

The Blessing of Adeima

By Richard Dawson

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<p><u>Main Characters</u></p> <p>Gelf – the healer Journgad – chief of Xenlaria Fronin – close friend of Gelf Truini – sister of the Oracle Ilmuhut – the boatmaker Ayube – Anthropologist and translator Dr. Sefi Ikpeba – Doctor and Xenobiologist Professor Umquo – head anthropologist</p> <p><u>Dieties</u></p> <p>Azealla – creator Goddess Adeima – Goddess who relates wisdom Ilhamet – God of travel Prijnak – God of battle Iqjarek – God of the meldabeast Dewos – God of the forst Pritlaxtl – God who escorts the dead Onatha – God of long life [and healthy crops] Saülé – God that provides light and warmth</p>	<p><u>Local terms</u></p> <p>Wardbreath – medicine plant annum – year sense-readin – telepathic sense shimmeri – stars dejeeyr – swift land animal jadzabebean pudding - a mashed sweet bean djengourd – plant similar to a squash Kadjaroot – edible root like yam smarati – memory gorcha stalks - fibrous plant tomuck – mix of mud and water, like adobe requibugs – burrowing insect Wingsqerl – like a flying squirrel but larger tilquebalm – medicine credantur – majestic steps leading to the temple plutolatry – noble class</p>
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Notes to you who are reading this. I try in each of my novels to highlight a different non-western culture. This is my own personal statement against euro-centrism. This novel is an attempt to meld the fantasy and sci-fi genres but without the eurocentric medieval element.

This novel highlights the culture surrounding Lagos, Nigeria. Please keep in mind that this takes place in a future with no countries or political boundaries as we currently know them. Language and technology have changed radically in this fantastical time. Yet the people still struggle with the memory of what has happened in the before-time.

Please sit back and enjoy this fictional world that I have created for you.

Prequel

It was an incredible day, not just the normal kind of beautiful that you commented on to the kinsfolk. This day the azure rays of the great Saülé were streaming through the glorious lavender sky with such power that she wondered if He might never grow tired and instead shine down with warmth and light for all eternity. Staring at the bright rays gently brushing the canopy of the forest, she almost wished this moment could be frozen in time by an artist and kept safe so that its likeness might be looked back upon during the cool season when the fields were shrouded in a creeping, ghostly mist.

But the cool time was a full moon cycle behind her and for now she could only gaze awestruck, drinking in Adeama's great majesty. It actually took a conscious force of will finally, to shut out the wondrous pallet of color as she made the last footfalls up the steps to the temple of the Oracle. Being a healer, she was privileged with admission whenever she felt it necessary. Well, not exactly *any* time. It was not permitted to consult the oracle during the season of cold for instance, and it was only acceptable to enter the Holy temple in the middle of the day when the Saülé was at its peak in the sky.

There were some times when she came here seeking her own answers, and other times that she made the journey at the behest of one of the kinsfolk who sought healing for the unhealth. In recent times though, the requests for prophecy from the kinsfolk had grown from a trickle into a great flood. Either her people sought news of the rains' return or they yearned for news that one seeker or another was still safe.

But this day, and this journey were profoundly personal. She visited the Oracle now in hopes of receiving advice on a remedy for little Falia. The ghosts of unhealth that plagued the girl made her skin turn pale and the young one had been unable to keep down her fodiens.

Gelf had been chosen as the healer because of her unique ability. She had inherited the same sense-reading from her father, who had told grand stories of healing chief Journgad's older brother. But for Gelf, the ability was both a blessing and a curse for her. It *did* allow her to get a feeling for when somebody was comfortable or upset or joyful. This was of course a great help in her healing practice. But it also distracted her enough that she had to live some distance from her kinsfolk just so that she could have a few moments of quietude in her head. As a young'in, she had struggled with the isolation, but over the years, her eremite lifestyle had become like a comfortable tunic.

Now, with many annums of healing behind her, she came to appreciate the peaceful solitude of the forest a great deal more than the crowded marketplace filled with the tangled emotions of her kinsfolk.

Akwukwo'Daya book one

Chapter 1

Today's trip into Xenlaria had been especially distracting for her. Tension and worry among her kinsfolk were as thick as moonseeds during pollination. The djengourd crop was suffering and people were afraid that there wouldn't be enough food come harvest time.

In the back of her mind, she hoped that perhaps in addition to advice on healing Falia, the Goddess Adeima might grace her with advice on how they could appease great Onatha and ensure that the djengourds grew healthy and plump. She knew there were incantations for doing this of course, but sadly, her father had passed away before revealing them to her.

And so, she passed slowly along the well trodden path between the colonnade of Tiktic trunks who's polished sides gleamed brilliantly in the daylight. As always the feeling of awe took hold as she slowly ambled between them. The path here was meant to invoke humility in order that none would allow their hubris to dominate their thoughts when entering the presence of the Gods. She knew this in her head, having learned from her father, and yet the consecrated ambulatory proved it's effectiveness. Her footfalls slowed appropriately as she approached the wide steps of the credantur and the grand portico of Acadja branches supporting the decorative archlintl.

She noted the new boughs which had already been carefully woven into the web, and what a beautiful tapestry of nature it created. She never ceased to be impressed by the effect it created, but more importantly, it gave her pride in the power of the great Goddess Adeima who bestowed Her wisdom through the inspired speech of the Oracle.

She advanced even more slowly within, giving her see'in time to adjust to the cool interior as she gazed at the glowing crowns on the huge stone statues. She bowed low to each one in turn and spoke the holy words of fealty as was the custom. There was Dewos who provided trees for shade, Iqjarek who was lord of the animals, Higsthon who lifted the Saülè into the sky each day, Ilhamet who brought each of the seasons in their turn, Prijnak the warrior who protected the village, Azealla who had created the ground and the sky, Onatha who helped the crops grow, and the great goddess Adeima who guided them all. Each statue was carefully polished, and shone under it's own brilliant shaft of light.

Finally, she respectfully waited for the Oracle who sat in her usual spot meditating before the eternal flame. The woman swayed slightly as if she had become one with the column of smoke rising slowly to the overhead. There was little time to absorb it though, for the Oracle's holy voice began almost the instant her footsteps halted.

“Three stems of red, then water fed.”

“One goes vanus surrounded by faeries.”

She listened carefully, in case there was any more and pondered the words. The first part sounded like the wardbreath plant which was said to be helpful against certain obscure types of unhealth. But the second part made no sense to her. Perhaps she was bearing witness to wisdom

that was meant for another? This happened on rare occasions. But for the time being she dismissed it and hurried to make the trip back to the forest to gather the medicine.

Chapter 2

Gelf spent the afternoon plucking wardbreath leaves and mixing it along with weltrimit into her medicine bowl. The plain straw mat on which she sat was a kalaidoscope of stains from the many annums spent mixing leaves and herbs into healing potions. It was a tedious process, but she hoped that this batch would finally drive out the unhealth that plagued little Falia.

Her concentration was interrupted suddenly by a cacophony of pots avalanching to the floor. She hurriedly jumped up and caught one of the haphazardly placed shelves in time to prevent an even greater flood of destruction. Very slowly she stretched out with her toe-fingers to grasp pieces of broken pottery that might hold the shelf long enough for her to prop it more securely with a branch. All the while her concentration was plagued by the scents of Djuta leaves, yingeroot, tilquebalm, and several others from the spilled pots. It was a magic act worthy of her father when she finally returned the stacks to a barely stable equilibrium. Glancing back it felt like a single hair dropping on a board would send things crashing again. But with a few more branches for stability, she was able to restore some semblance of order.

The event made her dream back to the beforetime, when her shelter had been larger, and she had earned many vessels in trade for her elixirs. But with the poor harvests, everyone was hungry and she was forced to accept ever smaller trades. So now her shelter was a great deal more crowded, and her food pantry was a great deal less so.

When she heard the knock on the door, her insides quickly plummeted to her feet. Nobody came out this way except the rare lost traveler, or someone on official business. Before she could even will herself to rise up from the mat, she sensed not the fear of someone who had lost their way, but the confident assurance of someone with a specific objective. Her kaba shook in fear that even *she* might now be called into the strange business that chief Journgad was involved in. It seemed utterly ridiculous, for she was no warrior, but there was no way that it could be anything else. On her last trip into the village, the quietwords had been flying all over the marketplace.

Valtreen, the most recent of the seekers dispatched by Journgad was now vanus like the others. And just as before, the search parties had found no sign of him within two days tracking. This could only mean that she was his next choice, though why the chief would choose a poor elixir-girl, was beyond her understanding. With no experience and little social status, she could only expect that hers would be a one-way trip just as the rest had been.

She was so filled with remorse that for a timespan she lacked even the will to stand up. There was so much still to do! She had only been a practicing healer for twelve annums, there was still so much smartknowing to develop... and what of Fronin and his daughter Falia? Who would heal the ghost of unhealth within the girl if she were to depart? But the handsmack on the door sounded again and she knew that she could not disobey an official messenger of the chief.

She opened the door and immediately knew that her fraidness had been correct. Staring down at her through the doorway was a very serious-looking man. He was tall, enough so that he was forced to stoop low in order to give see'in through the doorway, and he wore a dark woven traveling cape. But more importantly, his tunic displayed the royal crest of chief Journgad. His expression was not cruel, but neither was it friendly. The man was focused solely on the business at hand.

“Yes?” She struggled to sound nonchalant, but she was certain that the tremble in her voice shouted her feelings beyond the edge of the forst..

“You are Gelf, descender of Sigfrend?” He spoke it as a question, but it was clear that he already knew the answer.

“That I am. What business brings you out this long way? And why should you stoop so?” She quickly moved outside the small doorway to allow the man to stand more comfortably.

“Gelf, descender of Sigfrend. I summon you on behalf of chief Journgad to accompany me to the great hall.”

Just like that, her fate was sealed. There was no avoidin' now that she'd been chosen to be the next seeker. Like so many kinsfolk before her, she would be dispatched out to the wildlands for what purpose only the chief himself knew.

With boulders at the ends of her legs, she grudgingly followed behind the man. All the while her thoughts were strong-focused on the mystery that all of Xenlaria queried. What was this quest which had consumed so many brave people before her? Why was her chief willing to continually risk the lives of his people when the village was under no obvious threat? And perhaps most puzzling, why had they all disappeared without a trace? She did her best to sense from her guide any hint of an answer, but his attention was focused only on his duty. There was neither fear, anger, nor joy detectable in him.

She regretted now, that her sense-readin was poorly developed compared to her father. Temerin could know when she was in trouble almost before she herself did. He had done his best to teach her the skills to foster their talent, but she had only developed the ability to discern strong emotions, and even then only when there were no distractions. Today of course, that wasn't the case at all. Her guide on this trek was as emotional as the fallen tree that she climbed over and she was deeply distracted by all manner of worries, both for herself and for the familyland. So eventually she gave up with a sigh, and assumed that her questions would be answered soon enough whether it be for good or ill.

Chapter 3

They quickly crossed the marketplace and the dozens of stalls piled with hotz-fruit, kadja roots, and various trinkets. Cries of the wonderful delicacies available drifted back and forth across the square as the tall man sternly called 'Make Way!' while he carved a path for her. Soon however, her eyes were drawn away from the milling traders and towards the grand chief's gate which they were approaching. This wondrous sight always dazzled her, especially as a young'n. It was built of thick wood planks and the two doors were taller than her entire shelter and almost as wide. The handles were richly carved and a pair of vigrusmen stood guard each day. She barely

registered as the last of the milling traders fell behind them and she was, for the first time in her life, admitted through this barrier.

Once on the other side, they entered an even grander courtyard filled with flowering trees of more varieties than she'd ever seen before. The sturdy tomuck along the wallsides were interrupted by a cascade of fuchsia vines dribbling down from the ramparts. She barely managed to take in each detail though as she was ushered forward to yet another door. This one was at least half as big, and admitted into the great hall itself. It was a room grander than anything she had encountered in all her days. The space here were built of baked brick and there were recesses an armspan apart holding a fire pit which bathed the room in a flickering light as it washed up the rough wallsides.

As the door closed, she briefly looked back and stared at the gleaming clay statues of former chiefs gazing down from either side of the entrance. There was so much to see that she almost missed the plutolatry seated at vigrus tables along the far wall. But the tantalizing smells of Djengourd and sweetcakes floating in the air which sent her insides spinning when she passed them.

Even the wondrous fodiens soon fled from her attention as she found chief Journgad himself giving her the straight-eye. She had never before witnessed such an imposing presence. The man looked larger than life sitting on his exquisite stone dais. He looked to be a dozen annums older than her and easily twice as broad. His knobhorns gleamed silver in the flickering light and his entire expression gave her the feeling of being a mere hutz-fly by comparison. If someone had told her at this moment that he'd conquered the entire village single-handedly, she would wholly believe them. He did not sit alone either. On either side of his dais sat one of the matriarchs. Their position was to offer wise counsel and to ensure that the chief did not overstep his authority.

As instructed she knelt on one knee and bowed her head until spoken to. Meanwhile the man who brought her spoke in a loud commanding voice. "My liege, matriarchs. I present Gelf the healer, descender of Sigfrend."

There was a brief pause, and then the chief spoke in reply. His voice was quite antithetical to his mass, being only slightly lower in timbre to her own but still quite loud.

"Noble subjects. I wish this room vacated. I will speak with the healer alone!"

This caught her off-guard and she watched open-mouthed as men and women of great title and influence hurried out of their presence. Even the man who brought her to the hall bowed quietly and left. Soon she was facing chief Journgad all alone. The fraidness wrought by his gaze sent all her limbs to quaking as she struggled uselessly to meet it.

His face fell and he seemed to age several more annums as he spoke again. "Gelf, descender of Sigfrend. You have heard the stories of the seekers who have been sent out on official business, have you not?"

"Y..yes my liege. But I do not know why-"

The man raised his hand. "That is fortunate. For we be no-avoidin disaster if the nature of our peril were understood by the kinsfolk. Our situation now is a great deal more precarious than anyone here is aware of. All the more so now that Valtreen has gone vanus." The man raised

one bulging arm and pointed a finger at her. "You have been summoned here because I believe that your skills as a healer and interpreter of Adeima, may allow you to prevail where the bravest and strongest before you have not. There are ever fewer able people left in our village to take this quest, and even your own missing will be a hindrance for the familyland. Each time a seeker fails to return, the quietwords flare up among the kinsfolk and their trust in me as protector becomes more tenuous." The man's countenance fell even further and his head drooped. "I got the fraidness that if you are not able to solve this terrible enigma, then I will be forced to reveal the fulltrue to all the kinsfolk. This news would certainly put an end both to my own position and to the stability of the village."

Hearing her ruler speak thus, presented him in a light which she could never before have imagined. The honesty and humility contrasted so heavily with her perception of the man that she was completely at a loss for words. Everyone in the land saw the chief as larger than life, almost godlike. She had never expected that the burden of rule could be so heavy, or that the man could experience fear in any way. It emboldened her to finally ask the question which had flown from the mouths of every Xenlarian for almost two annums. "My liege, may I query you what IS the fulltrue that caused you to send so many kinsfolk away?"

The chief spied her now as if she had just now entered his presence, and he had been speaking to an empty room previously. "The tale is long, I suggest we both sit more comfortably." He motioned her to one of the large tables and they both sat down.

"Would you like some fodeins, or mead? There is plenty of both."

As soon as they neared the table, the scent of Jadzabean pudding reached her and brought her insides to rumbling. Burning with curiosity, she quickly took a helping but kept an eye on the chief all the while, as if he might rescind the offer if she became greedy. Having only taken a single sporkfull of the delicacy, her thoughts were quickly returned to chief and the great secret. "In the last annum, when the first buds were just showing on the trees, I was visited by a very unique man. The man found me alone after the games, a rare moment indeed, for he seemed to know exactly when my valet was off bringing fodeins for the men. But even more unusual was the man's character. He clearly was not of this land, but yet he had gone to great lengths to appear as one of us. His knobhorns were of average size, he had all the right ridges, and his skin was a lovely shining teal. Yet he did not greet me with a bow, but put his hand straight out in a peculiar gesture. Most unsettling of all were his eyes. He looked not at the ground, as is appropriate, but directly into my own. It was this that nearly caused me to knock him to the underfoot for showing such impropriety. If it hadn't been for his confidence and his impeccable timing, I might have. But it was his walkin that finally gave me pause. His walkin was most strange, as if his feet were not his own or he was somehow lame. When I asked him where he was from, he described a vast island far to the west. Yet we have never heard of any people visiting from the western ocean before. Even the ocean itself is little more than legend to most people."

This was true, Gelf herself had never heard of anything called an ocean before. But her mind was quickly yanked back to the chief's wordsong.

"I intended to assert my authority and bade him to quickly speak his purpose in approaching me with such informality. Thus did he share a wordsong that brought fraidness for myself and for all

the seekers who were sent forth in the beforetime. He told me that a great many annums back, members of his tribe had lost a valuable tool in this region and he was looking to recover it. When I asked him what it looked like, he admitted that he wasn't sure. But said that the tool had a strange smell and very faint vibration. He also told me that any denisovians who remained near it for long would suffer strange wakedreams, disorientation, and eventually fall into a sleep from which they would never recover.”

“My word, the Oracle!”

“Yes healer. My thoughts exactly. The man told me that the tool was very dangerous and that he was tasked with recovering it by any means necessary. He was quite clear about that. And the fact that he was able to approach me alone without any of my courtiers spotting him was not lost to my see'in.” The chief paused and leaned in closer. “I risked speaking an untrue and told him that I did not know where such a thing could be found, but that I would urge the people of the village to keep a straight-eye for anything unusual. I asked the man where I could send a message to him if I discovered something. What he did then was even more disturbing then before. He stared me directly in the eye and said that *he* would find *me* if any news came up. How a humble man, if he was one, could simply know where I will be at any time was, and still remains, unclear to me. However when he departed, I traced his footfalls out of the forst. Few people outside my inner circle are aware of my foot-tracing skills. Thus did the man remain unaware of my followin as he traveled to the far edge of our familyland. He then put something in his ear and spoke to the sky. Soon the man became surrounded by what looked like a curtain of faeries and became vanus, in an instant.”

Now Gelf's jaw really did fall to the floor. “By Prijnak's spear! This was foretold by the Oracle!”

She quickly repeated for her chief the foretelling which the Oracle had spoken. But the moment she finished, her sense-readin detected something new from the chief. It wasn't like a surprise, it was more like a confirmation of some kind.

“Healer, there is no reason, to withhold this from you now. The Oracle visited Pelfren several days ago.” At Gelf's questioning look, the man clarified. “Pelfren is the man who was tasked with bringing you here.

As you must know, it is quite out of the ordinary for any Xenlarian, even the Oracle herself to have Pelfren summon me. But that she did, and only a short timespan before the holy midday period. I entered the great temple and found the Oracle sitting in her usual spot of meditation. The prophecy which reached my hear'n when I entered was this:

‘child of Temerin will finally learn, why those who were sent do not return.’

“What?!” The words escaped her even though she knew it was inappropriate to interrupt the chief.

“Indeed I speak the fulltrue. It seems to be the will of Adeima that you should discover that which the previous seekers have failed to see.”

It took Gelf a timespan to grasp where all of this was going. That not only the chief, but even Adeima expected her to perform some kind of miracle? The whole thing was preposterous!

“It took me until this day to recognize what Adeima could be foretelling. But now I believe that She means for you to be the next seeker, that you can protect the temple from this great enigma

threatening our temple and our village. It would be best that you be sent immediately, that you may resolve this matter quickly and end the fraidness which fills my kaba.”

She could barely keep her attention on the chief's wordsong now. Her head was spinning from so many revelations. She wondered why Adeima would allow such a radical break from tradition. She wondered what could be so unique about *her* that she could be expected to surpass the ability of all the seekers before. She wanted to know how a man could simply go vanus into the air like Azealla was said to have done in the time of creation. But she needed no sense-readin to understand that the chief was as ignorant as she regarding such profound questions. Quickly, her thoughts were pulled back to the present as the chief continued his wordsong.

“Despite all of this, I do know that if we do not discover where this man and his kinsfolk take shelter, then I believe their magic will eventually lead them to the Temple of the Oracle where they will steal back the wisdom of the Gods. For I saw nothing in the man's demeanor that showed him to have fealty towards Her great wisdom.”

“And is there no clue that may guide us to them?”

“No healer. The only pointer that I have is that the man must have been traveling in the direction of his shelter when he left the forst. That trail led directly toward the great mount of Higsthon where He lifts the Saülè into the sky each day. Therefore I have sent all of the seekers toward the great mount in hopes that they might discover this strange creature.”

“Then I will depart at once. We must save the village and protect the wisdom of the Oracle.”

She was about to rise, but the chief grabbed her arm and held it in his powerful grip. “Gelf, descender of Sigfrend. If you succeed at this task, know that you will be welcome to request anything your inner-being desires. From me, my court, or anyone in our village.”

She bowed her head against the man's intense gaze. “You honor me before the task is complete my liege.”

The chief then replied most somberly. “And you, healer, honor me with your humility.”

With that he released his grip but delayed her departure still. “Do not depart yet healer. Not before you are provisioned for the journey.”

The man stood up and strode quickly towards a corridor to the left of the hall. “Pelfren! Join us, quickly.”

Scarcely had the chief returned to his seat then the tall messenger entered the great hall again.

“Yes, my liege?”

The chief gave the man a quick glance. “Pelfren, please assemble provisions of kadja-roots, gourds, and mead. Gelf will be departing on an official journey.”

“Yes liege.”

While they waited, the chief related to her what little was known of the lands beyond the forst where she lived.

“You will find little water between your own dwelling and the far edge of the forst. However there are plentiful gorcha stalks if you seek out the foreverleaf trees.”

Gelf already knew most of it, but also knew better then to correct the man. The conversation was merely a way to fill the empty silence. However in no time at all it seemed, she saw the tall courtier stride quickly into the room with a woven pack of marvelous quality full almost to bulging. She gratefully took the pack and bowed low to them both before leaving the great hall.

Chapter 4

The oppressive weight of fear was no less cumbersome on her trip to the Oracle than it had been with Pelfren earlier. Her mind reeled with thoughts of what might happen to the holy temple as she forced her feet, still as heavy as tree trunks, towards the grand portico. Often, her trips to the temple made her think of the harvest festivals, when great cloths of colorfully stained reedgrass were hung along the shining colonnade. The whole of the kinsfolk would crowd the steps of the temple to hear the Oracle recite the holy blessing for sufficient rain and healthy crops. But this time it wasn't tradition, or even a difficult sickness demon that led her along. This time she was an official errand of the chief of Xenlaria. And unlike her previous visits, she barely noticed the colonnade, the portico, or the bronze motifs decorating it. Her footfalls up the credantur sent an empty echo until she finally reached the entrance itself. By now her foreboding was only exacerbated by the gargantuan entrance as she passed beneath its soaring archlintel. Once inside, she waited till her see'in adjusted, and again bowed to each statue in turn.

“Travelers you see, vanus smarati.”

Barely was she able to even register it all, before the voice of the Oracle scattered her thoughts to the wind. She looked around and slowly made out the woman crouched at Adeima's feet. The Oracle was wearing the long white tunic of Holy prophecy and her flickering shadow jumped from one statue to the other as she swayed back and forth.

“He with lost hand, beside you will stand.

“Shimmeri play, alongside the Saülè ray.”

“Long path therein, brings quaking within.”

“Stranger with fraidness in the eye becomes an unexpected ally.”

“Three leaves blanched brings a trance.”

“The cliff of stone reveals the unknown.”

The words were so confusing and senseless such that her waking thoughts could not absorb it all. The strange ambiguity of the prophecy left her speechless as she struggled to find meaning in the seemingly random wordsong. “I'm sorry, but none of this is graspable. I do not doubt the great wisdom that the Gods have bestowed upon you, but my mortal form is inadequate.” She felt like a failure. Surely Adeima would not bestow a gift that was beyond her understanding. There must be something that she was missing.

“Water will flow not from high down to low.”

“As curiosity burns, danger unturns.”

“Man of two, one is true.”

“Shimmeri fly backwards through the sky.”

“Revelation at the height where the Saülè takes flight.”

Her thoughts quickly scattered to the far-off. 'Higsthon!' It was just as the chief had described! So quickly, before they could scatter from her mind, she wrote everything down on a scrap of

reed-mat. As she did, the oracle continued speaking, but now even the words themselves became incomprehensible. She raced with the charcoal stick as quickly as she could, all the while praying that her memory held the words correctly. When she finished writing, she stared at the words for a great timespan, hoping against hope, that some spark of comprehension would strike. Instead though, her attention was interrupted when the Oracle fell to the floor and lay still.

Perhaps the woman had become overwhelmed by the power of great Adeima? Or it could be that the chief's wordsong about a strange tool was true. She didn't know which, but Gelf hurried over nonetheless to see if she could offer healing. She turned the woman over onto her back and was overcome by a strange smell. She put her cheek against the woman's breathing hole, and with relief felt the faint puff of air on her skin. Thank the Gods, the Oracle was still alive. Then she checked to see if the woman's skin felt warm or cold. But the face of the woman felt normal enough against her hand. The lifeforce under the skin of the arm however was frighteningly faint.

With no small trepidation, she stooped to help move the holy woman, and while she was not the strongest denisovian, she found the woman unusually light and had little trouble carrying her to the entranceway for some fresh air. With flying feet, she hurried to the brook and returned with a dampened cloth which she used to wipe the woman's forehead and cheeks while she spoke the healing incantations repeatedly.

It took six repetitions of the whole prayer in full before the woman's eyes fluttered open. The Oracle's gaze panned side to side before finally focusing on Gelf.

"Do you feel better now?" She looked down kindly, still holding the damp cloth.

"I, where am I?"

"You're in the temple of the Oracle. Do you remember anything at all?"

"I don't, don't know." The woman once again looked back and forth as if searching for something. "I do remember meditating after the rise of Saülé. I put on the cloak of prophecy, and went to sit in front of the alter—"

Gelf didn't want to further burden the revered woman's head by asking too many questions. No mortal could understand the strain of so much Holy power pulsing through the great temple within. Instead she merely sat and dabbed the Oracle's head and neck with the cloth.

Little by little the color returned to her face and she finally sat up a bit. "You must have come here to receive the wisdom of Adeima. Are you in a time of transition?"

Though Gelf had visited the temple many times in her search for a healing elixer, she had never spoken to the Oracle face to face. It wasn't taboo per se, but it *was* highly irregular. When she was not giving prophecy, the Oracle led an ascetic life in the back of the temple.

She sighed then, "True, so it seems. But not be my own wanting. All of the seekers that chief Journgad has dispatched are vanus and I am the next in line to be sent on the quest. It seems now that he calls even on a poor eremite like me to seek an answer."

"The wisdom of Adeima will guide you my sister."

"I truly don't see how I can uncover the fulltrue though, when so many other brave men and women have failed to bring an answer."

The woman read her expression and frowned. "Then the wisdom which was passed through me was not helpful."

Gelf opened her eyes wide. "Oh I'm sure that it was most hallowed. I must be a foolish girl indeed to not comprehend the prophesy of-"

The woman reached up and put a finger on her mouth to silence her. Now that some color was returning to her cheeks, she actually looked quite handsome. But Gelf chased away that thought as improper.

"Please do not doubt yourself. It is rare indeed for a seeker to pass through here with the belief of grasping the fulltrue of Adeima's wordsong. And then, it is most often the false belief of hubris. The words, mayhaps, will bring sense in the later-time, or mayhaps not. Either way, I pray that your adventure is a victorious one." She looked now more earnestly. "And if you happen to find any of the other seekers alive, please inquire after Truini? She is my sister now unseen for three moon-cycles."

Gelf showed a somber expression for the woman. "Of course. I will certainly keep a straight-eye for the others, including your kin.

See'in that the woman appeared more healthy now, and with the Saülé well along in His flight, Gelf took this as her cue to depart. She helped the woman up and into a chair just beside the entrance. Once the Oracle was comfortable, she passed through the village and held a straight-eye for Fronin. She found him, as usual, working on his roof. The short man's powerful arms were hard at work measuring and trimming a great stack of kraboo stalks.

Her pat on his back caused him to turn his attention to face her. "Ah Gelf. Pleasin to be see'in you. You're looking very nice today." Then he glanced back at his sleeping hut. "What news have you of the elixir? I fear that the djuta leaves that I tried have not reduced Falia's unhealth." Dejection quickly overran his earlier smile and she was filled with melancholy as well from having to disappoint her friend. She held a great deal less hope that the girl would be able to recover without the elixir and incantations. But then she realized that the whole village might be in danger if she did not make this trip. The state of things was a great anguish in these sorrowful days.

"I am so sorry my friend. But I cannot finish preparing the poultice. Chief Journgad has summoned me to embark on-"

"No! Please no." The man wrapped his great arms around her. "Say that it is not so Gelf. What if you never return? What if we never see your lovely face again?!"

She was deeply taken aback by the man's reaction. She knew that he cared for her, but he was acting as if she had failed already, and she told him so.

"Please forgive me Gelf. I do not doubt that your healing skills are unmatched in the land. But you have never faced a wild meldabeast, or the cannibals which I hear in so many wordsongs. I be feared that this trek will be the end of you, possibly forever."

He embraced her even more forcefully, and her suspicions were finally confirmed. He wished to be her mate and feared that the opportunity would be vanus as soon as she was.

She patted his back and gently pulled away. "Fronin my friend. Please understand that I have no intention of failing in this mission. Chief Journgad has furnished me with generous provisions

and I feel quite confident in my knowledge of the wild lands to the west. I will return before you and the village have time to mourn my absence.

The man's somber expression however, proved that he was unconvinced. "I hear you Gelf, and I do not wish to show a lack of faith in your prowess. But what will happen to little Falia? I fear she will not be able to defeat the ailing without your prayers."

The silence stretched out between them, gaining an almost physical power over her. What could she say to the man? Fronin was clearly beside himself with worry, and yet she couldn't risk the entire village on the delay even for such a precious young'in. Tears threatened to swamp her eyes as she searched her mind desperately for some type of response that would ease his pain.

"My good friend I-" But then she remembered the remedy that she had been mixing earlier. "I have a potion in my shelterspace of wardbreath and weltrimit. If you boil the mixture in water and give it to the girl, this should help her to recover." Even this however, didn't feel like it would be enough for such a long absence. "And, I will continue to say the healing incantations for Falia the whole time that I travel. I'm sorry, but that is the best that I can offer."

And before she herself broke down entirely from emotion, she lightly brushed her knobhorn along his cheek.

A hint of a smile returned then and he did the same to her. He briefly embraced her again before regretfully letting her depart.

It wasn't until returning to her shelterspace, that the cauldron of emotions finally calmed down. She felt a great wonder at the landslide of events which were about to change her entire life. She gave the present little attention as she packed traveling clothes into a small recess of the fine pack and looked over her exceedingly humble space one last time. Then finally, with less of the confidence that she had expressed to Fronin, she strode out with the tired Saülè at her back, like so many other seekers before.

Chapter 5

She met no other denisovians, nor did she expect to meet any. Occasionally in the brush, a curious animal would poke out to sense her presence, but as she was not a predator, they ignored her. Wingsqerl songs, requi-bugs, and the sighing of the boughs were the only noises to break the peaceful silence of the forst. Her steppin was labored, but peaceful throughout the initial time. For though her feet had lost the heavy dread of her visit to the chief, her footfalls were short due to the heavy pack and the fatigue from her earlier trips. It took a full day to cross the forst and by then she outdistanced all familiar landmarks from her balm hunting. Now all was new and exotic among the ancient soaring trunks.

The dejeeyr trail she was following meandered around larger boulders and around fallen trees as she pondered the ever-shifting tapestry of her surroundings. Thankfully, the trip continued without mishap for another two days before she saw any significant change in the scenery.

It was gradual at first, just a slight brightening of the random speckled rays from the Saülè. Then a few spotlights would even reach the underfoot. But finally, the dense wood grudgingly surrendered to a clear lavender sky ahead. For a long while, she could find no discernible cause,

and it wasn't until she reached the boundary itself, that the reason finally became apparent. A vast plain lay before her stretching far into the distance on either side and as far ahead as she could see. The trees here grew ever more sporadic and finally lost their hold entirely, with the fallen soldiers scattered randomly along the saturated underfoot. Within a few footfalls there was nothing but a tough grass-like plant all around.

Sensing possible danger, she took careful steps now to see how difficult the soft underfoot would be. Initially there was no threat, as the ground was merely damp and a faint sucking sound reached her ears each time she lifted her foot. But soon, her feet sank lower and lower until she couldn't see anything of them at all. It became a struggle to even lift her foot at all much less to walk.

This morass would clearly be impassible without some type of help. Though what form that would take at the moment was as mysterious as any prophecy of the Oracle. Looking off into the distance to either side, she was unable to imagine how long it would take to detour around the plain. There was no end in any direction that her straight-eye could discern. But with only three days past, it was obvious that the seekers in the beforetime could not have given up so quickly. There *had* to be a solution, somehow.

She spent a long timepause meditating on what to do. It seemed that the morass was like an in-between place. Not quite ground, but not quite river and with qualities of both. So what was it that allowed a person to travel across the river on a boat? That she didn't know because the river was a half a day's travel on the far side of the village and she had only seen it once. The boats that she *had* seen were long and thin... and they were hollow like a clay pot. So it was possible she thought, by making small boats that she could still walk on, that this might allow her to cross the marsh more easily.

Chapter 6

It took another full day working on two wide and thick pieces of wood until she had hollowed them out enough that they began to look like small boats. She carved slits and wove some stout vines through them and over her feet. Then with no small fraidness she tested her way out into the marsh.

It was amazing! No longer did her feet sink all the way down. She found that she could walk across the surface of the mud like the great Ilhamet who was said to stride over water and ground with equal confidence.

She ate one more of the gourds to lighten her load and then began making her way across the vast morass. The added weight of the pack meant that she sank more than expected, but it wasn't enough to stop her. More than anything else in this new environment, the largest struggle was the monotony of the expanse. Within only a short timespan the trees and all that was familiar disappeared from view. Soon, nothing interrupted the endless horizon and nothing larger than a huitz-fly disturbed the thin grasses and reeds. The swishing of the grass and the constant thuck thuck of her feet were the only sounds to keep her company. She began singing folk tunes and holy psalms to keep herself occupied as light drifted into dark and on into the next light again.

Several times she tried to sleep after nightfall, but each time that she did, her feet sunk further and further into the mud. The only way to keep above it was to stay in motion, and so she was resigned to forego sleep until she could reach a more stable place.

By the third day, her legs were trembling from exhaustion which set her muscles to fire each time she fought to bring one foot in front of the other. She very soon became worried that her muscles would become too weak to lift each leg and she would soon go vanus forever beneath the endless saturated plain. She fought valiantly against her fraidness, but disquiet staunchly refused to scatter from her thoughts.

By the fourth dawn she no longer noticed the horizon, or the boredom, or even the huitz-flies. All the strength she had was focused solely on lifting one foot after another. Just keep making it a little farther, that was her mantra. Each foot was a mountain being dragged to the surface of the mud, and her limbs were ready to mutiny from the constant abuse.

She didn't quite know what happened but she watched the ground suddenly rush up to meet her with dreadful speed. Instantly the chill of dampness wrapped her in it's shivery embrace. Her clothes were muddy and her skin began to tremble. For awhile the will to move was utterly vanus from her consciousness. Everything was numb and her limbs were glued to the surrounding underfoot. But then she began to feel the mud creeping, bit by bit, up along her body. Already it felt like she was not so much lying *on* the ground so much as becoming *part of it*. As if she were slowly dissolving into the vast plain. The feeling was almost peaceful, to just lay there and sleep, letting all her cares just, melt away. It was only when she felt some of the mud creep up against her mouth that she managed to force her screaming legs underneath her again. She refused to catch ailment and succumb to the aftertime if there was a scrap of fortitude left within her.

Chapter 7

It was the middle of the fourth day before she finally reached solid ground again. By now she was bent over from exhaustion and even kneeled to rub her knobhorn in loving gratitude against the soft but solid underfoot. Four days had passed without sleep and with barely more than a few morsels of food at a time. She managed, only just, to find the strength to hobble for the nearest tree, threw down her pack and slipped joyously into that ethereal world of dreams.

When she woke, everything was pitch-black. There were no trees, no shimmeri, no sign of land at all. At first she panicked, thinking that the comforting shimmeri had finally been stolen away. Could it be true? Could the necratic prophecy and its endless uninterrupted night finally be upon the land? But then when she turned over, she saw that it was just her pack which blocked her view. The familiar constellations were all still there. Prijnak the warrior, Azealla the creator, Iqjarek the meldabeast and her offspring, even the deep maroon of Pritlaxctl of the after-time hovered low over the marshy plain. With all else being foreign, the shimmeri were a source of deep comfort for her this night away. They were the only familiar thing left to her now.

First light brought with it greater warmth and a deep sense of relief that the worst might finally be past. She discarded her life-saving boat shoes and ate the last of her gourds along with some water from a brook. From now on the only fodeins would be a few kadja roots and any plants that she saw along the way. It brought her a small measure of fraidness to think about it, but this was still the season of warmth and there were many edible plants to be found.

With her limbs barely reaching normal function again, she hoisted her pack and continued on into the forst ahead. Once again lovely beams of the Saülé dwindled to rugged twilight beneath the soaring green overhead. A thousand spear-blades of maroon light pierced the air around her and filled the forst underfoot with a wondrous mosaic. Each beam was speckled with faery dust, telling her that the great Dewos was still smiling upon her quest. This gave her a deep sense of relief, for there was no certainty that He had offered His support to the other seekers before now. The new forst surroundings here were a great new world, filled with both wonders and trepidation. The trees were of a strange type, there were thick brambles oft grabbing for her clothing and skin, and the calls of the requibugs seemed more muted here. If Dewos was indeed smiling this day, his care was sporadic as a djengourd stalk. But when finally the sound of a brook reached her ears, her disquiet faded into memory. Her pack fell to the underfoot and she gratefully plunged her head into the cold flowing stream. Drinking deeply, as if it were sugar-sap, she soaked up an eternity of handfuls after two days going without.

The bubbling water quickly overpowered her sense of urgency and she promised herself the shortest of breaks along the bank. The forst dimmed from view with her closing eyes, and the lullaby of the splashing water sent her dreams of the Oracle surrounded by glowing light all around.

When she opened them again, the Saülé was noticeably higher and she felt horribly careless. So much time gone vanus! Hurriedly now she topped off her drinking flask and set off across the stream. A faint animal trail led away along the opposite bank toward the great mountain and she scurried up the bank to reach it.

The trail greatly eased her travel now and she found her mood improved enough to meditate over what Journgad had said. A man who sought after a powerful tool, but refused to say what it was? The strange smell somehow causing the sickness of the Oracles? A faery curtain that can make someone go vanus? It all sounded like the tale of a man hindered by too much mead. If it hadn't been related to her by the chief himself, she might have even dismissed it as such. But then there was the issue of the many seekers who were all vanus, could they have all suffered from lack of food? Or could it be that this land toward which she was heading contained a great many more dangers than her own home? She did not relish the direction those thoughts took her.

Chapter 8

It was two days further on when the trail led through a sparsely wooded grassland. This one though was solid ground and marked a clear boundary. From here on the land was too inhospitable for a lush forst. There was only meadow, a speckling of foreverleaf trees, and rocky crags discernible ahead. She moved toward the brook to once again refill her flask, but stopped before her hand touched the water. An unusual sensation reached her mind. There was a faint vibration, and the sense that someone was upset. At first she couldn't detect exactly how, but soon enough her question was answered when the vibration distinguished itself as hoof-falls. Instantly she knew. It was a meldabeast, and a large one at that. Her insides grew cold with fraidness at the thought of being so exposed. She could tell from the vibration that it was approaching faster then she could run, but the nearest tree was several hundred footsteps away. The thundering ground could soon be heard as well as felt and she had barely more than an instant to adopt some means of escape.

As if it were on fire, she dropped her pack and sprinted for the nearest tree in the hopes of reaching it safely. Her sense-readin told her that the pack was distracting the animal, possibly enough to let her escape. But would it be enough? *That* was the question which she was staking her very life on. The animal gave a loud roar and she soon understood that she had unknowingly impinged on the beast's territory, which he was obligated to defend at all costs. For this was the mating season for meldabeasts, and they would ensure that no competitor got in the way. Her feet pounded the ground with everything she had, and her head rang from the exertion as she raced for the one tree that quickly became her only focus. She used the last of her strength to scurry up the tree only to see the beast in the distance still tearing it's tusks into her pack. It had smelled the kadja roots and she now understood the folly of her decision. Though she might not have been able to reach the tree if she'd kept the supplies with her, now there was no fodiens or even a means of carrying any if she *did* find some.

Watching the beast she had the depressing thought that perhaps *this* was the fate to which so many other seekers had fallen to. The land was certainly inhospitable, and there was little in the way of edible plants that she could see growing in the area. The understanding that she was utterly alone in a territory many days travel from home only strengthened her foreboding. If a seeker had become injured here, or met up with hostile people it was easy to see how they might be with Pritlaxtl in the later-time. She spent a long timespan in that tree wondering if she was now at the point of saying the prayers of forgiveness before waiting for Pitlaxetl to swoop her up.

What would it like, she thought, to finally enter the aftertime? Would she be reunited once again with Temerin and grandma Djokra, or would she be transported to the peak of Higsthon? Or, she feared, would she become a messenger for Pritlaxtl?

“Gelf! Snap out of it!” She slapped herself lightly to remind herself that she was in no immediate danger. She focused instead on her own strongness, her clear head, and the bright lavender sky that offered no hindrance to her travels. There was no reason to think that she wouldn't come up with a way out of her present situation. Even now she could sense that the meldabeast was finished with the pack and was moving towards the brook to drink. If she hurried, she could get to the brook upstream and reach the other side where it would no longer see her as a threat. Wasting no further time, she quickly leapt from the tree and sprinted back towards the brook always expecting to hear the hoof-falls racing towards her. But by the time they approached, her powerful legs were flinging her across and she rested on the far side to catch her breath. She sat there a few minutes and contemplated how she would take care of her needs now with no pack and no spare clothes. Her thoughts were briefly interrupted by another warning roar from the beast, but she knew that it wouldn't follow her across the water.

With the immediate danger past, she focused on the imminent strategy. Staying near the brook would eliminate the need to carry water since she no longer had a flask. However fodeins was a different story entirely. Did kadja-plants or gorcha-stalks even grow in this sparse land? Were there other fodeins that *were* safe to eat? She had no answers and no way to find out. But gazing up at the majestic peak told her that to go forward was shorter than the considerable journey back to the familyland. Perhaps she would be lucky and find another village where she could trade for something to eat.

That last thought settled her resolve, she moved on again staying within earshot of the brook as it meandered away from the great mount of Higsthon. For two more days she made her way, enjoying the sound of the tumbling water and the few wingsqerl calls sounding from tree branches. The terrain here was rugged, and at times it was downright intimidating, with steep rocky cliffs reaching up to claw at the sky. But through it all, her ropy limbs helped her to scale the land with tenacity.

Chapter 9

It was so gradual at first, that she didn't notice it for a long time. But the sound of the brook was definitely louder than it had been the day before. She couldn't quite tell what had changed, for the forest was otherwise peaceful and undisturbed. But now that she was aware of it, the sound of rushing water grew more intense throughout the day. Soon she heard nothing of the animals or the wind through the trees. All were drowned out by the sound of rushing water.

Finally she reached the edge of the trees and was confronted by a great wall of muddy liquid. The transition was so sudden that she almost lost her balance. Her arms pinwheeled about and thankfully caught purchase on a low-hanging branch. There was no gradual transition this time, as there had been with the morass. The swift rushing water formed a distinct, and uniquely dangerous, boundary.

She held onto the stout trunk and gazed morosely over the current, for here was a challenge at least as foreboding as the morass had been. The flow was faster than she could run and it was far too broad to wade across. The muddy water splashed and heaved itself over hundreds of boulders and branches as it made its indelible way onward.

Her previous confidence was vanus like the dirt she had knocked into the brook and she could do nothing but stare down at the broiling obstacle trying to imagine how people dealt with this back in the familyland. She knew little of boats or bridges such as existed there, and even if she did, the project would take far too long. With no ideas for a solution, she resigned herself to following the grand brook away from its smaller tributary. All the while, she kept a straight-eye for any fallen tree or tool that she could use to reach the far side.

Her progress here was greatly hindered, for she could spy no trail passing anywhere within view of the water. There seemed only two choices. Either to push her way slowly through the underbrush or to skirt the bank where the vegetation was sparse. She decided on the latter option and made her way along the precarious edge. For half that day, her mind began to ease and she felt sure that Prijnak or Dewos would provide her with some form of assistance.

She didn't know what happened at first, all she felt was a sudden sinking of the underfoot and instantly the great boiling water rushed at her with horrible speed. For an indeterminate timespan she was aware of nothing but the great cacophony of rushing water. She looked around to find that the Saülë was very low in the sky and her skin was a frightening cerulean hue. By all that is holy! She must have been knocked out, and she was half submerged in the frigid water. Even more horrifying, was how steep and inaccessible the edge above her was and in the weakening light she could see no branches or handholds of any kind. How foolish she had been! To risk her very kaba just to enjoy faster progress. Now that simple mistake threatened to be a fatal one. She threw the straight-eye around in all directions more frantically. She just *had* to get out of this water. It was already becoming impossible to feel her legs. All she felt was a deep sleepiness and an intense desire to rest just a little longer. But she would not give up! Not if there was even a *hint* of strength in her tired body.

Finally, out of sight behind somewhere, her hand grasped a half-submerged branch that felt vigrus enough to help. Dragging her half-immobile body, she slowly wriggled towards a more gradual part of the edge. It was a lifetime exertion and she nearly gave up more times than she would ever admit. But finally, the underfoot of the forst was visible. The joy at being able to rest on the flat underfoot was so strong, she nearly rubbed her knobhorn against the ground now, as she had at the far end of the morass. Instead, she said a brief prayer of thanks to Azealla for giving her a body with strength and the agility to apply it skillfully.

But victory was not yet complete. Her legs were still numb and there was no extra clothing that she could use. She thought about it for a long timespan, and finally came upon an idea. The houses back in Xenlaria were built with thick walls of mud to keep the chill of the cold time from getting through. So, with no other ideas, she grabbed handfuls of dirt and buried herself up to her chest in the soft loam of the underfoot. It wasn't actually *warm*, per se. But she no longer felt the chill from the damp wind blowing against her. She spoke the healing incantation over and over as she slipped into unconsciousness, hoping beyond hope, that her journey would not end

here. She slept then, and suffered fitful dreams of wet hands wrapping around her and sucking the life force away.

Chapter 10

The warmth of the rising Saülè scattered her previous trepidation to the wind. She slowly pulled the dirt away from her and stretched her tired limbs. Thankfully they all responded as they were supposed to. She did however see a dark blue stain on the ground and remembered being knocked out. So now, with much more care and intention, she made her way down the edge and washed the gash in the water. With that complete, it was time to continue on with her adventure. This time, she chose the safer, if much less pleasant path of forcing her way slowly through the underbrush and brambles which covered the forest underfoot. This continued for another day and a half before she peeked out from around a tree and saw something different.

Looking carefully into the distance, she saw that there was definitely some kind of shadow across the water. With hope and curiosity crowding everything else out, she hurried through the underbrush in the direction of the anomaly. Spying once again around a trunk, it was clear now that a fallen tree lay across the brook. The angry water churned and sprayed its protestations at the impediment but for Gelf it was a wondrous gift from Dewos.

An ample timespan passed before she could actually size up the situation properly. She had needed to skirt away from the edge due to the thick shrubs. But finally now she stared down at a vigrus tree laying across the water. On the far side, the trunk was easily wide enough to support her. On the closer side though, it was a massive tangle of branches that still fell short of the solid ground by at least two armspans. Would that be enough? Could she hold herself upright in the churning water until reaching the tree?

There seemed no other option now, for she noticed the water was beginning to lead her away from the great Higsthon. So, being more careful now, she grabbed another vigrus branch and half buried it into the ground along the edge so that the other end rested among the crown of the fallen tree. She then slowly lowered herself into the water and held onto the smaller branch as the water tugged at her with all its strength. The underfoot of the grand brook was littered with stones and rocks of all kinds and she struggled to keep herself upright. But in a short timespan, she managed to reach the main tree and twisted herself in among the tangled branches. It wasn't until she was halfway across that the branches ended and she could walk a line along the heavy trunk. She said another prayer of thanks when her feet found purchase on the opposite edge and she scrambled up to the solid underfoot again.

Akwukwo Biyu book two

Chapter 11

Sitting near another tributary to drink the next day, she felt the presence of someone else. It was such a shock after all this time that she barely registered it before she saw two men near the path ahead.

“Haylloo?”

The sound was slightly different but she understood well enough. As she neared, she saw that the two men were roughly as tall as her but the men both wore covering of maldabeast fur with the nearer one carrying a well-honed spear. The first was older, perhaps the same age as chief Journgad and nearly as powerful looking. The other was wearing a fur of a different color and appeared slightly shorter. She gave them the straight-eye, for something was definitely not right here. She experienced a sense-reading from only one of the men, while the other was blank. It was an experience which she had never had before with other people. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but she felt increasingly uneasy.

"Halloo to you."

"Yoursrn infringin Barbrinland. Waas trayde?"

The language was very strange. She could understand, mostly, but it took concentration for her to grasp the meaning. She concentrated more carefully to get a sense of either man's emotions. But all that she got was a wary confidence directed towards her. It sounded roughly like a request to trade, but she couldn't quite tell what he expected to trade for or with.

"Dja you sat fagets?"

The question made no sense to her. But she felt worried, enough to stand her ground and reply in a strong voice that she didn't entirely feel. "I remember all things well. I am a healer."

Both men watched her for a long moment. They seemed to be deciding what to do. But then the dominant one pointed the spear towards her and spoke slowly. "You joyne disyaway. Go Barbrinland, heal priest."

Despite the language difference, there was no difficulty in grasping the man's intent. She struggled to decide what course to take now. Should she run? They would certainly overtake her, being familiar with the land. Plus the armed man was clearly adept with his weapon. She also didn't think she would last for many more days with no fodiens. There was hope that if she could help heal someone, that they would give her something to eat in return. In the end, she acquiesced, but made sure to keep her senses alert.

"Yes, we go."

The man with the spear, who was the more dominant, made a gesture pointing to a trail and both men walked behind for a few dozen footfalls until they reached a clearing. She sensed that the one man's alertness did not waver, but she also sensed, anticipation. This she could not quite grasp, unless it was that the man expected prestige for bringing a healer to their village. It still puzzled her that the other man projected no emotions at all.

Unfortunately, the trip didn't provide her with enough time to formulate a plan or to fully gauge a sense of these people, which only deepened her disquietude. She mulled over the Oracle's words, 'He with fraidness in the eye becomes an unknown ally.' There had been no fraidness that she sensed, and she could not right then imagine either of these men as an ally, but she chose to bide her time before committing any rash action.

When they reached their destination, there was a small cluster of huts made with branches and mud. The huts were not unlike her own shelterspace but these were at least 8 paces across. The roofs were of simple reeds, much as she'd seen elsewhere. Surrounding the huts was a ditch that looked deep enough to be hazardous without a keen straighteye. The dominant man instructed

her carefully on the footfalls that allowed them to cross safely over a few vigrus logs and it was clear that only those who knew exactly where to step would avoid injury.

On the other side beyond the huts though, was something even more distressing. There was a wooden fence, and inside were animals. These people kept animals, children of Azealla imprisoned, and seemingly on purpose.

She barely registered this before the man urged her on to one of the nicest huts at the far end of the clearing. He motioned for her to go inside where she found the space dimly lit. Once they entered, the man's companion must have gone somewhere else for she was now alone with the more talkative one and another who was new to her see'in. The man spoke briefly to the other who brought a stick that burned and held it next to a bed. At first she could only stare at the stick, for the flames leapt wildly off the stick as it moved, but the stick itself was not consumed. It was an amazing magic indeed. She wondered briefly if these were the people who had lost the strange tool. She would have to keep a straight-eye for the peculiar curtain of faeries.

As her eyes adjusted to the dim light however, the reason for the man's invitation became clear. On a raised bed lay a shorter man with painted markings on his face and his knobhorns. The man's skin looked very pale, even in the meager light, and there was a strange growth on the man's neck. The man slept, but occasionally a moan escaped his mouth, as if even in the world of dreams, his pain tortured him still.

Chapter 12

She sensed the man behind her and turned to ask for more information. "Query you, how long he sick?"

"Priest sikhealth mana moon passins but dis-" he pointed to the growth "shou jez one moon befretym."

"Have you tried cutting the bump to drain it?"

At first the man didn't understand. So she motioned that she had a question and made a cutting motion near the growth.

This he understood. "Ya, wedoo, it get big alloyvr."

She had never seen anything like this. She felt the priest's lower arm and the life-force was weak, even weaker than the Oracle's had been. She then asked the man what the priest had been eating while he was sick.

"Priest phed prize o'da victyem. Ches meat wid liver."

This was amazing. Did these people eat nothing but hunted animals? It would explain the enclosure, but if these people ate animals all the time, then Azealla must certainly have struck them down by now. Every Oracle since she had been brought into the land spoke of the great curse that befell any who harmed Azealla's children. She turned back again to the man. "Do you have any kul-melon, or gourds?"

The man did not seem to know what those were and her descriptions were of little help. Since she had no knowledge of what grew in this region, her ability to show them her own healing plants wasn't likely to meet with success. So for the moment she sat over the priest's form and spoke the healing incantation many times and prayed to Adeima on his behalf. After that was

finished, she turned to the man and eventually made it clear that she needed to look in the forest for healing plants.

“That godi. Gritritl go tu yu.” He then motioned her outside.

She moved out of the room and wondered at his statement. The language was strange, and she only grasped pieces of their meaning.

The man called out to another person and the man 'Gritritl' arrived shortly. He was also a burly man with the look of many annums behind him. There was a slight stoop to him, but it seemed to not affect the strength of his feet. The two spoke quietly despite the lack of need and her sense-readin attested to the first man's distrust, probably relating to her trip into the woods. This only reinforced her own concern, for she assumed the men wanted to have a means of ensuring her return, which meant the need for a guard.

“Comehr taketofut.” The man motioned her forward.

Gritritl was joined by a second before they crossed the gully and the three headed for a small patch of trees on the near side of the stream. She gave straight-eye all along the ground but saw little of value. The plants here were foreign and she wasn't sure how many were edible. The man followed her footfalls as she searched an area near a few large boulders.

Perhaps that was it! The plant was small, but it looked very similar to the yinquer-root that she used for bruises and swelling. As she dug the soil away, the tuber looked familiar enough that she felt certain this would help. As soon as she finished washing it in the brook, Gritritl urged her back towards their village. Once again, only one of the pair spoke, giving her the feeling that there was an underclass of some kind here.

They returned to the hut where she passed her prize to the man watching over the prone one. With simple gestures, she instructed the man to get a cooking pot prepared and she set thin slices into the boiling water.

Her insides flipfopped with the smell of the boiling tuber and she tried communicating her need for fodeins. But her sense-readin told her that his kaba was filled with distrust. It must be that he wanted to be sure that she earned the meal. So she was forced to wait in frustration until the tuber was fully cooked and then mashed before returning back to the hut. Very gently she fed small slices to the man and brushed the juice of the tuber onto the man's bulging neck. A smile broke out on his face when he was finished and she took that as thanks.

“You, meyel.”

The man finally led her towards a more dilapidated hut and handed her a small grass mat with something wrapped in it. She wanted to eat outside as there wasn't much light within. But the man pointed and urged her inside, making her wonder if she was nothing more than a prisoner now.

“Halloo?” The voice spoke differently than the man had, and it took a long time for her to adjust to such dim light. The space was only slightly bigger than her own shelter and the mud finish was flaking off in several places. The whole room was crowded with rough bunks all over the floor. She saw men and women either sitting or laying in every single one of them and most looked too tired to get up.

“You bring fodeins!” At the sound of her own language, her head spun to see who spoke. Even in the dim light, Gelf's mouth dropped into an 'O' at the sight. The woman resembled the oracle

slightly, but this figure was so much more. Feeling smitten immediately, she fumbled and almost dropped the precious mat before the nearest man took it and carefully divided portions for each of them. When he passed the remaining portion back, she saw that it was animal remains. How horrifying! She was nearly tempted to refuse, for Azealla would surely punish her for such a thing. But then the man who had given it to her spoke softly.

“It may seem not pleasant. But we have little choice about the fodeins available to us. We have to make do.”

With sorrow and a small prayer of remorse, she grudgingly ate the meat. It was old and she wasn't even sure that the fodeins was safe. But as the man had said, there was nothing else available to them.

Seeing that the man had finished with his, she carefully asked about the barbarian settlement. “Strange. I've never met you before, but your language comes easily to my ears.”

Her mouth fell open and she barely got one word out after another. “Could you be the lost seekers from Xenlaria?!” Her sense-readin perceived only confusion though, which was only confirmed by the man's response.

“I do not know of this Xenlaria. All of us-” he swept his arm around the meager surroundings, “found ourselves at the edge of this village with no knowledge of who we were or where we came from. The men here found us and gave us a place to live in exchange for our labor.”

As if the animal pen wasn't horrid enough. They even kept denisovians as prisoners... as slaves. And as she gave the straight-eye around at them it appeared that nearly all of the kinfolk were in a weak-state. Only the beautiful woman and the man who had distributed the fodeins looked strong enough to stand upright.

“If you are from the same village as us, why is it that you are not sat fagets..um without smarati?”

“Um.” She looked again at the beautiful woman and her innerbeing flipped, momentarily disorienting her. “Honestly I don't know. Do you think these barbarians could be the ones who took away your memory?”

The woman almost laughed at that. Gelf reasoned that the bitter surroundings weakened her mirth. “I can't imagine how. They don't know any good fodeins to eat, they just hunt dejeeyr and meldabeast. They toss us the scraps left over. The fodiens smells strange and it could be what brings the ailing.”

As soon as the beautiful woman mentioned the peoples' ailing, she was thrown back into the present. “Oh how selfish of me. I spent so much time trying to figure out if you are the lost seekers, I didn't even try to help your ailing.” She quickly went to check on the weaker people to see what could be done. The people she saw were in such a sorry state, it tugged heavily on her kaba. They were all listless, sore and had strange rashes covering their limbs. One of them even had a pit dug next his cot, ostensibly for the sickness to escape and be buried.

The man with some vigrus stood next to her mournfully. “The rashes come first. For a long while, we thought it was just something from the thornbushes. But soon people who had not been allowed beyond the village experienced them too. After awhile, they start to feel achy and listless. Some have begun the weak-state purge, and a few days ago the one in the back fell into a sleep and will not wake up.”

It was horrifying. There were fully sixteen horribly sick people crammed into this tiny shelter. If this was the fate of the seekers, no wonder chief Journgad was concerned. There had to be *something* she could do. Overcome with grief, Gelf spent the whole night sitting by one cot after the other singing in her most earnest voice, the healing cantations and imploring Adeima to forgive them.

Chapter 13

She wasn't so much woken up, as shaken violently back into the day by one of the barbarians.

"You. taketofut kwik."

With little choice, she walked with the man who she thought was Gritritl towards the priest's shelter. Behind her, another of them brought the beautiful woman along as well. With forceful motions, she was directed to the Priest who gazed earnestly at her. "You plantbuds on raizkin...less fire, parah fire kumbaqu."

It made little sense to her, but the other woman put a hand on her shoulder. "He said something about the leaves you used did some gudhealth for him, but he is in weakstate again now."

She wanted to gaze at the woman and nothing else, but the eyes of the others brought her attention back to the sick priest. "Can you tell them that I would have to go back to the brook for more leaves to bring the priest goodhealth?"

There was some conversation again and then Gritritl motioned them both to leave the hut.

Another man joined behind them as they were led back to the brook which only reinforced in her head the high level of distrust that these strange people held for their conquered servants.

As they made their way back to the trees, she got a sense of trepidation from the beautiful woman. This wasn't surprising given the precarious position that they were in. As the group entered the forest, she risked a casual comment to the woman in hopes of learning what skills she might have. "We're looking for a plant called Wardbreath. It grows about knee-high and has deep indigo leaves."

The woman barely turned her head as she responded. "I'll help you look. Though I've never heard of it before."

Well, clearly the woman was not skilled in the healing arts. But she felt quite sure that this woman was the oracle's sister Truini. She risked a glance back and saw that the man and Gritritl were staying close to them and so she returned her attention to seeking any familiar medicine plants along the banks of the brook. It remained a puzzle to her that only one man of a pair would speak or display any feelings. She could perhaps imagine how some of the people might be considered secondary, as Pelfren was secondary to chief Yorngad. But how could it be that the other displayed no emotions, at any time? She pondered that for a long while as she searched along the ground. Her concentration though was interrupted when her sense-reading picked up something new from the woman. It wasn't something that she was familiar with, but it felt like a mixture of relief and hope. She slowly moved closer to the woman in hopes of understanding it. The woman turned her head only slightly and said a single word. "Sleep." She threw a subtle glance toward the men keeping watch and suddenly the words of the Oracle came back to her. Without a second thought she knew that this was the time to look for the blanched leaves. There

were in fact many such three-leaved pale plants growing around. But then she wondered, how would they get the two men to take a potion when they were not sick? She wanted to ask the woman, but Gritritl was too close. So she merely nodded her head and continued looking at other plants while she meditated on the idea. As the two quandaries mixed themselves in her mind, she found herself crouching near a shrub and staring off in the distance. Suddenly she spied one of the men put his foot directly through a heavy branch. If she hadn't been looking straight there, it would have been lost. She pondered this unbelievable sight for a long timespan before finally, like the spark of a flame, it came to her. 'Man of two, one is true.'

It was an astonishing vision, but if she were careful she could test it without being noticed. She stole glances and felt for the thoughts of Gritritl until she was certain that he wasn't looking at her. Then she tossed some very light pebbles at the other. Once again, they passed right through him! Somehow the other man was some kind of ghost. Man of two, but only one is a true person.

She couldn't be sure if the other woman knew, but at least this changed the odds. If she could somehow get their one living guard to take the sleep medicine, then they might have a chance. There was now a great wrestling with the fraidness in her kaba. She was not a trained warrior, and none of the hardships so far had involved battle against another denisovian-- such a thing was forbidden to a healer!

Only a few moments later though, an idea came to her. The thornbushes! If she led them in among the thornbushes, the man would get many cuts on his skin and she could suggest the leaves as a remedy. So without looking too obvious, she began moving gradually closer to an area that bordered the brambles. Little by little the space of footfalls became too narrow and she felt the sharp thorns. Soon the curses of both the man and the woman told her that she had been successful. But she still had to be cautious, it was clear that the man was not going to trust them easily. She feigned concern as she backtracked towards them. As she looked each one over, it was clear that the cuts were superficial. Nevertheless, she displayed a look of deep worry as she carefully examined the scrapes.

"This plant has poison. Cut will get worse." She kept a most worried expression and repeated her concern while the other woman translated.

Soon, the man's face also showed worry and she sensed that he believed her. "You fix?"

Now she had him. She nodded her head confidently. "I fix. Plant there." She pointed back the way they had come and looked closely for the one with the pale leaves. She quickly found it and gathered another innocuous plant as well. When she had a considerable amount of both, she went back to them all. The second man, watched in silence but she noticed that he also showed cuts on his skin. Fearing the distraction, she prayed to Prijnak that her hunch was right. She offered to start helping Gritlitl, but not surprisingly he refused.

The man waved her hand away, still watching her closely. "Fix thotune frist."

This she was prepared for. She told the girl to sit also and put the leaves of the harmless plant on most of the girl's cuts and wrapped them carefully with bits of cloth. As she did so, the girl gave her a subtle wink which told her that she understood. Only when that was done did the man allow her to put the leaves on his cuts as well. She wrapped his cuts just as carefully, and when she had finished working she began chanting the healing prayer for added effect. She sat for a

long timespan chanting the prayer of healing most ardently, but for awhile she worried that the medicine wouldn't work. The wait was long and distressing, until at long last the man's eyes started to droop and she continued until he finally nodded off to sleep.

Instantly the slave girl was on her feet and embraced her tightly. "You did it! Oh thank you. Thank you!"

Afraid that the girl would see her blushing uncontrollably, she gently pulled the girl's arms away and lowered her face. But only a moment later she felt fear again from her companion.

The woman tensed again, looking around wildly. "But where is the other one? There were two of them before."

She led the girl a few strides away to ensure they wouldn't wake up Gritritl. Then she explained her theory to the woman.

Not surprisingly she didn't believe it. "What? I don't believe it."

She had to struggle to keep from being distracted by woman's beauty and took a breath to calm herself. "Look around. The other one is nowhere in sight." She explained how she had thrown a few pebbles and they had passed right through the man. "Mayhaps it's a survival gift from Azealla. Like how the wingsqerl can glide from tree to tree."

Immediately the other was shaking her head. "No, no Gelf. This is more than just a wingsqerl's patagum or our own knobhorns. This is like," she paused and her eyes grew wide "like magic." Despite her own doubts she wondered if it really could be magic, magic like the power to make a person go vanus. But there was, something within her that felt this was not the answer. She couldn't quite put it into words, but there was a strong sense that these were not the people who visited chief Journgad. She made the effort to debate this with the beautiful slave girl, but with nothing more than intuition, the woman remained unconvinced.

Instead, she attempted to draw the woman away with her towards Higsthon before the barbarian regained his senses. But again the girl stopped her.

"No, we have to go back and help the others."

This threw her for a loop. There was a whole village full of barbarians guarding the seekers.

"Well of course. But h-

Before she could even finish, the girl had grabbed a hand-sized stone and threw it with strong force at Gritritl. An instant later, the man fell over to the side, either knocked out or dead. Then, while she was still processing this, the woman grabbed the man's spear and handblade before turning back to her with a smile.

The woman's speed was amazing, and she was so adept. "How did you do that?" Sadly with all of her emotions tumbling around, she could think of nothing more poignant to say.

The woman shrugged, "I have no idea. But I must have been a warrior. It seems to just, I don't know come to me."

Gelf couldn't keep from staring at the woman until finally her sense-readin told her that it was causing discomfort. She gently moved forward and took the girl's hand. She lowered her voice, as there might still be barbarians nearby to hear. "I believe, that you are the Oracle's sister Truini. Does that name sound familiar?"

The slave girl looked back to her with a blank expression. "I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean."

Unfortunately it seemed that their talk the night before had done little to help. She mulled over the situation in hopes of presenting a more conducive wordsong, but again her thoughts would not coalesce into words of any value. “Alright, query you tell me what you *do* know and maybe we can fill in the gaps in your smarati.”

Here the woman paused a moment as she seemed to struggle with her own mind. “Okay. I remember laying on my back just beyond the ditch that surrounds the camp. I looked up and saw several of the men standing over me. I didn’t understand their wordsong, but there was no denying their intent. They brought me into the village and gave me a pile of the animal hides to clean. If I didn’t work fast enough, or if I tried to fight back one of them would strike me. At times when I was too numbed for violence to motivate me, they would threaten one of the others with a spear blade.”

She was horrified by what the woman said. “By Prijnak’s sword, they’re little more than animals themselves.”

“No doubt about it. Watching them treat the caged animals, one would think that they’re even worse. I couldn’t imagine a Meldabeast acting with such violence towards another.” (unless it was mating season she reminded herself).

“So their entire society is focused on hunting animals?” She could not imagine how Adeima would permit such sacrilege.

“Yes. Not only do they eat the animals, but they use the bone for these spearheads” she held up the weapon, “the hides for their clothing, and the fat as fuel for their torches.”

It was a horrifying tale. That any denisovians would treat Azealla’s creations with such disdain shocked her down to the core. She was certain now that their priest’s sickness was a curse from the creator for abusing Her gifts so.

“The beautiful warrior paused and held out her hand. “Would you help me to free our people from this horrid fate?”

She didn’t miss the term ‘our people’ and she hoped now that the woman accepted her as kin.

“Well of course, I would love to do anything to help, but-”

“But what?”

“Well, I’m a healer. I’ve never fought in battle, or taken a life. It goes against my oath of service.”

At first her fraidness told her that the woman would label her a coward. She even wondered now if it could actually be true. But then she started thinking about how they had fooled Gritritl and the seed of an idea began to grow. “What if, we combine our talents to develop a strategy for taking down the barbarians in a different way?”

This suggestion brought a beautiful smile to the woman’s face.

Chapter 14

She hurried towards the barbarians camp looking like a crackpot. Her hair tufts were muddy, her pants were torn, there was dirt streaked all over her and she kept a horrified expression as she reached the camp.

“Hurry hurry. Your man Gritritl got hurt. He bit by bosnayke! Someone please come help!”

Two men, one of them being the man who found her, came across the ditch toward her. “Wayz you frayedcalln graytzey fyr? Houd yu askyp Gritritl?”

She tried to use hand motions to convince them of what she said. At first her sense-readin told her of their doubt. But she kept her expression wide-eyed and terrified enough that soon they pushed her to hurry and show them. Wasting no time, she rushed back towards the brook, sensing the men following behind. They found Gritritl and quickly fell to his side. The moment their attention was averted, she made quicksteppins to the side and first one, then another rock sped through the air. She stared in fascination as both of them collapsed with barely a mutter.

“Wow Truini, you were amazing!” She rushed over and embraced the woman., as trepidation filled her like a bucket from the well. They held each other longer then she would have with anyone else. Gelf stared into the woman's delicate eyes and wondered briefly why the warrior hadn't let go. Then she sensed something new. It was a feeling she rarely sensed in others, and it reminded her of Fronin. She felt the woman's eyes staring back at her and finally, with terror filling her every pore, she raised her neck and brushed her horn delicately against the slave girl's cheek.

At first the girl opened her eyes wide, but then she lowered her body down and they kissed—hesitantly at first, and then more passionately. Gelf had never felt this way about anyone before. Her talent for sensing emotions had always made people uneasy and few men, or women had propositioned her for coupling. But now, as she held this delicate girl close to her, she felt all the suppressed desires bubbling over inside.

Their lovemaking was deep and charged with a sparkling energy. She delicately stroked the girl's hair tufts and felt the shivers of joy as they both exhausted themselves together.

When they finished, the girl gazed deeply into her eyes. “Thank you, that was wonderful.”

“No.” She countered. “Thank *you*.” Then she kissed the girl again, pouring all of her energy into it. As if a single kiss could freeze this moment in time forever.

“You have to be the most beautiful person that I've met in all my life, even more so then your sister. I, I just can't get over how perfect you are.”

“You're pretty amazing yourself. I was really impressed by how easily you deceived those men. I tried to get past the barbarians a few times, but one of them always caught on.”

“Well I was helped by my sense-readin. I can feel certain, emotions from people. It's not that strong, and doesn't work when I'm distracted. But I could feel the right moment when he got the fraidness enough to trust me. More importantly, I can tell when one of them tries to use that ghost-image trick. The ghost never speaks and I sense no emotions from him.”

“Wow Gelf, that's a wonderful talent.” They kissed again and then just held hands for awhile, drinking in the peaceful sounds of the forst. Something nagged at her kaba though. It was a huitz-fly in her head just buzzing around until finally she couldn't keep from facing it. By that time the advantage was lost, for she sensed a man close by and what she sensed was a cruel assurance.

“Watch out!” She grabbed the woman and they rolled over into the bush. She didn't see exactly what had made the man confident, but then a spear landed only two handspans next to her. Clearly the danger had not passed, but she did sense disappointment from nearby.

“Stay here.” The voice was a barely audible whisper as she spied Truini move off in a crouching soft-step. She sat tensely waiting to see what would happen. For a time, all was silent and she felt out with her senses hoping that the triumphant thoughts would come from Truini. She searched in all directions, but this time both the warrior girl and the barbarian were equally skilled at secrecy. It was only when she finally inched around the base of a tree that she saw the woman flanked by two barbarians. Now the warrior spoke to him to see which one was real and the man foolishly revealed himself.

The true man quickly lunged with a long knife and Truini stepped aside whacking his arm with a spear. The man, now realizing that she knew his secret, made attempts instead to use his ghost as a distraction. It had little effect as Truini stared straight at the live opponent. Gelf screamed inside realizing that she was watching a fight to the death between her lovely warrior and the barbarian. They threw dozens of jabs at each other sizing up one another's skill. There were several terrifying attacks by the barbarian, but Truini chose to defend for the moment. She threw a few swipes, but Gelf could sense a purposeful delay on Truini's part which she couldn't quite understand. As the two warriors slowly revolved around each other, she developed a strategy of her own. It took awhile before the moment was right, but finally she sprang out of her hiding place and smacked the barbarian in the back of the leg with a branch.

Unfortunately, the branch was rotted and didn't have quite the effect she'd hoped for. But the distraction was enough that Truini soon had him on the ground and knocked unconscious.

“You know, I could've taken him alone.” The woman smiled and the gratitude radiated off of her. “Of course you could Truini. I'm sorry to interfere. I'll let you have the next one all to yourself.” She kissed the beautiful warrior and was almost ready to bring her to the ground again. But the woman stood fast.

“Gelf, do you think you could sneak into the barbarians' camp and free the other man who is still with the gudstrength?”

That was a disturbing thought. She didn't have experience with these warrior tactics. But given what the two of them had accomplished just now, she began to recognize that her sense-readin would give her an advantage to make up for her lack of experience. So with that realization, she grudgingly pushed her fraidness aside and told the woman she would do her best.

“Wonderful. I'll wait here with my newly acquired arsenal of barbarian weapons.” She winked and threw a kiss.

But Gelf wrapped the woman up and kissed her with everything she had. Then, praying that she would see the woman alive when she returned, she hurried off to the back side of the camp.

Chapter 15

There were few places to hide, but the barbarians didn't seem to be watching this side of the camp with any concern. She suspected that few people would attempt to cross the ditch and so the villagers expected no threat. She carried a small shrub with her and if she got the sense-readin that someone was uneasy she would hide behind it for awhile.

The trip was agonizingly slow before she finally reached the ditch and looked to see how much of an obstacle it presented. The depth was not so challenging, but the sides were steep enough to

be potentially deadly. Once she got down, she didn't know how she would get back up the other side. She thought about this for a timepause until she got the sense that the last of the able-bodied slaves was nearby. She made a rustling in the shrub until her sense told her that he'd noticed. Then she carefully poked her head through and motioned for him to stay nearby. Very slowly, for any noise at this point would be catastrophic, she scooted herself down into the channel and when she reached the other side, the man was there to help her up.

“What are you doi-”

She quickly shushed him and led the man back to the slave shelter. Finally when they were safely inside, she told him of Truini and their success against three of the barbarians.

“Then we must hurry, before the advantage is lost and they go on the attack.”

Gelf was filled with relief at the knowledge that this man was as brave as Truini. She gave the man a brief explanation of the barbarians' strategy and how to defeat it as they made quick-steps back the way she had come and followed the ditch to the entranceway. With their priest sick, and three men already missing, there was only one man and his ghost standing at the entrance. Gelf could sense his worry and knew that he was paying careful attention for any disturbance. With the quietest words she could, she told the other man, who she assumed must be Valtreen, which of the two was real. He then took out the guard so quietly that she assumed he was a warrior too. They carefully lowered the man's body near some rocks, and covered it with branches. Then they worked together to pull away the thick boards that covered the ditch.

By now, everyone in the village was shouting angrily and she knew that the two of them wouldn't get back to the forst safely. She would have to hope that Truini didn't stay there in wait for them. Under the shelter of a nearby branch, the two of them discussed what next steps to take.

“Okay Gelf, now if your friend took out three of them, and I took one, then that leaves twelve others not including the priest. We should assume that one person will stay with the priest and another woman recently gave birth. So that's ten people that we must get rid of.”

She stood guard in front of the weak-state slaves, hoping that she wouldn't be forced to choose between her oath and the safety of her kinsfolk. The sounds of struggle kept her on edge constantly as she earnestly watched the gaps between the shelterspaces. Meanwhile her kaba was filled with it's own struggle as she dug in her thoughts for any means by which she could offer help. Finally she settled on prayers to Prijnak.

It took awhile, but finally the sounds of battle drifted towards her. The sensin that she felt was mostly fear and anger, but she wasn't sure if it was coming from the barbarians, from Valtreen, or from Truini. She prayed once more to Prijnak on behalf of them both that her friends would be victorious.

“Gyert oughere! By rhang of Thorre, hu sa couwrd?!”

She sensed from this man, not just fear but outright terror. Out of curiosity she drifted away from the slave shelter and around the corner. Now the man she saw was carrying two spears and a belt knife while Truini advanced on him. She couldn't see anyone else, but it seemed impossible that they were all defeated.

“Truini wait!” Both of them spun around to look at her and she quickly sensed their confusion. “Truini I think this is the last man in their village. We don't need to harm *everyone*. By Prijnak's spear, all that we want to do is free the slaves!”

The woman kept a sword held out toward the man before answering. “I'm sorry love. The barbarians just kept coming at me.” The woman then turned to the man holding the spears. She told him something that sounded like 'go and don't return' though it was hard to be sure with the strange language.

“Wait!” She hurried over to the girl and spoke quietly to her. “Tell this man about my sense-reading and that if he tries to return here secretly that I will know it.”

Truini did this and the man's eyes grew very large. She sensed his amazement and he talked excitedly for a timepause. Finally, when he finished Truini turned back to her. “Gelf. He says some pretty crazy stuff. He asked me if you came from the mountain where shimmeri appear during the day. He asked if you were one of the gods from there.”

This brought many thoughts tumbling about in her head. It was forbidden to tell an untrue, for Adeima severely punished those who did so. But she wanted to ensure that the seekers, especially the sick ones, would be safe. “Tell him that I am headed there to meet with the people of the mountain.”

Through the protracted conversation she was able to learn a great deal. It seems that the man's whole tribe feared the dwellers on mount Higsthon. In addition to the shimmeri that they saw occasionally on the mountain, their priest had been awake early one morning and saw a shimmeri coming from the direction of the mountain but traveling very fast towards them above the ground. It fell to the underfoot on the far side of the brook. This was shortly before the priest fell ill with the strange growth.

She felt certain that if she could convince this barbarian that she was connected to such fearful magic, that neither he nor his tribe would give them any trouble. She thought furiously for a moment, before considering a strategy. “Truini, ask him how long ago the strange man with the funny walk visited them.”

As soon as the woman finished, the barbarian fell to his knees and she could feel the deep shock radiating off of him. He didn't even have the clarity to speak through Truini, his eyes were now glued straight on her. “Houwe yus noedis bisitr comhyar??”

Thankfully she could have predicted his response even if she hadn't heard anything. But she continued to speak through Truini so that there could be no misunderstanding what she said next. “Please tell him that the man who visited them is the one who I plan to meet with. We have much to discuss him and I.”

There was a great explosion of charged words now and the conversation was difficult to follow until Truini finally turned back to her. “He begs you to ask the mountain dwellers on behalf of his tribe to forgive them.”

That one was easy. Through Truini she told the man that it was not Higsthon who had punished them, but the great Adeima who forbids the harm of Her creatures. She told the man that they could only be forgiven once they have freed the captive animals and swore to eliminate their practice of hunting Her creations. Barely had she finished speaking then the man took off away from them and she could sense his unwavering compliance.

In all the excitement she only now noticed Valtreen standing behind her near the slave shelter. “Gelf? Is that true? Are you actually a servant of their God?”

Only now did she comprehend Adeima's edict and the danger of speaking an untrue. So briefly, she described to both of them how she had carefully chosen her words to allow the barbarian to *infer* an untrue without actually speaking one. Nevertheless, she still did not feel entirely at peace over what she had done. Would Adiamo judge her even for this mild deception? She did not know, but it brought some small fright to her kaba nevertheless.

In an effort to gain some strength from the other, she gave Truini a quick knobhorn stroke before they discussed their next steps. Her first thoughts of course was for their stricken kinsfolk. She led the three of them back to the dilapidated shelter and looked over them more carefully now. This ailment wasn't like anything she'd seen or heard of. There was no injury, and the sickness did not seem to affect the barbarians. Her only conclusion was that Adeima was punishing them for consuming animals. But why would She do such a thing when it was clearly not voluntary? It was all so mysterious. All that she could do was to sit over each person and reciting the healing incantation, which she repeated for a long timespan. She then instructed the other two on how to care for the people with the limited resources of the camp.

As she began a second repetition of the prayer, her trance was interrupted by a gentle touch from Truini. “Gelf, what about the people that you, or *we* were going to look for? Could they know something about this?”

In all the excitement, she had been focused only on convincing the barbarian of the great danger in seeking revenge. But now, now thinking back to the beam of light, and the shimmer that moved toward the ground. Suddenly she sat bolt upright. “Oh my gosh, that's what she meant!” “What is it Gelf?” Her sudden burst of emotion had actually startled Valtreen as well.

“The Oracle! One of the things she said was 'shimmer play, alongside the Saülè.' That must mean that my destiny will take me to the throne of Higsthor, where that man said the shimmer appeared.”

“Oh no Gelf. That sounds horribly dangerous. You heard what the barbarian said. Maybe Higsthor is the one who creates all the shimmer each night. How could you survive against the wrath of a God?”

She hadn't thought of this. Maybe great Higsthor would strike her down for trespassing on His domain. But as before, there was some obscure feeling within that she would not be harmed. It wasn't anything she could put into words, but she had the sense that Higsthor Himself wasn't the menace. “Truini, think about it this way. The man who met with chief Journgad did not pose a threat, nor did the man who visited the barbarians.”

Without a word, she could tell that the woman remained unconvinced. “Truini, I promise you. I will not take any unnecessary risks. After all, I have a perfect woman to come back to.” Valtreen patiently waited for them, but her sense-reading told her that he was feeling impatient. “Yes Valtreen?”

The man wasted no time in voicing his thoughts. “Gelf. What about this temple that you spoke of back at the village. Do you think that great Higsthor would send a simple denisovian to meet with the chief? If the man really was a God in denisovian form, then he would simply take what he wanted, no?”

She gave the man a somber expression. “Valtreen, I'm afraid that you know as much as I do about that. Until I reach the mountain, neither of us will have an answer to this mystery. And that is why I must leave you my wonderful friends, please pray that Prijnak and Adeima look kindly upon me through this journey.”

She needed no sense-reading to feel the sorrow and fear that both of them felt. But she hoped, and prayed that the answer would be found soon enough. She rubbed knobhorns with Valtreen and kissed Truini passionately before finally succeeding in prying herself from the warrior's powerful arms.

As she looked back one last time, the words of Truini drifted across to her. “May the Gods that you told us about, Prijnak the warrior and Adeima guide you in all that you do.”

Chapter 16

Her mind was still spinning from everything they had been through, and it was heartbreaking to be separated from Truini, even for only a couple of days. But the great mountain had to be reached. She couldn't put her own longing for a mate ahead of the great tragedy hanging, like a spear on a string, above her kinfolk. So she grudgingly forced aside her own desires and focused on traversing the increasingly hostile countryside. And hostile it certainly was. There were no food plants to be found, the underfoot thrust itself toward the sky in random jagged patterns, and even the trees were warped and stunted by the great power of Higsthon.

As time wore on, the hunger began to dominate her mind almost more than the mission itself. Some meat from the barbarian camp had been the last meal that she had grudgingly eaten and it had long since given up its energy to her limbs. Her stomach rumbled almost constantly now and she was feeling weaker each day from the exertion. Her breath was becoming ever more rapid which gave her the fright that she might not have the strength to make it to the great peak above. Earlier that morning there had been a few Rhutenga plants that she dug up and ate, but they only rekindled her previously numbed insides. The plentiful water from the brook was little substitute for a nice healthy goard or kul-melon.

Her musings were interrupted before sunset by what felt like a waking dream. As the Saülé began to dip towards the horizon, she thought that she spotted a hotz tree. She wondered at first if her food-starved mind was playing tricks on her, as the light gave all the trees an almost faery-like glow as the Saülé fell to the underfoot. But as she drew nearer, the smell was unmistakable. She ran to the tree and tore into one and then another hotz-fruit with relish. After consuming half a dozen, she finally forced herself to stop so as not to get sick from too much. It was such a relief to know that she could finally sleep through the night without her insides quaking.

Suddenly, she sat bolt-upright. Insides quaking! ‘Long path therein, brings quaking within.’ That was one of the things the Oracle had told her! So it was all true, she really was on the path that Adeima had laid out for her! Praise be to the creator for that. She thought back to the other things that the oracle had described. It was difficult to remember all of the peculiar sayings. There was something about shimmeri flying backwards, and a cliff revealing something. And what of the unknown ally? Was her beautiful Truini that ally? She struggled to understand the obscure

wording, but the memories were leaves spinning just out of reach on the breeze. So she resigned herself to putting the prophecy aside for the moment and focusing on her trek. Before going any further, she stitched some twigs together and made a rough carrying purse for the hotzfruit. With so little to eat, she was going to need all the provisions that she could get from now on.

Soon enough, she continued her climb, and the terrain became ever more severe and hostile. The ground rose up towards the peak of Higsthon and following the brook required her to regularly put down her food and scramble over large boulders and even scale a few small escarpments. By the time she was able to find a shallow cave to rest in, she was down to her last two hotz-fruits and her limbs felt like they were on fire. Her legs were shaking from the torment by the time she collapsed to the floor of the cave and fell immediately asleep.

Chapter 17

She must have been asleep for a long time. It had been dusk when she'd discovered the cave and now the sun was high up in the sky. A full night and a half day had gone vanus already. Realizing that chief Journgad was back at the village still waiting for her return, she willed her sore limbs to move again with an almost supernatural effort and continued climbing alongside the brook. It was only a short while later that she came upon the most peculiar sight. A young person lay sprawled on the ground at the bottom of a crevice far off at the edge of see'in. From the distance, she couldn't discern much except that the figure was quite short and was not moving at all. Clearly the person needed help and she carefully scrambled down to find out what she could do to for them. But as she got closer, she had a great shock which only grew more intense as details of the person became clear.

It wasn't a young one at all, it looked like a man, at least superficially. But he was smaller than any denisovian she had seen. As she got up next to him, she saw that his legs were thinner than hers and much shorter. Instead of the normal azure skin, his was a dark brown like freshly tilled soil and instead of two knobhorns on his forehead, he had a single strange horn in the middle of his face and something smaller on each side of his head. There were no tufts of hair that she could see on his back (he was wearing some kind of garment which hid the skin), but there was a thick layer of hair all over the top of his head. He also had an extra finger on each hand which looked quite useless to her superficial gaze.

She stared at him a long time before realizing that he might be in trouble. So just as with the oracle, she went to put her cheek against his breath-hole. But that brought even more of a shock. He *had* no breath hole at all! The man's head was nothing but skin and a large mat of hair. How did this man breathe with all that hair in the way?

It took several minutes of searching to discover where he might breathe from. Thankfully, she was at last able to feel the puff of air from what looked like his mouth. But more troubling than that was a thick gash along the side of his head and a number of strange purple marks on his arms where they poked out of the clothing. The former confused her a great deal. For the gash was clearly an injury, but it was red in color. What kind of creature could this be who's injuries were colored red and not blue? There was no denying that this man needed help, but she hadn't

any idea what kind of help she could provide for such a strange creature? And would he respond to the same type of treatment that a denisovian would? It made her wonder; if he was some kind of faery or servant of Higsthon, why would they abandon him in such a state?

That question brought a new thought to her mind. Perhaps the man's injuries were a punishment from Higsthon and interfering would incur His wrath upon *her* as well. The more she thought about it though, the more wrong that felt. She was a healer, and her first duty in life was to help the sick and injured.

Any questions that she had would hopefully be answered if the strange man regained gudstrength. For now, she fashioned some thin branches into a sling and pulled the man back to the cave that she had slept in. It was opposite the direction that she needed to go, but at least the being could rest there comfortably.

Her first thought was to get water from the brook and wash the cut along his head. Then she removed the clothing, it was a very strange material indeed, and poked at the purple spots. They did not release any liquid, so she assumed that it wasn't a disease. She then felt along his lower arm for the strength of his life-force. It was very weak. At least as weak as the barbarian priest's had been. But it was there nonetheless. So with the man cleaned up, she gathered some spydr-silk and pressed it into the gash on his head hoping that it would seal the wound as it did her own people.

With that done, she gathered leaves and blanqetgrass to lay around him and protect him from the chill. She watched over him for several hours speaking incantations before she began to get a strange sensation. She started to sense peculiar images that made no sense to her. She saw the shimmeri, but not the constellations she was familiar with, and these shimmeri were seen through some kind of clear wall, as if she were gazing through a hole in the ceiling at night. She saw a room with several beings on it. Some looked like this man, but others looked even more strange. There was a shelf which spanned around the whole room and was as smooth as the water in a bucket. Then she saw a passageway, it was round, like traveling through the inside of a tree trunk, but this one was also smooth. There were small depressions in one side and there was a being traveling through the tube by putting feet or hands into one indentation after another. The images were all jumbled and impossible to interpret.

Finally, her fatigue outweighed her curiosity and she recognized that she had to take rest herself. She would have to be satisfied with the hope that her help and prayers to Azealla would bring more gudstrength in time. Before laying down, she said the healing incantation twice more over his prone form and pushed the blanqetgrass up against him. Slowly, her head fell against the wall of the cave and she closed her eyes.

As she began to drift into sleep, she had the most unimaginable dream. She saw a great round object, but one so huge that only a small part was visible. There were wisps of some white substance mixed with blue around it and a few brown parts. All around the object was blackness speckled with shimmeri and the round thing moved bellow her like a leaf riding along a brook. She was looking at the scene through some kind of wall, but one that she could see through. It felt then, that the shelter she was in was somehow moving towards another object which was slightly larger and it was called something like a boat, but not exactly a boat. It was shaped like a

ball much smaller than the giant blue one and with many tubes sticking out of it and connected to other balls. The overall shape was incredibly beautiful and fragile-looking. After watching for awhile, she noticed that little by little she could see less of the peculiar boat-like object and she imagined that it was because they were getting much closer to it. Eventually the scene narrowed so much that she could only see one small round panel on it. The place she was in shuddered slightly and another person pushed a series of spots on the smooth counter. There was a strange sound and then the person floated to the back of the box, just like if he were in a river. She couldn't fathom how anyone could float in the shelter when there was clearly no water present. And what was this room that looked out on the night sky with a giant ball above.

She woke up with a start and wondered at the strange dream. Maybe it was a further clue from Adeima. But what did it mean? She grasped at random ideas like huiltz-flies while her mind dragged her grudgingly into the waking world. Nothing in her consciousness offered a clue, and sadly she could not consult the Oracle this time for guidance. Here she was alone with only her own wit to guide her.

She sat up and recited the healing incantation several more times and brought water which she sprinkled into what looked like the man's mouth. It took only a short timespan but soon the man opened his eyes. He looked about and the instant he saw her, he sat up and his eyes grew very wide. She got the sense that he was afraid, no terrified. But not afraid *of* her. He was afraid of something else. Something that she didn't understand. There was a secret, a very powerful secret. She wondered if it had something to do with the strange dream. She felt the man staring at her and she smiled in an effort to ease his tension. Then she pointed at herself and spoke the word 'Gelf' to help the man understand. He seemed to grasp her meaning and he pointed to his own chest and spoke the word 'Adewale.' It was a strange sound, and she couldn't tell if he understood and was speaking his name, or if he was trying to say something in his own language. She put her hand out in the manner that chief Journgad had described and the man recognized the gesture immediately. He opened his own hand and shook her hand up and down two times. The moment their hands touched, she felt the sensation of familiarity. This was the familiar greeting among this man's people. She also saw images and the words that represented them. Not many, but enough to help her create an understanding with the man.

“Ekene mu unu”¹ she said. The words felt strange, like they were meant for a different kind of mouth, but it was what this man used as a greeting.”

Now she felt a very strange image. The man, Adewale, was laying one of her own people on the ground. It was in a place unfamiliar to her, but yet something about it teased at her brain. She sensed that he was trying not to hurt the man, but what he was doing was necessary to protect, what? She did not know yet.

A light moan escaped from the man and she was brought back to the present. “You- hurt.” She said, and pointed at the red line on the man's head. Then “I fix” to let the man know that she was a healer. The man didn't understand her fully. He had a different understanding of fixing injuries. But somehow she was able to help him to understand her intent.

1 Formal greeting in Igbo

“Imela.”² He spoke slowly and his words were very low in pitch, almost more of a vibration than a sound. The language that he spoke did not make sense to her, but she felt the emotion of gratitude from him which was enough.

It was likely that he needed water the most. She had no idea how long the man had lain there in the crevass. She also wondered if he needed different types of drink, since he looked so different. But then she cursed herself for such silliness. He was a living being, and clearly a child of Adeama. Just, a type that she had never seen before.

“You rest. Me bring water.” She said to make it clear that she was leaving but would come back soon. However the man was not able to grasp her meaning this time. She experienced no images that allowed her to convey what she wanted to say. So she pointed at the man, then made the motion of lying down. After that she cupped her hands and brought them to him and made a drinking sound. Then the man understood and she heard the sound that he used for this.

“I get you, omi.”³

The man was both surprised and impressed that she could communicate in his language, but he did not know a way to communicate his emotion back to her. So they both let the matter drop and she scrambled down to the brook for water. Since she no longer had her flask, she had to resort to simply dipping a cloth and soaking up as much as she could. By the time she returned, there was only a little bit left which she squeezed into his mouth before giving him the last hotz-fruit. The man stared at this doubtfully. He had seen it before but had never eaten one.

“Bia rie nri.”⁴ (come eat) She took a bite out of one end to prove her point. The man followed suit and devoured the fruit quickly. She then got an image of foods that she didn't recognize. A golden brown bread-like substance but in round disks smaller than her hand. A root that was cooked and mashed. Some kind of dark green leaf that was also cooked. One of these even had a sound that described it- ‘kuli-kuli.’⁵ None of this was familiar to her and she didn't understand how she was coming to see so many strange pictures in her mind.

When the man had finished eating, she decided to see if he might know. “What, kuli-kuli is?” The man's eyes grew suddenly large and he again became frightened. He was also very confused. She tried putting her hand on his shoulder to encourage him to not move about too much. But when she did, a new flood of images and sounds filled her mind. Now the man was even more frightened than when he had first seen her. She knew something and the man didn't know *how* she knew. But with the new pictures and sounds, she grew more confident that she could help him understand.

“I see-” she pointed to her head “pictures. I see golden brown cakes that are food. I see an orange root that is cooked.”

But instead of helping to calm the man, her words seemed to make him even more frightened. It had something to do with the very important secret.

“I sorry. No want to make scared.” But nothing she said seemed to calm him. He spoke many words which were both too fast and too low-pitched for her to fully understand. The man said

2 ‘Thank you (could also use ‘ndeewo’)

3 Yoruba term for water, or drink

4 Igbo expression ‘come and eat’ (could also use Yoruba term -‘wá jeun’)

5 A groundnut cake

one thing, but he meant another. He was trying to deceive her, but not in a malicious way. The word 'contamnayte' came to her many times, but she didn't know what it meant. So she tried a different tactic. Instead of seeking his help in understanding the images, she instead repeated back to the man what the chief had said. She told him of the stranger who had come 'from an island to the west' who was looking for a lost tool. This seemed to be more successful in calming the man. He was happy that she referred to the island. He believed that this was how she knew words in his language.

Slowly, she began to get a hint of understanding. For some reason, she was able to grasp more than simple strands of emotion from this man. Somehow she was able to see images, words, and sometimes even smells that were part of his culture. The man, Adewale did not possess the same ability and that both frightened and confused him. It was actually not so much different from her own kinsfolk which helped calm her own increasingly frayed nerves. She would have to be careful, she realized, to not reveal to him so much of what she saw in the mind-pictures for the man's sake. But this brought up a new conundrum. She sensed in the man a desire to return to the place he had come from, but he was not able to contact his people and he did not want her to know about the secret place. What could she do to help the man if he did not want her to go near his camp? She couldn't of course abandon the man when he was suffering unhealth, but if he did not want her to see the secret place then what other option was there? No matter how much she pondered it, the answer remained stubbornly hidden. So, she took the cloth again and went to the river to wet it, all the while pondering how to help the man without upsetting him further.

By the time she returned, she had come up with an idea that might work. With simple words and pointing, she was able to let him know that she had been traveling through the mountains. She indicated a direction that was close the man's camp, but still off to the side. She offered to let him accompany her and she got the image of him secretly running off to his camp when she wasn't looking. She said a quiet prayer requesting forgiveness of Azealla for her small un-truth and then carefully patted the man's wound with the damp cloth.

After a couple of hours, the man stood up and stretched his limbs. He was sluggish and the ground force was larger than he was used to. But she felt confident that the being would at least be able to move around soon.

She put a hand on his shoulder to get his attention. "You seem- have gudstrength now. We" she pointed to him and then to her, "go after dark is finish." He was confused for a moment, but then she saw another image.

"We go when 'sun' rise again." Now he understood and he again laid down to rest. She found some more blanqetgrass and put them around the man before laying next to the strange man. But the moment she did so, she sensed very strong discomfort. At first she was confused because the emotions and images seemed connected with mating. But looking over, she saw the man's eyes were wide and he was trying to say something. It wasn't until he put a hand on her shoulder that she finally understood his concern. This man's people slept in separate places unless they were mating or, another word like bonded. He did not understand the idea of sleeping close simply for warmth. Gelf worried that sleeping apart in the cold would risk his health but she had to respect the strange man's customs. She went out and gathered as much blanqetgrass as she could find in the waning light and put them around him before laying down a few footfalls away.

Chapter 18

After Higsthon raised the Saülè, the two of them set out along the brook. The man had been here before and he knew where the easier paths were, so she followed the picture in her head but led him to believe that she was in fact leading *him*. They stopped periodically for water, but there was no food left and she not only felt her own hunger but sensed hunger from the man as well. She wished that the man's secret was not so important because she felt the man's longing to reach his camp was partly motivated by fodeins. She assumed that there must be more fodeins at this secret camp. Unfortunately she couldn't think of a way to make the man understand that she wanted to eat also, without betraying the mind-pictures that she saw.

So on they trekked up through the mountain while she struggled to understand the strange images. There was one image of a smooth counter and on it was an image made of only of light. She didn't understand the symbol, but the man, when he had seen this understood it to mean that the source of their energy was running low. She did not understand energy except when the villagers used wood to cook food, so she assumed that the energy was something like this. Her thoughts were interrupted finally when the two of them were confronted with a tall rock face. It wasn't impossible to climb, but she would need help from the man in order to do so. She saw an image in her mind of the man using a rope with some kind of hook to climb up it. But they were too far from the forest to weave a vine-rope. So she motioned for him to interlace his fingers and she would step on them to lift herself to the top of the rock. This was familiar to him and he did it easily, bending one leg and bracing the other.

She carefully stepped onto his hand and reached up to the top of the boulder, but before she could fully grasp it, the man stumbled and they both fell. She experienced the man's confusion of how anyone could function with such a strong ground force. This was something that made no sense to her. Was the ground force different in the man's camp? Every place in the land that she had traveled, the pulling force of the ground remained the same.

She went to get up and try again, but now a searing pain shot up her leg. She was hurt and couldn't stand. Panic began to overshadow all else. What could she do? She was easily 10 days travel from the village and at least two days from any food. The man was concerned for her and wanted to help, but he did not know healing. Remembering that the man was with her, she struggled to keep the panic out of her face and show strength. The man felt along her leg roughly and she bit down on her mouth to keep from yelping. The man felt depressed because he did not have the knowledge to heal her, but there was another in his camp who was a better healer than anyone. The question in his mind was how to use their- 'teknowludjy,' she didn't understand that word, without revealing something dangerous to her. She decided to try another small untruth and prayed that Azealla would forgive her.

"You, go to your people. Leave me here."

She sensed that the man would never *actually* abandon her, but her statement gave him an excuse to go to his camp without her seeing. He wanted to tell her that he would bring help to her, but he did not know how to make her understand. She urged him again and carefully stood on her good leg to hoist the man to the top of the rock. He was small and weighed very little compared to her

own people. Then she sat back down to wait. As the man was being lifted up, she had the image of herself being made to disappear which scared her. She hoped that such a thing didn't happen. While the strange man was gone, she pondered the situation from all angles. He wasn't denisovian, but he looked similar, and he was clearly intelligent. She stared off into the distance trying to grasp it when the most incredible sight of all came to her eyes. If she hadn't been looking at just the right spot, she would have missed it. The cliff above her seemed to shimmer and fade revealing a wall with large flat parts that shone brightly. How could it be?! A cliff that was not... She instantly sat bolt upright which sent new waves of pain down her leg. The cliff of stone that reveals the unknown! "Adeima be praised!" she shouted. Then strangely, she lost consciousness.

Akwukwo Uku book three

Chapter 19

Professor Umquo strode quickly into the room and went straight to the doctor. "How long will she be out for?"

The bald-headed woman looked at the chronometer on the wall before answering. "I'm sorry, it's difficult to say with their physiology. We gave her a generous amount though. She shouldn't gain consciousness for at least half an hour."

The taller man was pleased. He looked down at the patient and smiled. "A wonderfully unexpected opportunity. Each time we examine these beings, we learn something new. If we ever get back, I'm sure that you could hold an entire conference on their physiology."

The doctor, Sefi Ikpeba, was of the same opinion. She, even more than the professor, felt a thrill at the chance to study a whole new race of beings, even if it was due to Adewale's clumsiness this time. The being on the table was easily 2 meters tall and wasn't even the largest of her kind. The being was female (at least she believed so), sprouted small horn-like nubs just above her eyes, and lacked any obvious ears or a nose. It almost gave her a resemblance to an extinct animal in their database called 'giraffe.' There were delicate tufts of hair growing in a line up the back, terminating in a small tuft at the back of the head. She had skin of a wholly alien color and blood that looked strangely like sky-blue. She sported powerful legs, but her arms were more delicate and terminated in two four-fingered hands. As if to make up for the lack of a fifth digit, the feet sprouted four longer digits as well, somewhat like the primates of Earth but without the opposable thumb.

"Dr. Ikpeba I would like you to see if you can find anything distinctive about this woman's neurology while we have her here. Adewale related to me some disturbing impressions that he had while he was out there with this one. He said that she seemed to have an understanding of things that he'd never told her. He said that she picked up several basic Yorigbausa⁶ words in only a few minutes and that she seemed to know things about him, like his favorite food, without him having told her."

⁶ A combination of Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa. The result of many decades of cultural integration centered around Lagos, Nigeria

Dr. Ikpeba looked back at the professor with a curious expression. “Of course professor. I’ll run a neurological scan before we return her to that boulder.”

“Good good.” The old professor hesitated and took a moment to look carefully at the prone form. “Amazing people aren’t they. They’re so, different.”

The doctor gazed with awe at her patient. “What surprised me most, was the distinct breathing hole at the top of the forehead. I wonder if they descended from a marine species, like a porpoise.”

“Well they certainly don’t look like anything that I’ve seen from Earth’s database.” The professor looked briefly at the time on the wall. “Well, I must get back to the lab. Daalu doctor.” He bowed slightly and left the sickbay as quickly as he had entered.

Meanwhile Dr. Ikpeba punched a series of buttons and a circular disk slid out from the wall a few centimeters above the patient’s head. While the scan was running, she went over to check on Adewale who was just finishing up in the disinfection chamber. She checked the settings and also took a sample of the strange material that was found in a gash on the man’s head. As her fingers glided over the control panel her thoughts were interrupted by a high-pitched scream. It was like nothing she had ever heard before. If she had been born a few hundred years earlier, she might have mistaken it for a household smoke alarm. She immediately put her hands over her ears and ran over to the source. Instantly her eyes opened wide in fright at the image of her patient fully conscious and obviously terrified.

“Yeeee! How on Earth can you be awake already?!” She quickly grabbed for an injector and filled it with a fresh dose of sedative. She grabbed for the nearest limb to administer the drug when the patient called out in a high-pitched voice. “No Sefi! No sleep!”

But she injected the patient anyway, all the while struggling to understand how the patient knew her name, and whether the damage hadn’t already been done. Her hands were shaking and she quickly took a seat to sort things out before she lost her cool completely. Firstly this being didn’t, as far as she knew, understand anything about her language. Second, the patient had never met her before (at least not consciously). And finally, there was no way in the world the woman could have known what was in the injector.

It was several minutes further before she trusted her legs to hold her up. But then, with her fingers trembling, she finally willed herself to stab at the communicator. “Tell Umquo that I need to see him in the medical bay, on the double!”

Since the professor had been headed back ostensibly to the lab, it took several minutes more before he returned to the doorway.

“Yes doctor?” His puzzled expression belayed his surprise at being summoned back so quickly. She paused for a few seconds, resting her hands on the medical bed to steady herself. Then she took a deep breath and faced the professor, relating what had happened to her.

“So she knew your name— *and* that you intended to give her another tranquilizer dose? That, that’s unprecedented! How could such a thing happen?”

“I don’t know professor. I was still running the scan when the patient woke up.”

The man seemed to age a week in just the few minutes of their conversation. “This is *terrible* news. What if she finds out where we’re from? I mean she’s already seen the medical bay, and she must know that we’re not of the same species. Chi moo! Even if we wipe her memory, it

may not be enough this time if she can merely read our thoughts.” The professor was instantly several kilometers away mulling over the implications of the event.

“Professor Umquo, I could give her a mild hallucinogen so that when she wakes, she will just assume it was all a series of dreams.”

Instantly the man's face brightened. “Yes doctor, that's a wonderful idea. Please do so immediately. And let me know the moment your neurological scans are complete. I want to know everything that you can assess about her mental abilities without risking her health.”

Chapter 20

Gelf woke up in the same place she had been at the base of the boulder. Her reed skirt was clean and her leg was completely healed. On top of that, there was a clay vessel nearby filled with water. She spent several minutes thinking over what she had seen, trying to convince herself that she wasn't suffering from some kind of unhealth in her head. She had seen the cliff become, not a cliff. She had woken up in a strange room with perfectly straight walls and bright light above. There had been a large flat circle hovering above her head and another being, much like the man she had found but slightly shorter who had come towards her. She had asked the woman healer not to put her to sleep, but her plea had been ignored. There were other images too, which she felt were not her own experiences. There had been an image of a slave-girl being carried along a dirt trail. Then an image of Fronin walking through the forest, but he had the head of a meldabeast. There was another image of her hut transforming into a vast cloud of requibugs which all flew into the sky. Finally she had seen the oracle floating in a room with a background of shimmeri behind her. It was very very confusing. Now she was back on the mountain, and with her injury healed in only the time of a single sleep. None of it made any sense to her foggy mind. Everything seemed to meld together as she tried to reassure herself that this time *she really was* awake and not once again seeing dreams or mirages.

After thinking it over for a long while, she came to a decision. It would upset the short man very much, but she simply *had* to understand what was going on. She needed to find out if the strange healing room was connected to the dangerous tool that chief Journgad spoke of. Were these beings really from an island to the west? And if so, why did they dwell here in the mountain? Were they servants of Higsthon after all? And what was that image of the gigantic round ball? These were questions that she felt even the great Azealla could not answer, no matter how many prayers she offered. So she hiked down to a crop of trees and found a vigrus branch. With this she felt that she could scale the boulder and reach the top to where the man's camp lay. It took half that day further before she reached the spot where she believed the rock had changed. She moved her hand carefully along the cliff and in a moment of pure shock, she saw her hand push *right through solid rock*. A handspan beneath it she felt something smooth. It was as flat as water, but it was vertical. She did not know how such a thing could be so, but neither could she deny what her senses were telling her.

She felt around and by sense of touch was able to grasp the size of the panel and where it ended. But what she couldn't figure out was the *purpose* of such a strange thing.

She was so distracted, that at first she didn't hear the sound. But soon the low vibration reached her and she turned to hear her name being called. It was Adewale reaching his hand out to her. Very slowly, for she was afraid both of falling, and of the strange rock that was not rock, she moved back to the short man and grabbed his hand. Instantly she was flooded with the man's fear. He wasn't just afraid, he was panic-stricken. He knew that she had discovered the secret. The word 'contamnayshun' was prominent in his mind, but she still did not know what the word meant.

To his credit, the man did not show his fear though. He simply smiled and motioned for her to walk with him. They sat down on a flat rock and were soon joined by another man with a different color hair on his head, and by the healer Sefi who's head was smooth like her own.

The man with the white head spoke to her first. "Gelf. That is you?"

She nodded and put out her hand and said the greeting of these people. The man shook it and she was again flooded with strange images. She watched a window filled with shimmeri, but the shimmeri flew past so quickly that they soon looked like thousands of white lines. She saw the same room she had seen before with the smooth counter along the wall. She even saw the great Higsthon mountain but from above, as if there was another mountain even higher from which it could be looked down upon.

"Gelf, you, understand me right?"

Quickly she returned to the present and focused on the man with the white hair on his head.

"I, I understand some things. Other things I do not."

The man put his hands up in a gesture that was meant to be peaceful. "Okay. Tell us what you do not understand. We can try- help."

This reminded her of the other seekers who were with the unhealth. But she had to concentrate on the moment now. She thought for a long timespan about the funny pictures. She did not know enough words in their language, Yorigbausa, to express the images. But she did her best. "Well. You come from a big boat. But that is not, best word. You travel very far, farther than anyone in this land. You look out windows, but see only the night sky instead of trees. These things are what I do not understand."

The people looked at each other with strange emotions. Their eyes seemed to grow out from their faces and the part above their eyes became heavily wrinkled. In another situation, she would have been moved to laugh. But she felt that this was the thing they did not want her to know. These people were struggling to understand *how* she knew. Since she did not understand it either, there was no way for her to explain it to them. This was nothing like her experience with the meldabeasts or with Fronin. This was dramatically more intimate. Suddenly her thoughts were interrupted by an image from one of them. It was a picture of *her*. She was laying on a bed, and there was a big round disk above her head and attached to the wall.

That was it! She was getting pictures of what these people saw! But these people did not understand her ability and it made them scared. She did not know what to do now. She burned to understand the pictures, but she did not want to make the strange people uncomfortable. The pendulum in her mind swung back and forth. To protect the feelings of these strange people, or give in to curiosity. Every fibre of her being cried out to learn what was happening. But still she worried, did she have the right? Would she come to harm because of it? The looks of caring and

concern on the faces of the people helped to end her uncertainty and finally she let curiosity win out.

“I wonder, what is very large ball that does not sit on ground. It has white things on, you call them 'clouds' and it sits in the night sky? And how is it that you people can float in the room that does not have water in it?”

Now the people were very worried. She felt sad that her words caused this, but she also felt a need to understand.

“Gelf. Where... you see this?” The woman with the smooth head continued to give her the straight-eye but the being had eyes that were very wide.

“I see in my head. I, feel that it something you people saw, long ago.”

Now the smooth headed woman was talking quickly to the man with the white head. The vibration of their talk was a funny feeling, but she dared not laugh as she knew the people were very worried.

“Gelf. Do, others of your kind, do this also?” The smooth headed woman looked at her with deep pain radiating from every fibre of her being.

She thought about this for a moment. She of course did not know what other people saw in their heads. But nobody had ever revealed that they could do this. Then she thought of chief Journgad and how he had met one of these people. If he possessed the ability to do this, he certainly would not have let the man go without many questions.

“I, no. I think not.”

All three of the people sighed with relief. “This is good. It is important for you to not share with the others what you saw.

“You do not want, contamnayshun?”

The smooth-headed woman looked at the white-haired man and then back at her. “That is right. Your friends, can not find this place.”

She sensed that these people wanted to send her on her way as soon as they felt sure that she would keep their secret. But she still had many questions. She thought quickly for some way to keep them here.

“What about- tool? The one that is said to make sickness.”

Now the man with the white hair on his head looked at her with a serious expression. “Gelf. This is very important. Do you know where the tool is?”

Now she regretted her question. She shook her head in a way that these people understood as 'no.' But she feared that the many times of implying the un-truth would forever keep her from dwelling among the honored ones in the aftertime. Her thoughts were quickly interrupted by the white-headed one.

“Gelf. This is important. This tool. It works as a fuel for us. Like, um-”

“Like, wood for fire.” She volunteered.

Immediately the man brightened. “Yes! Exactly. Like wood is fuel for a fire. If we do not find it, then our other tools will not work. Like the thing that hides our camp behind rock.”

The more she saw images and the more she heard them. The easier it was becoming to use their strange language.

“Oh, so the thing I saw was, mistake. But why? Why you hide here and no dwell in the open. Are you eremite like I am?” She knew it was not a word they used, but she did not know the right word in their language. “Um, person that stays apart, a magic-maker.” She got several images then and chose the one that seemed to most match her own life. “An onye njenje?”⁷

The people looked at each other and spoke quickly before the white-headed one spoke again. “Well, yes. You could say that we are like hermits, but we dwell, together. Because we are different from you.”

Now she was understanding more. “You are different because you come from a far away, uh plan — it.” Then she finally got enough images to understand what the giant ball was. The giant ball was what they called plan-it. And she also lived on a plan-it but one very far away. “Oh my goodness! You must be as powerful as Gods! To have the power to travel to another whole world!” She almost fell off the rock she was on. To think, everyone that she knew, every plant and tree and meldabeast all lived on a giant ball that floated among the great field of shimmeri. And these people, these beings could go from one ball to another the way she had gone from one forst to another.

Now she got an expression that sounded something like àkàrà tú s’épo.⁸ This she did not understand. But she knew that this was what made the people afraid.

“I am sorry. Does this mean I am— contamnays?” She looked from one to another. “Will I be sick?”

Showing concern, the smooth-headed healer put a hand reassuringly on her arm. “Gelf this is nothing bad or wrong with *you*. The contamination is *our* fault. We hide behind the rock because we do not want to influence the culture of your people. It is important for our mission that your people are able to develop normally without, without crazy ideas of traveling outside of this, planet. We desired only to learn about your people, like, like when you watch a plant to learn more about it.”

Now she was starting to understand. She was a healer, and the doctor was a healer. She looked for plants that could be used to repair sickness, and the doctor- wait.

“Doctor Ikpeba, do you study us to find out if we can help cure sickness?” As soon as she said it, she realized that it was wrong. What the person had meant was, different somehow. The study that the two males did was different from the study that she and Ikpeba did. She looked at plants to find out if there was a part of the plant that would bring people gudstrength. These people studied, for some other reason. To understand something. It didn't make sense to her. Quickly her thoughts were tossed aside as the woman clarified.

“Gelf. We, well they-” she pointed to the other two, “are not healers like you and I are. They study in order to understand your *culture*. You see, we used to be much like you. Long long ago. Our ancestors came from a very large island called 'Africa,' in a village called 'Lagos.' A very long time ago, many many lifetimes, our ancestors lived much like your people do. We had huts made of wood and mud, we ate plants and berries, and we wore clothing made from grasses.

7 Igbo term for hermit

8 The cat is out of the bag, literally translates to ‘the wind has blown from behind and we have seen the ass of the fowl’

Over the many many seasons, we learned new things. Like how to make boats powered by the wind⁹, or how to get iron out of the ground and heat it into metal¹⁰. Eventually we found a way to go out among the stars. Your people will do the same thing, eventually. But if your people find out about us before you are ready, it could change the way they see government, politics, and religion. It could make people go to war, to fight each other.”

She did not know about government or war or fighting. But now she saw images from the people that were many times more frightening. These people had seen 'hue-maans,' that's what they called each other, fighting and killing other hue-maans on the scale of hundreds or even many thousands. The visions were more than nightmarish, they terrified her, right down to her kaba. There were gigantic explosions like when lightning strikes a tree, but larger than even her entire village. These 'wars' had killed more people than she had met in her entire life, hundreds of times more.

“By the spear of Prijnak! I can see it! The great 'BOOMS' on the ground, and the many many hue-maans sent to the aftertime. Even Pritlaxtl could not create such a nightmare.”

The idea that denisovians might do the same thing was more horrible than anything, even chief Journgad could possibly do. She thought deeply about their situation and the things she was seeing in her mind. Finally, after the silence had stretched out like the ku-rubr bark, she made up her mind.

“Professor Umquo, I know where your tool can be found.”

The man with the white hair on his head quickly turned to face her, his face made the funny wide-eyed look and his mouth opened wide. “You do?! But earlier you said, oh never mind. What do you know.”

She struggled to suppress the shivering in her fingers and feet as she prepared to defy the most powerful ruler in the whole land. “I was not supposed to tell you. But I also had the fraidness that I would lose the protection of our Lord Azealla because of my untrue words.” She took a deep breath and continued. “It is our tradition in times of uncertainty to consult the great Oracle who dwells in the temple of Adeima.” She could sense the impatience from the professor, but it was important for them to know that she had not spoken the untrue out of malice. “The Oracle goes into a trance when she sits in the temple and she speaks prophecy. She told me of the cliff that would reveal itself, and how the strange ones would be an unknown ally.” She looked directly at the professor now. “Our chief believes that your, tool. No it is not a tool, it is- source of power like the wood for a fire. That it lies beneath the temple of the Oracle. Our chief fears, as do I, that if the tool is taken away, that we will lose the prophecy on which our people depend.”

Barely had she finished before she saw the professor talking rapidly with the other two. The strong emotions that the beings felt made it difficult to understand their speech, but she experienced a few strange images. One was of one of her people being studied in their, healing room. They wanted to learn something, but they did not want to hurt anyone in the process. They also feared something as well. It had to do with the sickness of the Oracles.

“Doctor Ikpeba. If it helps you then I will let you examine me in your place of healing.”

9 Egypt was found to have sail-driven ships by 1450BCE.

10 Roughly 2000 years before Europeans discovered the bessemer process, the Haya people (in modern Tanzania) were creating high-grade steel

The healer had been facing Adewale, but now she spun her head quickly to look at her. “My word Gelf. This talent of yours is quite difficult to get used to. Our, um our people are not able to do this and it's quite, well exceptional.”

The impression that Gelf got was more severe than the words the woman used. The feeling that she got from the woman was more like, offended or violated. Like returning to her shelter and finding a stranger sitting on her sleeping mat. But she did not know how to stop the images.

“I am sorry Doctor Ikpeba. I do not mean to, offend. The things that I see are not anything I can control. Before meeting you, the only experience I had like this was getting faint— impressions from the meldabeasts and a few of my own people. I could tell if one of them was content or angry or frightened. But that was all. So these images of the big ball or of the healing place are new to me. I cannot keep from seeing them.”

The woman-healer patted her hand gently and her voice was kind. “I understand Gelf. It will take some getting used to, but... well I'll do my best to not take it personally.”

Now Gelf was filled with relief. These people no longer wished to send her off as soon as possible. They trusted her to keep the secret and the healer was hopeful that, by studying her, they might find a way to retrieve their tool without disrupting the power of the Oracle.

“Can I ask another question of you?” She believed that she knew the answer to this already, but she didn't understand why.

“Yes, go ahead Gelf.” This time Adewale answered for the group.

“I met a woman down the mountain over there. Her smarati was gone, but I think that she came from the village near me. Did you bring her there?” She told them of the encounter in the place of the barbarians, of the priest who had the strange growth, and of their escape thanks to the sleep-inducing leaves.

Once again she felt the image of one of her people being carried. She also sensed a desire to tell an untrue. “Please, if you do not wish to tell me, that would be better than to tell me an untrue.”

Quickly, the desire that she sensed vanished and she felt great conflict in its place. Time stretched on as she looked from one to another of the 'hue-maans.'

Finally, the white-haired man spoke. “Gelf. Please understand that we did this merely to protect your people from being contaminated.” He paused. “Yes, we did suppress the memories of those that reached too close to this camp. We brought them to the nearest members of your people so that they could live a renewed life-”

“But they were turned into slaves!” She blurted it out without even thinking. “They've lost their *identity*, their families, their entire past! Everyone from my village thinks that the other seekers are in the aftertime with Pritlaxtl. How could you do this to sentient people!”

Instantly she regretted her outburst. She felt the heavy weight descend on the three humans. They had been in deep conflict over the choice, and now there was an overwhelming sense of guilt that superseded all other emotions for them. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been rash with you. You were just trying to prevent this conta-”

The woman, Ikpeba put a hand on hers, and she felt the doctor's sorrow all the more intensely.

“No Gelf. It is we who should be sorry. The decision was far from unanimous, and there was a great deal of concern regarding the outcome of this decision. None of us were completely in favor of the procedure, but when one, and then another of your people began closing in on our

camp, we became desperate for a means to keep your people from finding out the truth. There's no doubt that we all feel horrible about what's happened. My word, for them to become slaves, it's unthinkable." The woman shook her head sadly.

"But, can't we *do* something? I mean, if you have all of this... tekno, tec— um, tools—" She did not understand the terms that the humans used for their magic. "Can't you help to correct the problem?"

The man, Adewale replied with a morose sincerity. "Gelf, it's just not that simple. The *whole reason* that we suppressed their memories was to keep them from learning about our, tools as you say. If we interfere again, then we risk the same contamination that we took such pains to avoid in the first place."

Gelf could feel the professor's sincerity. But despite the possible offense, she reached out with her mind for any other images from them. There must be *some way*, she thought, of helping her kinsfolk. But sadly, she drew a blank. Perhaps her emotions, her anguish for the beautiful Truini was clouding her senses. So she tried appealing to the doctor who had the same desire for healing.

"Doctor Ikpeba, couldn't you at least look at them and tell me what causes the ailment so that I can find a plant which could help?"

At first the hue-maans didn't understand. So she spoke more about the sickness that affected the other seekers. Like the rest of them, Dr. Ikpeba listened with rapt attention. "Gelf, from the way you describe it, this ailment sounds like a disease our people used to suffer from called 'anthrax.' It was caused by a failure of our bodies to fight off, um—"

The doctor paused and Gelf could sense the woman trying to think of a term that she could understand. But none of her own people had a word for this thing that the humans called 'limf-node.' She only grasped the vaguest sense from the doctor of what it meant.

"It's okay Dr. Ikpeba. I can sense what you mean by this... bak-tear-eeya."

As before, the doctor stared at her and she sensed the feeling of violation, but also something else, it was something like a mix of impressed and amazed. She was amazed herself, by the doctor's reaction. It was humbling that a being with such powerful magic could respect a simple healer with such a comparably minuscule ability.

But soon the woman recovered and continued her dialogue. "Alright, well anyway, so the disease is not something which can easily be treated with plants. It takes time to examine the blood and find out where it came from. In our people it was often caused by people living near cows or other animals—"

"Yes! That's it exactly! These barbarians seem to get most of their food from hunting animals and they even kept some animals captive within their camp. Maybe our disparate people have the same—"

But she quickly saw that the doctor had turned away from her and was talking animatedly with the white-haired man. They were both clearly distressed as she saw their hands moving rapidly and the doctor pointed at her several times. She caught a brief image of a large wooden boat with people next to it who looked like Ikpeba but with pale skin. Nearby on the shore were many people laying on the underfoot covered with blankets. Those people all had black spots covering their faces. It seems that long ago many of these hue-maans had fallen victim to a similar disease

brought to their land by a group of pale-skinned hue-maans. More than three-quarters of the people in the land were killed by it.

Before the conversation among the humans was even finished, she grasped what was worrying them so. They feared that the barbarians carried the same disease and would cause sickness among the other seekers and eventually her as well. They realized that it was they themselves who had introduced her kinsfolk to the disease. The thought of her lovely Truini catching this sickness from the barbarians sent shudders of emotion all up and down her fur-tufts. Her horrified expression must have been noticed for soon the three humans were staring at her. “Gelf, what is the-” The doctor started out in a concerned voice, but then quickly became pensive. “Geezleweez. You already know, don't you?”

Unable to hold herself back, she screamed out now in agony. Her whole body became wracked with sobs as the image of this 'plague' became clear in her mind. It was several long moments before she noticed the humans holding their hands over the strange growths on their heads. Quickly she lowered her voice to something less painful to the hue-maans, but the emotion continued unabated. “Doctor Ikpeba you must help us! This- 'plague' it could destroy my entire village. We, we HAVE to do something!”

Her grief must have struck a deep chord among the humans because the feeling of guilt that she experienced before grew to overwhelming proportions. There was more animated conversation which she couldn't follow before the doctor turned to her finally. “Gelf, there is no question that we must help you. The question-”

“Gelf! Gelf are you there? Please answer me!”

Chapter 21

Their conversation was interrupted by the most beautiful sound she had ever heard. Instantly the strange hue-maans went vanus from her thoughts and she sprang child-like off the rock. “Truini! Truini, I'm here. I'm here!”

Surprised that she didn't hurt her leg a second time leaping off the boulder, she hurried down alongside the brook and threw herself at the beautiful slave-girl as they both tumbled together to the ground. She gave no thought to the hows or why, she simply covered the girl in kisses and happily stroked her fur-tufts, content simply to have the perfect-looking girl in her arms again. It was a very long while before she finally pulled away enough to ask the question that hovered immediately under the surface.

“Truini my dearest. How did you find me? I thought that you would still be helping our people in the barbarian village?”

The lovely girl paused a moment before answering. “I did stay there with, the one you called Valtreen. We tried to clean up for awhile. But then I saw that we both had the same rashes that the kinsfolk are plagued with and I figured the risk of intruding on the great Higsthon was less dangerous than the horrible ailment that everyone had.

“Oh Truini. I've missed you s-” She paused when she saw a nasty rash covering most of Truini's arm. “Oh my word! That rash really does look horrible. How long have you had it?”

Before the words even left her mouth, she was already uttering prayers that it might simply be something innocuous. The thought of this 'plague' the hue-maans spoke of was nearly as terrifying as their 'war.'

The girl looked at her arm and frowned. "I'm not sure. The fact is my dear, not all the news is good I'm sorry to say."

Gelf instantly sensed a very strong fear from Truini and the same fear began to fill her own being as well.

"Love, I'm afraid it was more than just your good looks that brought me here. Several more of our friends back there are struggling with a very low temperature and more have fallen into the deep sleep."

"Oh no! They were right." Gelf put her hand to her mouth in fear that it might already be too late.

"They?" She looked up questioningly. "Who do you mean?"

Knowing that she'd already said too much, Gelf panicked, searching for a way out of the situation. She was caught between the desire to save the woman, her promise to chief Journgad, and her promise to the hue-maans. Seeing Truini's inquiring look, she struggled to think fast, but there were already far too many deceptions and half-truths connected with this whole mess. If she hoped to ever be looked on kindly by Azealla, she had to be more forthright. She took the beautiful girl by the shoulders and looked seriously into her eyes. "My love, please know that there is great danger afoot. I cannot tell you who 'they' are, only that they want to help us to set things right and (she hoped) to save us all from the un-health."

It was clear from the girl's expression that she understood the strong emotions involved, if not much else. "So, were 'they' the cause of all this?" She waved her arms around them.

"Truini, I think it's best that you do not ask too much of me at the moment. I have already told un-truths which I'm quite ashamed of. Can you trust me that I will do everything possible to help you and the others from the village?"

She could feel now a sense of understanding now and her sense-readin from the lovely girl was stronger now than with any people except for the hue-maans. She thrilled at the bond that was developing between them and prayed that Doctor Ikpeba would be able to heal the woman.

"I understand, and I'll let it lie for the time being, on one condition."

She kissed the girl's hand in gratitude. "And what is that love?"

"That you tell me all about what happened to me before I ended up with the barbarians." Truini stared more intensely now. "You do know, yes you do. I can somehow feel it."

Gelf shrank back in shock. She'd never heard of anybody else having the sense-readin that she experienced."

Truini showed a guilty expression. "I'm sorry dear, I didn't mean--"

"No, no sweetie. It's just that, before now I didn't think anybody else could, sense this. Truini, I promise you, I will tell you everything that I can safely share. But this sickness, I don't know how much time there is and I must do what I can to help you all, right away." She kissed the girl again, fearing that if the hue-maans were unsuccessful she might lose this angel, and so shortly after finding her. "My love, can you wait here while I go and- search for a remedy?"

"Of course Gelf my dear. I hope that 'they' can help us."

Her smile was all she needed to motivate her back up the cliff.

Chapter 22

By the time she reached the big boulder and started climbing the branch, she was able to sense the impatience from the hue-maans. Quickly she called out to them, letting them know that she was returning to them.

“My word Gelf, we were getting worried about you.” The healer projected strong concern as she finally reached their group.

The emotions chased themselves like wingsqerls across her face. She vacillated between the joy of having found Truini again and the terror that the healer might not find a cure for the strange disease. So with little delay, she shared with them everything that Truini had told her and stressed the urgency of the situation.

Adewale gently put his hand on her arm to calm her. “Gelf, I have every confidence in Dr. Ikpeba. I'm certain that we can help your people to be healed of this. I'll go get the- sleep dart and we'll bring your mate back to the medical ward.”

A short while later Gelf saw the man return with something his people referred to as a 'trank-gun' which they had used to put the seekers to sleep so that they could move them without the contamnayshun. While he left down the slope, the healer told her that they were going to bring her as well, but she would not need to be put to sleep since she knew about their magic already. The healer warned her that she would feel very strange for several seconds, but that it would all be okay.

A few minutes later she felt herself surrounded by a strange light and it looked like a column of faery-dust appeared in front of her eyes. The dust became thicker and thicker until she could see nothing of the mountain anymore. Each speck reflected the light brilliantly, as if all the shimmer in the whole sky were flying down to surround her in their brilliance.

For a short timespan her skin felt like it was separating from her body and she was filled with a horrible fraidness. But then, gradually, the faery dust became thinner again and the next thing she saw was the healing place that she had seen briefly before. And laying on one of the tables in front of her was the lovely Truini, sleeping peacefully. She could not imagine how their magic worked, but it was unquestionably more powerful than anything she had seen or even heard of in the wordsongs of the elders.

Her befuddlement and her preoccupation with Truini left her blind to the healer's approach. The woman put a hand lightly on her shoulder. “Are you alright Gelf?”

She turned quickly to look back at the doctor. “I- think so. Your magic is, just a little difficult to get used to. One minute we were standing on the mountain above the large boulder, and now we're inside of your healing room. It's so, so incredible.”

“Thank you Gelf. Do you understand now why we must keep ourselves concealed? Imagine if beings like those barbarians had been able to get ahold of this, magic.”

“By Prijnak's spear! That would be terrible.”

“Yes exactly.” The woman quickly closed the conversation. “Now. You are welcome to stay here in the medical ward, but I must warn you that there will be many strange magic things and I will be too busy trying to find a cure to take time and explain it.”

“She put her hand on top of the one on her shoulder. I understand healer Ikpeba. Please do what you can. I will not get in the way.”

Chapter 23

It felt like a great length of time passed, and even if she were a master of speaking wordsong it would be impossible for her to relate the many wonders that she saw. There was the device that measured the life-force more precisely than she or any of her people. Another tool that removed only a small amount of vital-fluid from Truini's arm so that the healer could look at it more closely.

At one point the healer Ikpeba asked her to come to her and she used their tool to remove a small amount of her own vital-fluid. The hue-maan said that it was for comparing with Truini's. Somehow these people were able to learn a great deal about someone's unhealth simply by looking at the vital-fluid through their devices.

Next she saw a great flat device extend out of the wall, much like the one they had used on her, but this one was a rectangle instead of a circle. There was a series of low-pitched beeping sounds and the healer pushed several 'buttons' on the flat counter. As time wore on, she could feel the tension and frustration emanating from the healer as the hue-maan tried several solutions without success. Her own mind became more and more filled with worry with each of the doctor's dead-ends. But out of respect for the woman's efforts, she kept her thoughts quiet as promised.

Briefly she asked about getting a meal and the doctor gave her directions to the place where the hue-maans shared fodeins. She followed the strange tubes until she found herself in a room not much bigger than her own shelterspace. Except that, as with the rest of the hue-maan camp the walls were perfectly straight and the ceiling glowed faintly without any torches. Another person there showed her where the food was stored and she randomly chose a food called 'fufu' that she had seen in the mind-pictures from Adewale. The container that came out was very hard and smooth, with some kind of spork connected to the side. It took a timespan to figure out, but once she did, the taste was amazing. It was nearly as sweet as jadzabean pudding but more filling. In her hunger, she even stole a second one when she was finished and again relished in the experience.

But the distraction was fleeting, as her worry for the other kinsfolk could not be put off for long. She returned to the place of healing and let her eyes close while she waited and hoped for the healer to bring good news.

“Opé o!”¹¹

The sound pulled Gelf out of the dream that she'd fallen into. Slowly she struggled with her sleep-fogged mind to remember where she was, and finally the strange magic of the hue-maans came flooding back to her. Instantly she was on her feet and moving over next to the healer.

11 Yoruba term, roughly translates as 'Eureka!'

“Oh Gelf. I'm glad you're awake. Look, look at her arm.” The woman was grinning widely and pointing to where the rash had been.

Gazing down, Gelf saw that the blotches on Truini's lovely skin were noticeably faded and the woman looked as beautiful as ever. She then got a strange image of the healer wanting to embrace her. It wasn't something she was used to except from Fronin or Truini. But apparently it was something that these people did when they cared about each other. So she wrapped her arms around the healer and gave her a gentle squeeze in appreciation.

“Healer Ikpeba?”

The woman quickly interrupted her. “Oh Gelf, we've just rescued your people together. You can call me Sefi.”

“Okay, Sefi. Now that Truini is out of danger, can you tell me what this disease was? And will it hurt the rest of us?”

The woman led her over to a seat and became very serious. “Gelf, it was very much as I suspected. This virus is similar to one that infected a group of people back on our world very long ago. There was a group of pale-skinned humans who sailed across a large ocean and brought diseases to the native people. Because the natives had not built up a resistance to that disease, they suffered enormous losses of life. But once we give some of this medicine to you and your villagers, all of you will be safe.”

She paused for a minute and looked down. “It's possible, actually, that even if we had not made this mistake your people would have become exposed to the sickness eventually when you came in contact with these animal eaters, just as some of our people once did.”

Gelf was amazed. That such advanced people could be conquered by *any* sickness was almost too much for her to believe. “Doctor- Sefi, can you tell me how such a thing could have happened?”

For a moment, the healer seemed unsure of herself, she felt afraid of the *contamnayshun*. But after a time she seemed to decide. “Well, as we told you earlier. Our people once lived much as you did. And just as with these people who you discovered, there were some native societies among us who ate mostly plants and gardened while there were others who followed animal herds and ate mostly animal meat-”

“What?! Even *your* ancestors engaged in such a thing?”

“Yes, well. Their descendants are not proud of it for sure. But it did happen. The tribes who consumed the meat and kept animals in cages soon became sick from diseases and many of them died. But not *all* of them did. The ones who survived were the ones who were resistant to the sickness, but still carried some of it in their bodies. They in turn had children who did the same.” She was amazed. “So this sickness could be passed from an adult to a young'n?”

“Um, something like that.” Gelf sensed that she wasn't exactly correct, but the healer did not want to be interrupted.

“Eventually when those descendants came into contact with the plant-eating native tribes, the latter people had no defense against the disease and so many of them became sick that they were quickly conquered-”

“By the hand of Adeima!” Her voice rose in awe. “You may have prevented my own village from suffering the same tragedy at the hands of the barbarians!”

But instead of showing the same joy, the healer hung her head with a forlorn expression. Gelf sensed a great conflict from her, but still didn't quite understand this 'contamnayshun' that the hue-maans kept thinking about.

“Yes. But this also goes against our explicit orders not to influence the society that we are studying. Assuming we ever find a way to get back to our home, Professor Umquo and I will probably be stripped of our titles for this.”

Gelf was shocked. “But, how could that be?! Your chief would *punish* you for helping to prevent a tragedy that your own people endured?” These strange people were becoming more and more puzzling all the time.

The healer looked at her very seriously for a moment, as though studying her. Finally she let out a loud breath before speaking. “Gelf, think about it this way. You teach your children the skills that they need to succeed right? You teach them which plants are good to eat, and as they grow you might teach them to make pottery, or to build shelters, right?”

Gelf nodded, as such a thing was obvious.

“Now.” The healer continued. “Imagine if you showed your child how to make a pot, but you always did it for them. You never allowed them to make a pot themselves.”

“Well that's silly. Then the children would never- oh.” She now got an image of what the healer was trying to communicate. It was like if the children reached the age of discovery but she told them where everything was, depriving the young people the experience of learning on their own.

“I believe that I finally understand what you mean.

So if your people healed all of our diseases, then we would never seek to find cures ourselves. We would never invent new healing remedies. But does that also apply to preventing a tragedy such as this big disease that kills so many?”

The healer did that thing where she let out a long breath again. “Gelf, it may not seem that way to you, and I can understand why. But our leaders would still want us to not interfere with your natural development, even if it meant a tragedy such as that.

“Well, my friend (for she now considered the healer a friend) I cannot know what your leaders would do or think. But I, for one, am grateful that you agreed to help us.”

The woman smiled then. “Gelf, just between the two of us, I'm glad we could help as well.” The healer turned to some display on the wall. “Now why don't we go find the rest of your tribespeople so that we can prevent this plague from reaching your village?”

Chapter 24

There was a meeting with professor Umquo, doctor Ikpeba, and the man who had originally met with chief Journgad (Gelf finally got to meet him in person, and in his natural form), who's name was Ayube. The man stood out among them for being the only hue-maan with paler skin. It was more like a clay vessel than freshly tilled soil. Also the covering of hair on the man's head was slightly less curly.

At first the professor wanted the paler man to go with her and help retrieve the others. But the man had an accent that, combined with their low-pitched voices, was impossible for her to understand. So instead the professor asked Adewale to go with her.

They brought with them the thing he had called a sleep-dart, along with containers of water, and two bags of supplies which she wasn't supposed to see (though she experienced confusing mind-pictures of the contents regardless).

Gelf followed Adewale out through the most amazing space she had ever seen. They crawled through the round tube like the one she had seen in her dream, but then they reached a larger round room with many strange tools. On one wall was a storage space with a row of 'suits' as the hue-maans called them. The suits allowed these people to go into the black place that had no underfoot. Then next to the storage space was a rectangular opening and when Adewale moved a lever, she saw two squares rotate. Both rotated in the same direction but with opposite spin. One rotated around the top corner, and the other around the bottom corner. She stared at the panels for several minutes trying to figure out how the magic worked. But soon Adewale was ushering her through the opening and once they descended a flat ramp, she was back on the mountain.

"I must admit Adewale, this experience of going through the amazing door is much more pleasant than the magic faery column that you used on me last time."

The man chuckled lightheartedly. "Gelf, you won't get any argument from me. Personally most of us try to avoid the kefatz when we can." Then he became more serious though. "Now that you know where the real entrance to our camp is, I hope that we can continue to trust you not to reveal this place to anyone from your tribe."

"But of course Adewale. Your people have rescued my beloved. I will honor any request you make."

As they began traveling, she sensed many questions coming from the man and a desire to learn more about the 'kulchural' things, those that were beyond the physical. "Adewale, feel free to ask me anything you like."

Sounding a bit flustered, the man commented quietly about her being able to read him like his ex-wife, whatever that was. "Well Gelf, that woman in the medical ward, she is your mate?"

Gelf sighed blissfully. "Yes, isn't she the most lovely thing you've ever seen?"

"So, your people mate with others of the same gender? Do you also have offspring within your own gender?"

It took a little while for her to understand what they meant by gender and differences between males and females which were more pronounced among their kind. "Sure we do. We often mate with the same 'gender' until the time comes when we decide to give birth. When we do, we find someone who will produce strong children and we request the continuation with them. After that we visit the Oracle and if she considers the union a positive one, then a new denisovian is born."

"So that is what you call your people? Denisovians?"

"Yes. We are denisovian, and you are, hue-maan."

The man chuckled and she got the sense that he was amused by the way she said the word.

"What about your own people Adewale? Do you not mate with the same gender?"

"Yes Gelf. Sometimes it happens. Like you, there is not the possibility of giving birth. But some of my people are only willing to mate with the same gender and a few, like you, are fine with either. But the vast majority will only mate with the opposite gender, which ensures that enough births will happen."

“How interesting. But with all or nearly all of you giving birth, do you not worry about having too many hue-maans to provide fodeins?”

The man turned to look at her, obviously impressed by her deductive reasoning. “Yes, in our past there were absolutely problems with feeding people and with the number of humans being too large. But we've since used our, 'magic' to allow people to mate and be together while keeping the number of births to a reasonable amount. We also have these ships which allow us to explore and live on other worlds.”

Instantly Gelf saw a new and horrifying image. It had something to do with what the man's people referred to as 'colun-eyes-ashun' which involved many numbers of these hue-maans traveling to and then living permanently on another world. “My word Adewale! You were going to do that here. Your people were going to 'colun-eyes' my world.” But then she experienced something else that tempered her earlier concerns. “But, you are not allowed to do that if a group of people already live in a place.”

“Man, Gelf. It sometimes feels like just a one-sided conversation with you.”

She turned to look at the man and felt something like what the healer had experienced on first meeting her. “I'm sorry Adewale. This- seeing pictures in my head is still new to me. I'll try not to vio- violate your personal thoughts.”

“Well, thank you Gelf. And I'll try not to feel too upset about it.”

She put out her hand toward the man in the gesture of the humans. “Deal.”

The man smiled at her perceptive humor and repeated her.

“So your people from many annums back, they were the ones who left the magic tool here?”

“Yes Gelf. They did travel through here looking for a planet to colonize. But as you so judiciously deduced, they were not allowed to populate a planet which already hosted a native population. In our ‘long ago beforetime’ there was much conflict when more powerful tribes traveled to and began living in land that was already inhabited by others. We learned, eventually, from the great tragedies that resulted from such poor choices.”

“But that must have been many hundreds of annums ago. We have been dependent on the wisdom of the Oracle for, forever!”

She sensed more sadness from the man as he continued. “Yes Gelf. This is part of the contamination that we strive to avoid. By leaving this power source on your land, it has changed your whole culture and you now make decisions about your lives based on it.”

“But the prophecy of the Oracle is TRUE! Don't you see Adewale? The Oracle told me about the cliff that would reveal itself, and of the strange people who would become an ally, and the shimmeri that shows in the day. So it must have been Adeima who guided your ancestors to leave the tool here.”

“Gelf.” The man began talking to her as if she were a young'in, because he did not believe in the power of Adeima. “We respect your beliefs, just as we respect the beliefs of any other people. So it's best if we leave out discussions about what your deities might want or not want.”

She was more than a little upset by the way the hue-maan dismissed the great majesty of Adeima. She at first wanted to protest, to convince the man of the Holy wisdom held within the temple. But the mind-images that she saw convinced her that the hue-maan was most skeptical and so

she grudgingly let the matter drop. Even so, the pessimism of the hue-maans was a persistent requibug digging into her skin.

Chapter 25

They continued out toward the village of the barbarians, now covering the ground more quickly since Gelf had already passed through here before. At one point she experienced the approach of a meldabeast. But once she warned Adewale, he used his sleep-dart and the animal became asleep before it ever reached them, posing no further threat. Watching the interaction, it occurred to her that if she were able to harvest the sleep medicine from the leaves she had used on the barbarian and if she could shoot them in the way that the hue-maan did, she would have a very effective defense against the animals or even other barbarians.

The Saülé was not far from it's completion of the day's trip, by the time they reached the brook at the edge of the camp. It took only a short discussion for the man to clarify that he shouldn't be seen by any of her people. So she left Adewale in the trees and approached silently by herself.

The sight she beheld in the camp was one that deeply haunted her kaba with it's emptiness and devastation. She had been so preoccupied by the mission before, that she hadn't really *seen* the vast transformation which had happened. The barbarians now were all dead or gone, the animal enclosure had been thrashed apart with the animals freed, and a smell of death stretched it's pitiless fingers out to her as she drew close. The hut where her people had been was completely empty, and a fraidness began to squeeze her in it's icy grip as she checked one and then another dwelling with ever increasing worry.

The huts were all empty with a few still housing a dead and decomposing occupant. There was not the slightest sound of any living being whatsoever. It wasn't until she reached the shelter where the priest had been that she at last joyously encountered her own people. Valtreen was bringing water to one of them and he turned to her with a smile.

"Ah Gelf. I'm so relieved to see you. The other woman, Truini went out looking for you yesterday. She had the fraidness that the Gods you spoke of might have been unkind after all." Her relief on seeing him almost overwhelmed her. She wanted to run up and embrace him for just being alive. But that of course would send a very complicated message, and there were far more important matters to deal with. Not the least of which was the ugly rash that was clearly visible on the man's arms.

"Oh Valtreen it's so good to see you awake. I have wonderful news! I found Truini, or rather, she found me. But more importantly I met the people who chief Journgad tasked me with finding. They aren't dangerous after all and want to help to heal this unhealth. Their healing woman is very skilled, more so then me."

The man quickly put the bucket down and hugged himself with joy. "I'm so glad to hear that. So everything is going to be okay then."

“Well, for now. There's still a lot to be figured out I admit. It's going to be confusing for awhile, but I do trust the people up there, and they trust me in return. That alone should make our efforts a great deal easier.”

“Congratulations Gelf. That means you have surpassed all the rest of us, and I'm very proud of you. Why don't you help me get the stretcher for the one over there and we'll start bringing the weakest of these people up to them.”

“Valtreen.” She hesitated, at first she didn't know why. But then she realized that what she was going to say would probably disappoint the man. “I'm sorry to say. The people who want to help, they are staunchly eremite. It was only by accident that I was able to find them at all. They wish to not be seen by anyone else.”

“Really? They are that severe? But why would they want to help us if they don't want to interact with us. Do they consider us inferior somehow?”

“Valtreen. It's not that, at least I don't think so.” She certainly hoped not, but his comment did in fact trouble her more then she was yet willing to admit. “Their healer seems to have respect for me at least. But, well they are *very* strange. That's the easiest way to put it.”

“So what. It can't be any more strange then these barbarians who kill animals and enslave their young'in. Do they not want to be forced to talk with us, or have to hear what we think?”

She hadn't expected Valtreen to be so cynical. She was beginning to get the fraidness that he might stand in the way of letting the hue-maans help.

“No Valtreen, it's not that at all. They talked to me and didn't seem to mind.” She thought it best to not bring up Sefi's reaction to her sense-readin. “It's just- well they look really strange, and it might upset a lot of people.”

Valtreen's expression hardened and he shook his hands at her for emphasis. “Gelf please. I've just spent several days working from the rising to the setting of the Saülè taking care of ailing kinsfolk, bringing them to this bigger shelter, moving at least a few of the dead barbarians. I think that a strange-looking denisovian would be a great deal less unpleasant than all this.”

“Valtreen *please*. I have the fraidness that they wont help us if we try to force their hand.” She hated to be reduced to begging the man, but the lives of all their kinsfolk were at stake here. “I give you my word that you will not be harmed and that we will fill you in as much as possible on everything that happens.”

“Gelf, if these people don't want to be seen at all, then how are you going to be able to move sixteen deathly ill kinfolk without my help? If these people really are denisovian and not the great Higsthon, then it will be impossible to do this by yourself.” He paused and folded his arms. “Healer, our people really don't have a lot of time for us to debate the issue.”

She was becoming very frustrated with the man. He was right. The other seekers *didn't* have much time. But she couldn't rightly tell him about their magic faery column. She felt briefly frozen, as if Valtreen had some of the God's magic as well. But finally she thought of something that might convince him. “Look Valtreen. You've been helping our people for the past few days (she made a guess as to how long it had been) and both the seekers and I appreciate it. But please consider that neither of us have the skill to heal them. These people on the other hand do. Their healer cured the funny spots on Truini's arms (she hoped that it was okay to share this) and I'm sure that they can do the same for you.”

“Well-” He hesitated so long that it felt like a full day passed in the interim “alright. But I want you to let these people know that I take it as a personal affront that they don't consider us worthy of giving them the straight-eye.”

“I will be sure to relay the message Valtreen.” She suppressed a frustrated sigh then, in hopes of maintaining the fragile truce.”

“The question still remains though, how do you propose to move sixteen full-sized denisovians all the way to the mount of Higsthon without my help?”

She assumed that Adewale would use their peoples' 'tek-nah-lujy' for this, but it would require consulting with the hue-maan first. She couldn't of course do such a thing in front of Valtreen.

“My friend. I'm going to check in with one of their, um, scouts and see if there's a way to do this. Even now, the man muttered under his breath, “be a lot easier to just let me help the damn fools.” Then he continued in a louder voice, “whatever we do, it better be fast. Three more of them have fallen into the trance sleep and can't be woken up.”

“Oh my gosh no!” She felt even more guilty now for focusing so much attention on Valtreen and not checking on the condition of her kinsfolk first. Quickly she went to each bed, looking at them, feeling for the life-force, seeing how many were awake. As Valtreen had stated, their condition was much worse then when she had left. It felt like the waiting-room of Pritlaxctl, where none but the wasted remains of departed people were allowed. All of them had the rash that Truini and Valtreen had, and many had strange growths on the inside of their leg or the crook of the arm. One who's back was exposed had lost all the hair tufts and another had one knobhorn which was black and another that looked rotted through. A few of them had such a weak life-force that she had to check twice more to be sure they were even alive. Only one of them was strong enough to even speak and even then his voice cracked from the strain. She urged the man to save his strength for healing not for talking. She told him then that there was a powerful healer who should be able to cure their disease and that everything would be alright. The one man smiled and tried again to speak, but she put a finger over his mouth and smiled back. The scene was frighteningly similar to the mind-picture she had gotten from the doctor of what the hue-maans had experienced in the beforetime.

With deepest sadness, she hurried back over to Valtreen. “My friend, I swear to you that I will make the swiftest time possible to get these people to a place of healing.”

“I'm sure that you will Gelf. Thank you for all that you are doing, and, well I'm sorry to have been such a pain.”

“Valtreen, looking at all of this” she spread her arms around. “I can't even imagine how difficult this must have been for you.”

Without another word, and before she broke down herself, she made long footfalls out of the camp and across the ditch. With her kaba crying for all the suffering people, she hurried as quickly as she could back to Adewale. The experience of seeing her people so helpless had burned itself deeply upon her consciousness. Only the urgency of their situation kept her from breaking down entirely. It soon became so difficult to see that she barely recognized the hue-maan, so heavy was her weeping. She didn't simply greet Adewale, she collapsed sobbing into his arms. The man almost fell over from the weight of her before recovering and easing her to the ground.

“My word Gelf! Are they even alive?”

It took several moments before she could recover from the shock of seeing so much suffering.

“Oh Adewale. I don't know that healer Sefi will be able to fix them! Nearly all of them are in the sleep that leads to the after-time and only one was even strong enough to say a word or two. They look so... so tragic. I doubt they will be able to stave off a visit from Pritlaxtl for even another day.”

It took several more moments for her grief to subside enough to acknowledge anything else around her. When she did she saw that Adewale was holding one hand to his ear and she heard the sound of the hue-maans' low-pitched chatter. This went on for a short while before he turned back to her. While he spoke, he reached into one of the bags and dug around for something.

“Gelf. We're going to try and bring your friends to the healing place right away. We're going to use the magic light beam.” He must've seen her tense up because he quickly put a hand on her shoulder. “No Gelf, you don't have to go through it yourself if you don't want to, but your friends must be helped right away.” He then must have found what he was looking for because he handed her a strange device and looked at her with a most serious expression. “Now since a few of them are still awake, we will have to use the sleep-medicine. Since obviously none of them can be allowed to see me, *you* will have to give them the sleep medicine.”

“But Adewale.” She interrupted his instructions, thinking fearfully of Valtreen's resistance. “I'm not so sure that Valtreen will allow it.” She quickly summarized the conversation between them. “What happens if he changes his mind?”

The man took a timepause to consider that. “Well, it would be immoral to use the sleep medicine on somebody if they objected to it.”

“But he *did* agree, just... maybe not in the way that he believed.”

“Yes, well. I'm not *completely* comfortable with it. But for the sake of your friends I think that we need to take that risk. I'll make sure that you and Truini are beside him when he gets woken up.” He turned to check again in the bag and she sensed that it was for the 'trank-gun.' Then he continued, “In order to avoid a drawn out debate with that man Valtreen, I'll use the trank-gun to put him to sleep from a distance and then you can use this device to take care of the others.” He pointed to several knobs on a hand-sized rectangle with a point at the far end. “Now I've already set this to the right dosage and I've sequenced it to recycle after each use. All you have to do is press the pointed end against someone's neck and push this key. You'll hear a small sound, like air blowing very fast. When that finishes, the person should fall asleep within half a minute.

Then you must wait until the count of five before you use it on another one. Be sure to use it only on those who are awake. Otherwise it could make them,” the man paused and searched for the right words “make them sleep too deeply.”

Though the man explained everything well, Gelf also saw a mind-picture of what he was describing which made the instructions even easier for her. Once she took the magic tool, he began digging around for something else. This time he found it more quickly.

“Now, only after everyone is asleep, and this is very important-”

“Yes, I understand Adewale, they must not see the magic faery column.”

The man smiled. "That's right. Only when everyone is asleep, then you put this pin on each person and make sure that it's attached to the person's clothing." He paused and put a hand on her arm. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I won't tell the untrue, it's very disturbing. But I think I can do it."

"Alright let's hurry back there and I'll work my way around to get a shot at him."

"It won't hurt him right?"

The hue-maan looked over at her and smiled. No more than with your mate. They should both wake up just fine and hopefully without any sickness."

Chapter 26

She hurried back to the camp, and as she closed the distance, her worry reasserted itself. What if Adewale missed? What if Valtreen refused to help? What if the kinsfolk were too far gone to be brought to godstrength? Her emotions seemed to be in a state of constant uproar over the tragedy. If so many lives did not depend on her success, she doubted that she could have willed herself to experience the terrible state of the camp once more.

The sights and smells of death did nothing at all to reduce her unease as she hurried to the priest's shelter. When she got there, Valtreen was collapsed at the doorway looking like someone who'd consumed too much mead. She quickly sat next to him fearing the worst. Had he suddenly become too sick to stand? Was he exhausted from all the work of taking care of the kinsfolk? But then she saw a tiny object sticking out of his neck. It was incredibly detailed and yet so fragile that she couldn't imagine how such a thing could be created. She was so intent on it that she almost yelped when she felt the hand rest on her shoulder.

"Gelf. Have you given the sleep medicine to the others?"

It took her a timepause to register it all. "Adewale? How did you get here so fast?"

"I took a shortcut. Look, I'm sorry to rush you but we need to get this all done as quickly as possible. The more time that we give doctor Ikpeba, the more chance she has of saving them."

That finally got her going. She took the devices and hurried over to see who was still awake, which was sadly not very many. She forced a smile before giving them the sleep medicine. As each one of them fell asleep, she moved on until all sixteen were asleep. Then she put the strange pins on all of them and went back over to Adewale.

She quickly told him that the task had been completed and that it was safe to use their magic.

"Great job Gelf! I can't imagine how difficult all of this must be for you." He then quickly put something in his ear and spoke quickly to the air. When that was done, he put the thing back in the bag and motioned for her to follow him.

"Is it done already?" She asked, and glanced back to see that it was.

"Yes Gelf. Now we can make our slow way back and hopefully your friends will be on the mend by the time we return."

It was an enormous relief then, for her to finally leave the place of death behind forever. Now they could take their time hiking back to the camp of the hue-maans without fear of obstructing their healer's efforts.

Chapter 26

Once they reached the fantastic hue-maan shelter, Adewale gave her directions and she moved through the strange tubes of the hue-maan camp back to the healing-place to check on Truini. The girl looked so beautiful and peaceful laying on the table. But unfortunately when she made her way to the others, the outlook was less positive. Sefi offered a pained look which was reinforced by the emotions she saw of inadequacy. The healer offered her a cryptic sense of what she thought about the condition of the kinfolk while repeating her earlier request for uninterrupted privacy. From the mind-images that Gelf saw, the doctor did not have strong hopes of rescuing them all.

Unlike Truini, some of them had been sick for many weeks and none of the barbarians had taken much notice. So once again she was resigned to sit in the chair, helplessly praying to Adeima to assist the doctor in saving her people.

She recited the healing prayer over and over for each of them (though she only knew a few of their names) until her voice became exhausted. At first Sefi had been mildly annoyed by the distraction of her prayers, but she calmly explained the purpose and offered to continue in a more quiet tone. After that Sefi ignored her and continued working.

Though she saw no window and therefore knew not how much time had passed, it felt like a large portion of the day was over before the healer came over to her. Sefi's expression was tired and very pained as she sat next to her.

“Dead?! No! Sefi, please, you could not do *anything*??”

Quickly, the healer took her hands and made quiet sounds until she stopped her sobbing and looked back. “Gelf, the- um mind-images you saw did not apply to *all* of your kinsfolk. Only two of them were beyond my ability to help them. Two more will have to sleep for a few days before we'll know for sure. But the rest of your tribespeople should make a full recovery... eventually.” Though the news wasn't as good as she had hoped, it was better than the mind-picture she saw had led her to believe. She looked up at the healer with pale, strained eyes. “Sefi, can I look at them?”

The healer patted her hand. “Of course you can. Come with me.”

Sefi led her by the arm towards the row of tables and she looked at each of them for a few minutes. The two who were already with Pritlaxtl were covered completely in a blanket. As she stared down at them, the healer interrupted her thoughts. “Gelf. It is the human tradition when someone has died to first cover their face initially before checking with family or friends to decide what to do with the remains.” The woman paused for a moment before continuing. “May I ask how your own people treat a person's remains after they have died?”

Gelf had had to support families in the time of passing once or twice, but it was quite rare for her. Still she recognized that these people did not understand her culture, and so she explained slowly for the healer's benefit.

“When a Xenlarian passes on, we prepare a reed mat and carry their body exactly one thousand footfalls outside of the square. Then those who were related to them or who were very close recite the prayer of forgiveness to anyone that the departed may have hurt during their lives.

When all of the prayers have been said, the body is surrounded by a ring of stones and covered with the mat.”

She tried to continue, but the thoughts began to overwhelm her and her body became wracked with sobs. Several times she tried to open her mouth, but the emotion soon overwhelmed her. She was so filled with emotion that she barely noticed when Sefi wrapped her arms around her. It was several long moments before she could work through the tears enough to form the words. “Sefi, Sefi I don't know either of these people. I've never met them. Their kaba will never be brought to Adeima because there's no one to say the prayers of forgiveness. They-” She tried to continue but the emotion overtook her again. She wasn't sure if it was these people specifically, or if the whole crazy situation was finally catching up with her. She just, felt everything so intensely right now.

Finally, slowly, she felt herself being led back to the chair and Sefi spoke soothingly all the way there. “I'm sorry Gelf. None of us can know what this is like for you. But as for the ones who have departed, I can put them in a place of preservation where the body will remain exactly the same until they can be returned to your village. I, hope that this will be enough to give their loved ones a sense of peace.”

As she finally sank into the chair, she looked up warmly at the healer. “Thank you, for everything Sefi.”

“Please take all the time that you need. Your friends will be sleeping soundly and recovering for a long while. We'll do what we can in the meantime to help you.” Then the woman strode over to another part of the wall and spoke into it.

A few minutes later, Adewale came into the room and invited her to follow him. They went through more of the strange round tubes to another room and he led her into it. “Gelf, we don't really have 'guest quarters' here in our camp. But doctor Ikpeba asked me to make a space where you can have some peace and quiet. This room is rarely used and there's a cot there for you to sleep on. I've also taken the liberty of printing out some books from our long-ago past. They can help you understand the things about us that are similar.” He paused and looked at her with sincerity. “Gelf, the doctor told me how difficult this experience has been for you.” The man put a hand on her shoulder and she felt his sincerity flow between them. “Please know that you are welcome to call on any one of us for help. Just go to this spot on the wall and push this button.” He showed her a spot on the wall that was a different color and had several lights and strange patterns.

“Thank you Adewale. You hue-maans are very kind.”

The man left her alone and she spent time repeating the prayer of healing many more times for the remaining seekers in the hopes that Adeima would have the kindness to bring them gudstrength again. Soon she lost count of the prayers and just sat quietly thinking over the whole adventure. She wondered also if anyone back home was missing her. She thought of Fronin and how sad he had been to hear of her orders to depart. But then suddenly she sat bolt-upright. Chief Journgad! He had said that if she didn't return, he would have to announce the truth about the Oracle to the people. Such a thing might not simply put an end to his leadership, it might undermine their village's worship of the Oracle entirely. It would be a disaster for their people!

Quickly she stabbed at the panel, not remembering exactly which one she was supposed to use. One place that she pushed made all the light in the room go off. Now she panicked even more. What was she to do?! She stabbed blindly at where she thought the panel was but couldn't figure the strange magic out.

“Who is this? And why are you using the emergency communication frequency?!” The voice sounded like Umquo, but it was distorted slightly.

“I am sorry. It's Gelf, I need to speak with professor Umquo. I'm in the dark in this room and don't understand the magic of your cam-”

Instantly the voice became calmer. “Ah Gelf. I'm sorry for being gruff. Please give me a minute.”

She waited for what seemed a terribly long time in total darkness before she heard a door open and a blinding shaft of light pierced the room. The man must have done something, because the room soon became bright again. Then the professor brought over a chair and sat across from the cot she was on. “I'm sorry for the tumult that our tools caused you Gelf. What can I help you with?”

She quickly repeated the story to him of what the chief had told her about how she was the last seeker which her leader would risk sending. She told him of her worry that he might reveal the possibility that the Oracle's power was influenced by the hue-maan's tool and the implications that such a thing might have. Her face strained with the seemingly endless war of emotions that she was enduring. But thankfully, as she finished her story, she saw the professor, like the great cliff he inhabited, remain strong calm and respectful.

The hue-maan leader put a hand on her shoulder as he spoke. “I can see why this would cause you so much worry. Do you know how long your ruler would wait to hear news from you?”

That was a new thought. She remembered Journgad's statement, but she didn't know how long he would take before carrying it out. She said as much to the professor.

“Alright. Well, let's assume that we cannot wait until your friends manage to recover. I would suggest that we bring you back to your village long enough to meet with your ruler, then you can decide if you would like to return here to wait for the others to heal or if you want to stay among your people in the village.”

She leapt from the chair in her relief and embraced the professor. “Thank you Umquo for being so understanding. I will go and speak with Journgad, and then I wish to be with Truini.”

Chapter 27

At the request of the professor, Sefi gave her a sleep drug so that she would not see the magic that the hu-maans used to bring her home. But when she woke up she found that she was less than half a day's travel from her own hut in the forst. Everything looked so wonderful, so familiar. It still felt like some kind of dream which she just woke up from.

After taking a timespan to get her head settled, she made quicksteps back to her hut and just stood gazing at it for a time. Closing the door, she was relieved to see that everything was as she'd left it. Her precarious stacks of clay pots, her herbs, the small box with clothes. Briefly she had the temptation to write down the amazing adventure which, it felt, even the most brilliant wordsinger could not do justice. But then she remembered the danger of the contamnayshun and

so, after a quick change of clothes into something more appropriate for a visit to the chief, she reluctantly left the hut and made long footfalls to the village.

Some of the people who she knew tried to stop her and ask what had happened, but she gently brushed them off. She didn't know how long the chief would wait. She didn't honestly even know how much time had passed, what with all the times she had spent in the hue-maans' camp hidden from the Saùlè.

But the moment she reached the chief's gate and told them who she was, everyone quickly made way for her. After all, she was the first seeker of them all to have made it back to the village. Pelfren himself bowed to her and escorted her directly into the great hall before grandly introducing her in a voice proud and strong.

As before, she sat before the chief without speaking. But now, looking at chief Journgad, she saw her ruler in a new light. Where she had at first been intimidated and nervous in his presence, the man now seemed more— mortal. After experiencing the strange magic of the hu-maans and after helping Sefi to rescue the others from the sickness, she came to realize that the great chief was really just a man. And one with a huge weight on his shoulders, though one that she hoped to diminish.

“Gelf, descender of Sigfrend. I hope that it is good news which you have brought to this hall.” Despite her momentous adventures, and newfound confidence though, she was surprised to hear her voice start out as more of a squeak. This auspicious space still held power over her it seemed. But she paused and continued in a stronger voice. “My liege. I have indeed brought glad tidings. I will share with you, and the honorable people of this hall the most important news. First of all, the seekers who were sent on this mission before me have been found and all but two of them are alive. The second is that I have found the people to whom you sent me in search of. They are kind people and they do not pose any danger.” She paused, wondering how much she could safely share. There was so much that she *wanted* to tell the chief. But shortly, her thoughts were interrupted.

“Gelf, descender of Sigfrend. That is most joyous news indeed. For you have succeeded where many brave and highly trained explorers have not. Your name will be revered in song and your likeness will be painted on the walls. But for now, please join us. Feast to your heart's content.” He paused and smiled warmly at her. “And when your immediate needs are filled, I will speak with you privately.”

Gelf all but collapsed right there in the hall. To be spoken of in such a grand manner was an honor usually bestowed only upon the most highly decorated plutolatri. But to also be given a private company with the chief, twice, that was a privilege said to be reserved only for chief's private inner circle. Thus she ate very little of the kul-melon pudding and only one serving of the Djengourd stew. The truth was, the food of the hue-maans was actually a great deal more flavorful than even the chief's bounty. But of course she couldn't reveal to any of them that she had in fact slept through the entire journey home. So she took enough food to appear grateful and then she said a small prayer of thanks to Azealla.

“Gelf, descender of Sigfrend. If you have finished, then please walk with me.”

She rose quickly to comply and made her way to join her chief by the side door of the great hall. He led her out to his favorite glade and they strolled amiably along the edge of the lush trees. To

an outsider, it might have looked like they were old friends. But to Gelf, she was still feeling too distracted by the many goings on, both with the seekers and with the chief, to appreciate Adeima's beauty.

Only a short timespan passed before the chief paused and showed her an intense gaze. "Gelf, I want you to know that you should consider me in your debt, personally." Though she thought that she had everything together, she did finally lose control and her legs were reduced to kul-melon vines. If Journgad hadn't caught her, she would certainly have fallen straight to the underfoot.

"I, I don't know what to say my liege."

The chief quickly led her to a small boulder though his face lost none of its seriousness. "Healer, I do not think you realize how momentous your return is. Only yesterday I was meeting with Pelfren to organize a gathering where I planned to finally reveal the sad truth to our people. You—and you alone have rescued my honor, my rule, and the security of Xenlaria. That is why I do not say lightly that I am in your debt."

It took her several minutes before she could finally process and come to terms with the situation. In the hall, she assumed that confidence and succinctness were expected. But here, with no one to see them, Journgad displayed only a kind patience and friendliness as she finally managed to collect herself.

"My liege. What I shared with you all earlier was only a brief summary of a much greater wordsong."

"Yes, this I expected. Which is why you have been invited to this private meeting in the first place."

Now that they were finally alone though. She didn't quite know how to start. Instead of a calm retelling, she felt like she was blurting out the adventure with all the skill of a newborn young'in. Everything felt out of order and jumbled, much of that due to her need to avoid mention of the hue-maans' magic. But eventually she managed to bring it around to the most urgent part. "My liege. The risk to the Oracle is not completely passed. I have indeed met with the people who are seeking their 'tool' as they call it. The issue is, they are in great need of this tool. It is fuel for them, in the same way that we use wood for fire. But unlike wood, this tool is unique. Their fuel is running out and they need another one to— to have food and light and such." She was relieved at having avoided a potential pitfall. "On the other hand however, their own ruler has forbidden them to interfere with the lives and culture of our people. They could not, and would not harm us. The man who spoke with you knew nothing about the Oracle or how much our people depend on Her prophecy."

Instantly the chief pulled back in shock. "What?! How could such a people exist? Especially in the very bosom of Higsthon, and not recognize the vast wisdom of Adeima?"

"My liege, they are a very strange people and their customs are so very different from our own in so many ways."

"I see, but did you not teach them of Her great wisdom and kindness?"

"Of course I made a valiant effort. I felt at the time the same as you do now. However their people see the Gods in a completely different manner. My feeble words alone were not sufficient."

“Very well, we can continue that discussion later. Query you share if you have learned anything about their magic that causes a man to go vanus as Ilhamet would.”

“My liege, I do not understand the nature of their magic and I have never seen one of them disappear as you have.” Of course she obviously wouldn't have told him about experiencing it from the inside, and so the statement was only partly true, but such was the fragile line that she found herself traversing more and more between the world of the strange beings and that of the familyland.

“It seems that the mystery surrounding this strange tribe is an endless query in itself.”

For a short timespan she wondered what was hidden behind the chief's words. But she needed for the moment to concentrate on her telling to prevent more of the 'contamnayshun.' “I have returned here only briefly to reassure everyone, and most importantly you, that there is no need for the totality of the story to be made public. My liege, your rule is secure and the honor of the Oracle is under no threat. I plan on returning to them after our meeting and hopefully we will develop a strategy which will allow both of us to maintain our way of life without causing harm to the other.” As she glanced up however, the chief was no longer smiling.

For the first time in her experience with the man, she felt a deep displeasure from him. “Gelf, as you know I would grant you any wish that you desire. Save one. I will **not** allow you to usurp my position as ruler of Xenleria. Do not think that this one victory, as miraculous as it is, allows you to become my surrogate.”

Instantly she was caught off-guard. “My liege, I-” She felt at a loss for words that might repair the situation.

Everything had been going so well and she was finally beginning to hope that, with the help of the hue-maans, they could all go back to the peaceful life of the beforetime. But she *had* to be the one to represent Xenlaria. By Prijnak's sword! She couldn't let chief Journgad see the strangers directly, she was certain that he would not be able to understand. How could he? She barely understood the bizarre people herself. Besides, it would destroy the fragile trust which had developed between herself and the hue-maans.

“You- what?”

But she knew that her ruler's patience was waning, she would have to find some means of rectifying the situation quickly or things would fall apart again. “My liege. The hue-maans are a most unusual people, and they prefer isolation. It was not that I sought any personal title. The fulltrue is quite the opposite. The hue-maans *chose me* to represent our people. I would never in my whole life wish to undermine your rule. Once this is over, I would be perfectly content to spend the rest of my days with Truini in the woods gathering medicines.”

“That is good to hear Gelf. Nevertheless, you do not have any title, any legacy, nor any political position which would allow you to speak on my behalf. It is I, and I alone who will speak to these, hue-maans.”

Just like that, all of her hopes crumbled. What could she do? The choice was either to disobey her chief, which could easily lead to banishment, or to break her promise to the hue-maans. Well, that choice was less certain to end in punishment. She tried again from a different angle. It was impossible to predict whether or not the criticism would compromise her standing with the chief, but she had to try.

“My liege. You must know that these people are *very* strange, and also very powerful. More powerful than any of us I'm afraid. I do not know how they will react when they learn that I failed them.”

“Healer I am disappointed. You speak as if I have no skills at all as a mediator. You are beginning to try my patience most fervently. I am completely confident that I will be able to negotiate with these people as I would any other denisovian.”

She struggled at that point to hide her reaction, and coughed to make sure the chief did not notice. How could the chief realize that he wasn't dealing with denisovians at all, but an entirely different type of people? One which had traveled all the way from a different plan-it.

What could she do to avert tragedy? There simply *had* to be way of preventing her ruler from seeing the strange outsiders.

In thinking it over, she sought for one last possibility.

“My liege, it is many days travel to reach the place where the hue-maans dwell. May your humble servant query you on what will happen in the familyland while you are gone?”

Immediately, she saw that this deflection bore fruit. Her sense-readin told of the chief's uncertainty, but she had to wait until his pondering was finished before she could expect an answer.

Fortunately, the wait was not long. “Your point is wise. There *has* been tension, as you know, since the rains have been scarce. And the Oracle has not been able to receive any helpful words from Adeima this season.” He paused again, displaying an uncertainty that she would never have expected of such a self-assured ruler. “Very well. I will allow you to be the messenger, but this only. Return to the camp of the hue-maans and inform them that I will speak with them to negotiate a solution here in the village. They are welcome to send any representative that they wish.”

“Yes my liege.”

The man brightened up now and she was beginning to understand that while he possessed a great deal less power than the hue-maans, he still *believed* himself to be the most powerful person in the land. More importantly, he expected *her* to believe that as well. Therefore she now understood that she would now have to show extra caution in his company.

“Good then. Now given your greatly improved standing in Xenlaria, would you like me to instruct Pelfren to accompany you on this trek, to offer protection from meldabeasts?”

“Thank you my liege, that is most generous. But I have already made the trip and I am confident in my ability to take care of myself.” Obviously she could not share with him the need to prevent more of the contamnyshun.

“Very well. I will have Pelfren fetch a larger supply pack for you. There will no longer be any want of food or pleasure for you Gelf descender of Sigfrend.”

“That is most generous of you my liege.” She did not expect to need provisions, but obviously to refuse would arouse far too much suspicion. Therefore she simply bowed her head.

Chapter 28

Despite her successful compromise with the chief, she still remained unsure of how the situation could be resolved between Journgad and the hue-maans. The chief insisted on meeting with their people, but that would mean forcing them to expose themselves as outsiders. Even with careful planning, she could not imagine a solution which would completely avoid disaster.

The enormous weight of the pack made the trip back to the forst almost as difficult as traveling through the morass, but this time she did not mind so much, for it give her time to ponder the situation. There were so many people and complexities to figure out. Hue-maans, kinsfolk, the Oracle, the seekers, Journgad- how could she protect them all from each other and from the dangerous contamnayshun? It felt as if she were being pulled by a meldabeast tied to each limb. This last thought gave her more empathy for what chief Journgad must endure in his everyday life as a ruler.

Finally back at the shelter, she could relieve herself of the great boulder of a pack and sit for a timespan to rest and think further. The first priority of course, was to make sure that the seekers were well and to return them to the village. But what of the strange power source? If they returned it, the village might lose the wisdom of the Oracle. If the chief refused, then the hue-maans magic cliff might be discovered. There seemed to be no clear solution, and anyway she was not in a position of leadership in either camp. She would need help.

She dug hurriedly through her clothes from the previous day and found the strange 'far-talking' device that the hue-maans used. She held it dubiously to her mouth and called for the hue-maan professor as if she were knocking on the door of someone's shelterspace.

"Yes Gelf. I hear you. Are you ready to return?"

This magic was quite amazing to her. Not as fantastic as the faery column, but it still puzzled her deeply that she could be speaking with a person who was far off near the mount of Higsthon.

"Gelf?"

One thing that the far-talking device did *not* do however, was give her the mind-pictures of how the hue-maans felt. So she had to rely on the same speech that the hue-maans used to convey emotions.

"Sorry, yes professor. But I'm afraid the meeting did not go quite as well as I'd hoped. The chief insists that only HE is qualified to meet you. He will not accept me as his surrogate and insists on negotiating with your people personally."

"Yes Gelf, I understand. I'm sure that we can work this out comfortably. It might even be advantageous-"

"Advantageous?! But how-"

It wasn't until that moment that it struck her. The shock of it was almost a physical blow. Of course!! *Ayube had already met with the chief!* She didn't know how the hue-maans had done it, for she had not seen it herself. But the fact was, that it had worked, well mostly.

"So are you going to do the same thing that Ayube did when he visited chief Journgad?"

"Yes Gelf. That is certainly a possibility. We can discuss all of this in person."

Just like that, the added weight of her muddled thoughts fell, the same as her heavy pack of fodeins had. "Okay professor. Thank you for helping me understand that."

Though she didn't completely share the professor's confidence, the fact that he was not worried greatly tempered her own concerns.

“Gelf, if your visit with your people is complete, I would like to request that you return to us now. There are some matters which we would like to consult with you on.”

At this she was taken aback. These beings who had as much power as Higsthon Himself, were interested asking *her* for advice as if she had magic to equal their own? But that was absurd! She hadn't the strength of Journgad, or the wisdom of the Oracle, or the courage of Truini. But then her sense-reading came to mind. Maybe they were interested in utilizing her strange ability. This helped her to relax. It seemed that her gift provided her with a similar advantage to what chief Journgad enjoyed.

“I am ready to return yes. Are you going to use that faery column on me?” As much as she looked forward to being reacquainted with Sefi, and of course with Truini, she did not relish the idea of experiencing their disconcerting magic column again.

“No Gelf. That only works over a short distance. But I can send Adewale to bring you back.” The professor paused for a long moment and she heard unintelligible bits of conversation. “Gelf, Doctor Ikpeba has suggested that it's not wise to use the sleep medicine on you with so little time between. Do you think that you could handle staying awake for the trip back here? I can assure you that it will be safe, though quite out of the ordinary for you.”

She could not imagine what new wonders the hue-maan magic would offer, but this was not an opportunity that she was willing to pass up. “I believe that I can handle it, thank you for being considerate.”

“Okay. Where would you like us to meet you?”

She had to think about that. It was unclear what kind of magic they would use to travel, but she had to assume that it was something best kept hidden. “Professor, why don't we meet at the edge of the great morass, this should protect your magic from being seen.”

“A wise choice Gelf. How long would you need to reach that place?”

“I think that one and a half days would suffice.”

“Very well. I'll have Adewale keep a lookout for you.”

Chapter 29

This time the trip was a great deal less worrisome. She knew that there was no danger to the Oracle, she knew that Sefi and Truini would be there (even if the latter couldn't be awake yet), but even better she knew that she wouldn't have to cross that horrible morass. That last thought made her giggle. Here she was returning to a people who could go anywhere in the whole land, even to the far side of the sky, and she herself was grateful for not having to walk through some waterlogged ground.

Once at the edge of the forest, she only had to wait a short while before she heard a strange high-pitched sound in the distance. At first she thought it was an unusually large hutz-fly. But soon the sound became so loud that she knew it could not be coming from the mud plain itself. She

looked all around wondering if it could be the hue-maan magic. But that was impossible of course, the mount of Higsthon was many days travel from here.

Only when she saw the sunlight glinting off of something just above the horizon did her mouth fall open in astonishment. The shimmeri grew closer and larger until she saw it to be a large stretched out ball, but this was like a ball made all of triangles. It was colored like the grass in the mud-plane but there were four red cylinders that extended slightly in front and behind the main body. The high-pitched noise grew loud enough to clearly be heard above the other animal sounds before the flying box dropped to the ground. For a long while she simply stood there, mouth agape, as she tried to understand how such a thing could be. But then she became even more stunned (if such a thing were possible) when she saw that it did not actually rest ON the underfoot, but floated a handbreadth *above* it. The ground underneath and all around was being gently blown, as if the wind were coming out from all directions.

This must be how the hue-maans traveled on longer trips. Such magic was more powerful than even Ilhamet walking across the river.

“Gelf... Gelf?” Her thoughts were interrupted by the voice of Adewale.

“Oh there you are. Listen, I can understand that this must be an enormous shock to you. But I must encourage you to climb aboard before someone sees the sararin.¹² I promise you that the ride will be completely safe.”

She didn't know what any of this was, but she did trust Adewale. And she had to support the hue-maans in their effort to resolve this strange situation. So she clenched her hands, shut her eyes and summoned all her courage before stepping into the opening behind the strange hue-maan. At first it felt no different then climbing onto a fallen tree, but when she opened her eyes she experienced a second shock. The inside of the magic box felt familiar somehow. For a timespan the experience was a mystery, since she had never seen magic like this before, there was no explanation. She saw Adewale move towards the front with it's big smooth flat surface and he pushed on several parts of it.

She felt the 'sararin' rise up, with her inside of it, and she could see through the front which was clear instead of a blank wallside. She watched the ground fall away until they were higher than even the trees of the forst and then they began moving forwards at a very fast speed towards the mount of Higsthon. Once they were moving it finally hit her.

“By the sword of Prijnak! I've been inside of this before.”

Adewale favored her with a glance, but then quickly returned his focus to the picture in front and the smooth counter.

“Adewale! This magic box is where you were when you saw the giant blue ball! You were in this box moving towards the ball with many round hallways branching off of it.” As soon as she said this, she was almost physically thrown backwards by a plethora of mind-pictures. She felt a sense of amazement, then of great sadness. She saw another big see-through wall with the giant ball and the nighttime shimmeri, then the big blue ball got smaller and smaller until it was just a speck in the night sky.

12 [I would also consider using 'afategun-sare' jirgina or another appropriate term for a small flying craft. Maybe àpótí afategun (box that hovers). I'd like something better than 'hover box' though]

“Oh.” She finally grasped it. The picture of the big blue ball was the last time Adewale had seen his home, plan-it. He missed home very much.

“I’m sorry Adewale. I did not know that bringing this up would remind you of a sad time.

The hue-maan looked around briefly again but then spoke to her facing the front picture. “Gelf. Thank you for being understanding. It certainly isn’t easy, and the feeling that you can just pull these images straight out of my mind makes it very unsettling.” The man paused and she saw his discomfort. Then she felt a sense of grudging acceptance. “But at least we can trust you to be tactful.”

She tried changing the subject, but her sense-readin told her that the hue-maan did not want to talk. He needed to keep his mind and eyes focused on getting them both safely to the mountain. She wondered now if he was saying prayers to one of the hue-maan gods to ensure a safe trip. But she thought it best to ask such things after they arrived.

Chapter 30

She watched as a giant wall moved apart before Adewale’s magic box passed through the opening. Gazing in wonder, she saw that it was easily twice as grand as the chief’s gate back home but it was of some material she could not recognize or understand. Once inside, they entered an incredible space. It was easily three times taller than she was and larger than the entire village square. The floor slowly rose up to meet them and soon there was a slight vibration as the box settled to the floor.

“We’ve arrived. All passengers depart.” Adewale announced cheerfully.

She didn’t understand what that meant, but the fact that they arrived safely coupled with the man’s warm smile told her that the trip had gone as he had expected. The ‘door’ slid aside and she carefully stepped down from the strange box. Looking around she found herself even more impressed by the scale of the room now that she could see the whole of it. Beside the magic box that they had left, there were three others sitting on the expansive underfoot. She looked towards Adewale hoping to ask him more, but he motioned her towards a big rectangle in the wall that opened just as magically as the last time.

Soon they were back in the healing bay where she gave Sefi a warm hug and even brushed her knobhorn lightly along the doctor’s cheek. Then she also hugged Adewale and thanked him for bringing her back to the hue-maan’s camp.

“Gelf, what was that thing you did with your horn?” The doctor looked at her with a smile on her face.

“Oh.” She was starting sometimes to forget that these people had completely different customs.

“It’s a sign of affection... A way to show someone that you care.”

“Oh. Well thank you Gelf. I’m flattered.”

But as much as she appreciated the hue-maan healer and as curious as she was about their magic, another issue stood out more prominently for her. “Sefi, what about my dear Truini and the other seekers. Are they going to be okay? Has the unhealth been banished?”

“The others?” The woman took a few moments to switch subjects. “Oh yes, Your friends from the village who contracted that awful disease. Yes. Most of them are recovering nicely. Two of them are still in a coma, a kind of deep healing sleep.”

“And Truini? Where is she? What is, stays-sis?”

“Yes Gelf. Your mate is in stasis. It's perfectly safe for her. Let me explain.”

The woman told her about some kind of artificial sleep which was different from the medicine she had administered in the barbarians' village. As was becoming common in her talks with the hue-maans, the explanations were only comprehensible with the help of the mind-pictures that she got from them. It seemed that the sleep dart medicine was only safe for short times, whereas the 'stays-sis' was safe for longer periods. It was like a deep sleep where people do not age.”

As if the magic that she had seen already weren't incredible enough. Her mouth dropped into a large 'O.' “My word, your magic is absolutely boundless. You can even stave off the aftertime!” Sefi looked at her with a mixture of confusion and apprehension. “The aftertime?”

Feeling a bit flustered that the enormous power of the hue-maans did not include comprehension of such basic denisovian words, she shouted out. “You have the power to not die.”

At this the healer's eyes grew wider. “Oh no, no Gelf, please don't get the wrong impression. We live and we die just like anyone else. The stasis is only used to keep a sick person from getting worse while we come up with a treatment. I chose to put your companions in there because we had to keep them safe without letting them see this place” she paused, “Please understand that we are not supernatural. We simply had a longer period of time to develop all of these tools.”

It felt as if she would never cease to be confused by these people. “But Sefi, this 'stays-sis' does it not allow you to go into a deep sleep to prevent the aftertime?” Barely had she finished speaking before she saw a mind-picture of the doctor lowering her head into her hands which she did not understand.

“Gelf, you remember how you found Ayube in that crevice and he was not awake?”

She nodded silently without interrupting as she sensed that this was important to the hue-maan.

“Well, you may not have realized it at the time, but it's possible that he would have died without your help.”

Her mouth opened up in vast surprise at the mere concept.

“We may have the ability to treat many problems here in this room, but we don't *always* have access to such a place. If one of us were to get injured out there, or even if we simply grew too old, then we are just as subject to... to this aftertime as you are.” The healer glanced back over at the place where Truini slept before continuing. It is in fact highly unusual to put a healthy person in stasis as we have with your mate. But the risk of them being exposed to this room is a far greater concern for the professor and I.”

She didn't entirely understand the situation, obviously the seekers couldn't be left in the 'stays-sis' forever. And oh how she longed to hold Truini in her arms again. “But Sefi. What will happen to them now? Where will they *live*?”

The doctor smiled again. “*That* my friend is one of the reasons that professor Umquo has asked you to join us for a meeting.” She stopped smiling and became serious. “At your earliest convenience.”

“What does that-?” But before she could finish, she caught an image that helped her to understand. “Oh. Right.” So, taking a deep breath, told them that she was ready anytime. At least as ready as a denisovian inhabiting a magic hue-maan shelter *could* be.

So she followed the doctor through the funny round tubes toward the hue-maans' meeting place. Along the way she passed through different rooms with strange devices, whose purpose was beyond anything that she could imagine. At one room they passed another hue-maan. This one was a female, but unlike the healer she had longer hair that fell from her head in beautiful rope patterns. The woman wore a simple outfit like all of them, but she wore it with a strong confidence that few others exhibited.

“Ah Anuli. Have you met Gelf? This is the denisovian healer that you've probably heard about—” Gelf looked at the woman briefly, but looked closer when she saw the woman's expression. The hue-maan was, scared. No it was more than that, she was almost terrified. At first she couldn't understand why. So she tried to break the ice and put her hand out in the nature of the hue-maans, but Anuli shied away.

“I'm sorry to be rude, but I have a lab experiment going on that I can't be away from for too long.” The woman hurried to one of the doors and was quickly out of sight. But as she left, Gelf sensed from her something similar to what she'd sensed in Adewale when they first met. This woman, was afraid of what she might sense. Anuli was aware of her strange ability and there was something that the hue-maan didn't want her to know. Feeling this, Gelf relaxed. It probably had something to do with the contamnayshun. She said as much to Sefi and Adewale expecting that it would relax them. But as the three of them made their way through the next corridor, Adewale told her something that completely surprised her (as if there was anything left in this magical realm that *could* surprise her anymore).

“Gelf, professor Umquo has already agreed to let you see our, ‘magic.’ He trusts you, and we do to, especially after the care that you showed in dealing with Valtreen and your leader. That's why you were permitted to see the sararin.”

She stopped short and put her hand on Adewale's arm. “So your leader really trusts me, out of all other denisovians, to see your magic tools?”

The man shrugged. “Well, from the first day we met it was obvious that it couldn't be hidden from you for very long.”

She wondered briefly, why the other hue-maan had seemed so nervous then. But the idea that the rest of them trusted her so much chased any negative thoughts out of her mind. She was even beginning to think that she might be able to make a new life for herself with these strange beings. But then she thought of Truini. Her first goal was to be with the lovely warrior girl, and she knew that the hue-maans would not allow *both* of them to see their magic tools.

Chapter 31

“Gelf, thank you for meeting with us. Please have a seat here.” The room was roughly the same size as the healing room, but without the clutter of the healing devices it felt larger. There was an oval-shaped table in the middle with short well-built seats all around. At the far end sat the professor and next to him a female hue-maan with short-curly hair and a broad... they called it

‘Imú’¹³. Sefi and Adewale sat in chairs on the opposite side of the female and so Gelf went to sit with them. It took her a short timespan to figure a way to sit in the diminutive seats, but she somehow managed.

“Now I believe you all know, oh wait. Gelf you have not met Sodangi. She is our resident engineer and mechanic. She fixes broken things.”

Gelf looked at the woman and used the hue-maan greeting. “Ekene mu unu.”

The woman smiled and wished her the same.

“Now, there are two main issues that I would like to discuss with all of you. The first is the issue of how we should deal with the other denisovians. Obviously they can not be permitted to see this place, but since they have no memory it might be just as cruel to send them back to the Xenlarian village as it was to send them to the barbarian one. Does anyone have ideas as to how they should be treated?”

There was silence for a long while. Gelf sensed that the new woman was out of her element on this and was waiting for a subject she knew more about. But from the rest she sensed only confusion. So despite her nervousness at being in what felt like a chief’s hall, she willed herself to speak up.

“Professor, what if we simply bring them to the swift brook near the barbarian camp and leave them with a few days food and water. I could go there after a little while and reassure them of it’s safety.”

The man smiled and she sensed that he liked the idea. But not all of them did.

“Gelf. That’s a worthwhile suggestion, but I wonder. Is there enough to eat there...in the longer term? I mean the barbarians near that place ate animals.” The healer shuddered at this. “But they must have done this because there were not enough plants.”

She hadn’t thought of such a thing. It was already past the time of planting and anyone who did not already have crops or the means to trade for them was going to be hungry during the damp season. She dropped her head some in realizing that she too was out of her element. “I had not considered this Sefi, I take back the suggestion.”

“No no.” The professor put his hands up in some gesture she didn’t understand. “Please don’t be sorry Gelf. This is something that we call ‘brainstorming.’ All ideas are welcome because even if an idea is not completely practical it might spur us towards other ideas. Your suggestion is very good.”

“Professor, what if we bring only a couple of Gelf’s people to their village, only if there is a relative to help them.”

There was debate back and forth about what might work best for the seekers and Gelf worried that they were making decisions for people who did not themselves have a say in the matter.

“Professor, what if we start with just one person? Truini is the sister of the Oracle and that could be helpful in learning more about how your, power device affects her.”

Now the engineer-woman felt that she had something to contribute. “Excuse me, Gelf? Yes. I admit to knowing little of what you spoke about, but I’ve been thinking about something. How would you explain to the other seekers the means by which they woke up in your village instead

of in the land of the barbarians? You said that one of them didn't believe it possible for you to move your sick comrades without his help.”

“I don't mean to belittle your suggestions Gelf, but I have to agree with Sodangi. I feel that it would be best if we awaken your people as close as possible to where you and Adewale found them. Ayube could lead them back to their homes from there.”

“Not in the barbarian village you mean?!” She had hoped to never again be confronted with the images of death surrounding that place, not ever.

“No professor. We don't have to subject them to *that*, right?” Gelf was grateful for Adewale's willingness to step in. For he understood more than the rest of them how powerful the emotions connected with that place were.

“No Adewale.” The professor looked briefly over at her. “I of course can't know how those events would have affected you, can't even imagine really. I'm certain that we can find a place that's nearby but not *too* nearby.”

This gave her great relief. She could think of nothing else now except to hold Truini in her arms. Since the second thing they wanted to talk about was quite outside of her understanding, she slipped into daydreams then and held the woman's face in her mind.

The hue-maans talked now about their 'power device' which they believed was close to the temple. She didn't expect the hue-maans to explain how it worked, as it often taxed their patience to explain things to her that they felt were very basic, so she paid little attention. She had the sense that this was what Sodangi was waiting for and so she let the others work it out.

“Professor, I suspect that these beings are influenced by different vibrations than we are. If the vibrations of the energy release was causing these strange visions and the collapse that Gelf here saw, then maybe I could set up a device which would cause a similar vibration, but without drawing power. We could switch the devices in the middle of the night and none would be the wiser.”

Though she hadn't been following closely, the last bit had worked through her thoughts of Truini. The hue-maans once again were throwing aside the great wisdom of Adeima. “Just how, in all of the land, can you talk like this?!” She spoke out at first from pure emotion. It was infuriating that the humans would assume that the holy prophecy of Adeima could merely be some vibration from their tool. “If you think that the prophecy of the Oracle is no more than an energy vibration, then how is it that the oracle told me about the strange people who would become an ally, or the stars that fly backwards, or the being that disappears in a curtain of faery dust, or the cliff that is not a cliff. How can you explain that?”

Realizing that she had spoken more harshly than she had intended, she then apologized for the tone of her voice. But the fire of her emotions remained unquenched.

For a short while nobody replied. She sensed that they wanted to give her information, but in a way that didn't hurt her feelings. It was something like the *contamnayshun* they kept referring to. For awhile the silence hung in the air like the beams of the *Saũlè* in the forest. All that she experienced at first were blank looks, until Adewale finally spoke for the group. “Gelf. I understand that all of your people revere the oracle and we do not want to contradict the beliefs of your tribe. We simply want to understand if our missing tool had some influence. Maybe it helped your oracle to hear the wisdom of the gods better.”

It was difficult to hear the man explain things to her. He did not believe in the power of Adeima or of Azealla. But neither could he explain away the issue she had brought up. Finally she realized that there was no way that these foreign people could ever understand the great power of Adeima. Not the way she did. They had never witnessed the glowing crown on her statue nor were they blessed with a sense-reading. So once again, she had to grudgingly accept their beliefs for what they were. Though her mind still conjured images of dragging the hue-maans kicking and screaming into the temple for a first-hand experience.

“Professor. What if we could examine the oracle and test her to find out what kind of damage is happening and why she collapsed?” The doctor had an earnest look that belied the hopeful anticipation she was feeling. “If we could prevent their-” Sefi glanced over at her briefly. “oracle from being physically harmed by the energy, then it would further diminish the harm that we've caused.”

“In most cases doctor, I would be happy to explore that idea. But, it's enormously dangerous to bring a sararin so close to their village.”

“Professor. I have an idea.” Now all eyes turned to Sodangi. “What if we did a reconnaissance trip to the village early in the morning before the oracle wakes. Then Sefi can give her a sedative and examine her there in the sararin.”

“Hmm. Well that should resolve all of our concerns without being a danger to the people. Alright you have my support to move forward.”

Chapter 32

Great Higsthon had not even lifted the Saülé into the sky as they sped in the sararin over the great morass and towards the familyland. Where before she had been distracted by the mere thrill of traveling in the hue-maans' magic box, now she gazed through the window with rapt attention. It was all so unimaginable. The vast sky was slowly brightening from a deep Phlox to its usual lavender, the beautiful aqua forest which surrounded her entire village was before them, and below was the vast watery plain with the-

“Adewale! Look over there. What's that?”

Her eyes had caught something shining within the great morass below. It looked like a tiny pond but one that was a great deal more reflective than any water she had seen before.

The hue-maan looked up from the smooth counter and stared below them. “My word, it's the 'Benue.' What's it doing way out here? That doesn't look like it was an intentional landing.”

As the craft descended, they both looked down at the other magic box sitting, like a carelessly tossed spear blade, near the edge of the mud plain. The front looked like a crumpled dress, with a huge mound of dirt pushed high around it.

“Benue, do you copy? This is Adewale, on board the Lumumba.¹⁴ If you can hear me, please respond.”

Not knowing how someone far below them could hear the man, Gelf chose to stay out of the way and watch.

¹⁴ Patrice Lumumba first leader of Congo and advocate of 'Pan-Africanism'

“Damn. What could've happened to cause the ship to be out here and with no response on the sadarwa¹⁵?”

“Maybe the pilot's hurt? We should head down and see if they need help.” Nobody was surprised by the doctor's compassionate plea.

The man moved his hands quickly over the smooth counter and she watched on the screen as the horizon slowly rose up to meet them.

“Adewale, do you think that you can set us down close enough so that I don't have to worry about sinking into 10 centimeters of that muck?”

“I'll do my best.”

And that he did. Gelf was amazed watching through the screen as the other magic box grew closer and closer until it was just a hairsbreadth away and then Adewale announced that they were down. She'd felt no vibration and no shudder to confirm this, but took the skilled pilot at his word.

“Gelf, why don't you come with me, in case we need to carry the pilot in here.” Sefi moved her hand along the wall and the big door slowly rotated out of the way. Outside she could now feel the chill of the pre-dawn air and the side of the other enormous magic box loomed only two handsbreadths in front of her. Sefi touched a few parts of it and that too revealed an opening. Inside, the space looked exactly the same, save for the sloping floor. There was the big front panel, now blank, a wide flat counter which was also blank, and the usual row of seats along either side. But then she noticed the hue-maan woman slumped over the smooth counter.

The doctor made a strange breathing sound. “My word, it's Anuli. Gelf, can you help me lay this woman down?”

Once they got her safely to the floor, the doctor used her magic tools to check on the woman's condition.

“Mild concussion, hairline fracture of the occipital lobe, oh and a small puncture wound just above the pelvis.” The doctor turned to face her now. “Gelf, can you get me a clean white cloth from the bag over there?”

Thankfully, she got a mind-image of what the doctor wanted, for there were many incredible tools and devices to sort through. Once she handed it over, the doctor held it against the woman's side while she used the other hand to hold a tool near the most severe injury. After a couple of minutes, she used another tool near the woman's head.

Just as had happened with Adewale, she started sensing images before the hue-maan woman even woke up. At first it was just confusion and muddled memories of the crash. But soon the woman opened her eyes and started to look around. The instant she saw Gelf and the doctor, she started to panic and Gelf saw an image of hue-maans sitting in a cave wearing rags and rubbing sticks together next to a pile of branches.

“No! No no! Doctor please. I don't want to be offensive, but I don't want anybody probing my mind. PLEASE get the primitive girl out of here.”

Now the shocked expressions proliferated to both hue-maan and denisovian alike. It was definitely the last reaction that she would have expected. But at Sefi's request, she obliged and

15 [had considered ‘Sadarwa-balun’ but haven't come up with a term for “communication device” that would be different from cellphone]

returned to Adewale in the other flying box. After telling him what happened, he watched her with a pensive look. Confusion permeated his mind as they both tried to understand the woman's peculiar reaction.

“Well, there's nothing that I can do to change her mind.” Sefi walked back in with a resigned look on her face. “I tried to tell her how important it was to get her checked out back at the ship but she absolutely refuses to come with us.”

“Doctor, what if we drop off you and Gelf at the temple, then I'll go ferry Anuli back to the ship and pick you up afterward?”

“Adewale, that's a fine idea. Just please don't be too long. We don't want to risk having you seen by anyone.”

The doors closed and Gelf was nearly thrown into her seat by the sudden movement as the magic box soared into the air and sped over the tree tops. In barely the time it would take to protest, Adewale announced that they were directly over the temple. He then quickly turned around and addressed her.

“Gelf, are you ready for the ‘faery-column?’”

She still dreaded the idea of experiencing the hue-maans' magic. But Ayube already knew this and the picture she got from him even before she could utter a protest was of the magic box tearing a large hole in the tree cover. This would not exactly be the stealthy operation that the man was striving for. And so, instead of protesting, she merely checked the travel pack that the man had given her, gave Sefi a quick hug, and then nodded her head.

The same faery-dust began to appear around her, growing steadily denser until she could see nothing of the magical machine. She felt the same strange sensation on her skin and wanted to scratch all over. But soon it faded and she found herself standing at the beginning of the steps leading to the temple.

Though not much was known about the lives of the great Seers, she believed it likely that the Oracle would be either asleep or meditating at this hour. But what she *wasn't* prepared for, was the experience of actually going inside. By holy edict, no one was allowed to enter the temple except at the midday-hour. The few times that she had gazed inside, she'd been dazzled by the shafts of light which cast an auburn crown on each huge statue within.

But this time, there was no holy flame, and each statue was barely more than a dim shadow along the wall. The space now held little of the grandeur she had come to expect in the temple. It did sadly dampen her general awe of the space. It also meant that she required a longer timespan for her see'in adjust to the darkness, but soon she was able to make out the general pattern of the floor. She quickly began her search for the Oracle, but just as with the first time, the voice of the Oracle found her instead.

“The old learning ways of the new, will bring rescue.”

“See'er will preserve wisdom that is heard.”

She turned the corner and saw the Oracle sitting in the appointed spot before the holy flame. What she couldn't understand though, is why the Oracle would be in service so early.

“Foreigner rattled with fear brings danger as she draws near.”

Gelf listened with rapt attention to the holy words in the hopes that some meaning could be discerned. But soon the Oracle ceased relaying prophesy and after a long silence, she finally drew close to the woman. It was difficult to know what to do, as nobody was permitted to disturb the Oracle particularly during a time of prophecy, but she also knew that there was great risk if the magic flying box was delayed for too long.

“Delay for the strangers, brings threat of great danger.”

Now her jaw really DID drop. Was the Oracle blessed with some supernatural sense-reading? How else could she know that the hue-maans were waiting for her? The timing was too sudden, too perfect. But could she disturb the holy Oracle while the woman was receiving prophecy? Her insides spun from trying to discern the proper course of action. She seemed to be at risk of betraying powerful beings either way.

“Time is short. Hesitation is a threat.”

Finally, she took the cue and prayed that Adeima would forgive her for such audacity. She reached with shaking hands for the magic box. It took all the will that she possessed to force her hand forward and give the sleep medicine to the Oracle.

The woman slumped over and she gently guided her body to the floor. Now it was done and she could not change it. Nevertheless, her voice stuttered as she called Sefi that it was safe for the hue-maans to arrive.

Chapter 33

“Gelf? Are you alright?”

Her friend's caring and concern did help a little, but not enough to drown out the fear and sorrow that threatened to overwhelm her. She collapsed on the hue-maan's shoulder and wept.

“Oh Sefi. She was awake! She was receiving prophecy, even now at this early time.”

Despite the concern that she felt from the doctor, there was confusion as well. Sefi didn't know about the prohibition, and she didn't understand the awesome power, and danger, of Adeima.

“Sefi don't you see?! *I interrupted the Oracle while she was receiving prophecy!* It is a most horrible transgression and it assures that I am cursed throughout the rest of my days.”

She knew that the doctor did not believe her, but Sefi *did* care and tried her best to be supportive.

“I'm sorry Gelf that this is causing you pain-”

The doctor wanted to help, but she also sensed an urgency from the woman. The image of the Oracle and some strange devices came to her mind. The deep and overpowering sorrow at first drowned out the images, but soon the mind-pictures became clear. Sefi needed to get her tests done and wasn't sure which of them to prioritize. She had made the ultimate sacrifice and now she had to support the doctor so that her great sacrifice was not in vain. “Oh. I'm keeping you from your work Sefi. Please go ahead, I'll be okay.” She wasn't *really* okay of course. She knew that she would *never* be okay, not till the end of her days.

“Thank you Gelf. For being, perceptive.” The doctor then got up and began doing her strange tests on the Oracle. The hue-maan took a bit of the vital-fluid and made many measurements.

Meanwhile she ambled down the hall and bowed low to each of the Gods, as if this meager act of fealty could make up in some small way for her colossal malfeasance. She prayed to each of the Gods that if she *did* have to be denied Adeima's love and protection, that at least her sacrifice could be accepted as a worthy one. Feeling wholly drained her of energy, she sat at the entrance and gave up her battle against grief for the time being.

Her doze was interrupted when the faery column solidified and Adewale appeared. He walked over to Sefi and she heard little of their conversation. He mentioned something about the other hue-maan resting at the camp and that he expected a very tense meeting when they all returned. There was some technical talk about the damaged flying box, but it was beyond her understanding. She got the sense from Sefi that the woman was needing more time than she expected because they didn't have, some kind of tools that the hue-maans' kept at their camp. For the moment she did her best to drown out the hue-maans' with psalms to Azealla. But after a time, her thoughts were interrupted by the pilot standing next to her.

At first she merely ignored the hue-maan, so powerful was her remorse. But when the hand fell lightly upon her shoulder, she experienced the deep concern flowing from the hue-maan. With no small regret, she turned a sorrowful face towards the man. "Adewale?"

"How are you getting along Gelf? Doctor Ikpeba told me a little about what happened between you and the oracle. I want you to know that while we may not *understand* your religion, both of us consider you a friend and we want to support you however we can."

She was touched by the man's words. Though she still sensed unbelief in his thoughts, she also felt the deep affection, which did somewhat compensate. She looked up at him with expanded respect for the hue-maan's empathy. "I'm-" she still kept her words quiet, wishing even now in this tragedy to show respect and reverence for the solemnity of the space.

"Yes?" The man moved his legs into a strange position and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Adewale, do your people believe in Gods?"

As he gazed at her, she sensed a sudden tension in the man and a reluctance to speak on the subject. It had to do, not surprisingly, with their fear of the contamnayshun. "It's okay Adewale. You don't have to say."

But then the hue-maan surprised her even further by complying. "It's okay Gelf. Yes our ancestors believed in gods like the Iska and Shango. Then as we traded with more wealthy, villages, our culture evolved and many people began to worship gods called Allah and Jesus." This was quite a blasphemous concept to Gelf. The idea of a people abandoning one god in favor of another was unheard of. "But, did the people not get punished for leaving their old God behind?"

As soon as she said this, she sensed the wall of disquiet go back up within the man. "Gelf, it really is best if we stay clear of such ideas. Your people are only beginning to develop your culture and your ideas about the world. It would rob you of that development if I shared too much."

But for her, it was already too late. The images and feelings that she saw told her that the hue-maans did not believe in a holy power. They believed that religions among their ancestors in the before-time were merely from not having the smarts that they now had. The smarts that allowed them to make the magic flying machine, and the faery column, and the shelters that went outside

of a plan-it. They believed such ideas to be 'prim-ee-tiv.' The things she was seeing in her mind were making her angry with the outsiders. She was getting the feeling that they saw her the way she saw a dejeeyr or a meldabeast. Knowing how much magic they had, and knowing that they cared about her, she took a deep breath and thought it through. Maybe the gods *they* had worshiped were made up ones? Maybe *their* gods had never spoken to them the way the Oracle spoke to her. They abandoned the gods because they had learned to make the same god-like magic. That made more sense. Her people weren't primitive in an inferior manner. She and the villagers just hadn't evolved to the point where they could create their own magic.

“The healer is wise beyond her days.”

Her thoughts were interrupted by the strange comment. “What was that?”

“Olúwa ò!¹⁶ Adewale. Hand me a vial of tranquilizer. I can't understand how-”

Gelf rushed over to see what was happening and caught Sefi using a device on the Oracle. She recognized it as the one that the doctor used when she accidentally woke up in the healing room.

“Sefi, what did that mean? 'The healer is wise.' Did she mean you or me?”

Though Sefi was working, she intently thought the image of giving a hug. “Oh Gelf, I wouldn't worry about it too much. Most people are pretty disoriented when they first come out of a sleep. Remember how confused *you* were when you woke up in our strange medical bay?”

She was somewhat inclined to agree. But there was something about the whole thing that made the doctor feel most puzzled. Not only that she had come out of the sleep state so suddenly, but the timing was uncanny. It had happened right when she started thinking about the differences between the gods of the hue-maans and Adeima. Could it all *really* have been a coincidence? It was impossible to be sure.

“Doctor Ikpeba, we shouldn't stay here too long. Someone in the village might spot the sararin.”

Without looking up, the doctor gave a quick acknowledgment. Soon Gelf watched with deep sadness as the holy Oracle was gently laid down next to the altar with no knowledge or understanding of the great role she played in the hue-maans' study. She once again had the disturbing feeling of the magic faery column and the three of them were back in the strange flying box.

Chapter 34

Adewale steered them back to the hue-maan sararin room where she followed the doctor towards the door. Gelf sensed that Sefi wanted to ask her a favor, but was afraid that it would be asking too much.

“Sefi, feel free to ask me whatever you wish.” Despite the huge desecration in the temple, she was mature enough to realize that the hue-maans could not have known the situation and she bore no malice towards her strange new friends.

The woman was a bit flustered, but regained her composure quickly enough. “Gelf, I'd like to ask if you are willing to be exposed to the dark-energy crystal for a short period to allow me to compare your own body's reaction with the readings I took from the oracle.”

16 [would be better to find a curse word like someone hitting their foot on a rock ie. 'shit']

“Of course Sefi. I would be happy to help.”

The doctor stopped walking and looked intensely back at her. “Gelf I need to explain to you the risks associated with this. Please understand that this is no casual request. We don't understand what will happen, nor how your body will react to the crystal.” The woman made a deep frown. “You could be harmed in the process, perhaps severely.”

Finally understanding the magnitude of the request, she put her hand on the woman's shoulder and chose a somber expression. “Sefi, you have done everything that you can to help my people. Why should I not be willing to take a small risk if it might get us one step closer to finding a solution for both of our kinsfolk?”

She sensed a deep relief from the doctor and a deeper sense of admiration as Sefi led her through the strange corridors.

But instead of leading her to the healing room, Sefi led her to another even stranger place. This room was as tall as the sararin room and filled on all sides with the smooth shelves full of 'buttons.' In the middle was a huge round column that bulged in odd places as her eye followed it up towards the ceiling. She went over to another hue-maan who was ostensibly in charge of this room. The two hue-maans spoke quietly for a timespan and she saw the other woman's eyes open wide in some kind of shock.

The woman in charge then walked to the middle of the room and began speaking in a loud voice. “Alright everyone, I need to ask for all of you to clear the room for 10 minutes while we test Gelf here with a short-duration exposure to the dark energy crystal.”

All activity in the room stopped. Gelf could feel the anxious trepidation radiating from every person in the room. As confident as she had felt when first offering to help, the mind-pictures that she was getting from the hue-maans was making her wonder if she wasn't making a terrible mistake. Many of them thought that she was allowing herself to be turned into something called 'mar-ter' and that she was incredibly heroic. It was strange, she didn't feel courageous at all. She didn't even fully understand what was going on. Then the image of Truini came to her and she felt, even stronger, the temptation to run as fast as she could- somewhere. What if she didn't survive? What if this strange crystal damaged her so much that she couldn't be with the girl anymore? The fraidness gripped her insides tightly and her hands began to shake uncontrollably. The only thing that kept her from actually running away was the knowledge that she would be letting her friend AND her people down if she backed out.

She got the sense that Sefi was about to ask her a second time if she was still sure that she wanted to go through with the procedure. She stared intently at the doctor and gave a slow and very intentional shaking of the head to make it clear to the hue-maan that she did not want the comment to be spoken. She felt completely sure that, if given the chance now, she would shout 'NO' as loud as she could.

So instead, she held her arms stiffly at her sides as she followed Sefi to a small alcove. She was resolutely determined to not let her friend see how strong the fraidness was inside her. The doctor might decide to cancel the 'test' and then all of the work with the Oracle as well as her own eternal shame, might be for naught. So, to help calm her strong fraidness, she spoke quiet prayers of strength to Azealla and stood still as Sefi put several odd shaped devices on her head, chest, neck, and shoulders. The doctor then turned on a device that she said would record everything

that happened, 'like an advanced type of scribe.' She was then instructed to walk over to the big column in the middle of the room and wait. Not knowing if she still held any favor in their eyes, she still continued ardent prayers to Azealla and Prijnak for support in the faint hope that They hadn't fully abandoned her.

From the corner of her eye where she stood, the doctor's hands were moving over several tools and up to the wallside. A moment later, a large panel on the column in front of Gelf opened and she stared into the blackest void she had ever seen. It was darker than a moonless night sky, and with no shimmer to interrupt it. Immediately there was some kind of burning like fire, but it was inside of her. For a moment it felt like her very skin was being consumed. She wanted to scream, but the fear and shock held her frozen. It wasn't quite like pain, it was more intense than that. It felt like millions of hutz flies had replaced her skin and were crawling and flying all over her insides. She began to hear a strange voice, but it was too confusing to understand any of the words. She tried to tease out something from the noise, until something shifted and then everything went blank.

Chapter 35

"Gelf? Gelf please answer me. Oh please, tell me you're alright."

Before she fully rose to consciousness, she experienced the intense worry and fear pouring out of Sefi. The woman felt horribly guilty and it was that last emotion which finally penetrated the blackness and motivated her to drag herself out the strange realm. She really didn't want to, it felt so calm, so peaceful where she was. Any movement at first was impossible. The effort to move was worse now than her experience being in the mud plain. Here, she felt as if her whole body was buried and she was trying to pull herself up with arms that were also buried. She concentrated on Sefi though, and slowly began to see a pinpoint of light, like a single faint shimmer ahead. This was the focus of her energy, until finally she gained control of her voice.

"I, I hear you Sefi."

She still felt too tired to open her eyes, but instead she had the strangest experience of seeing the situation through the doctor's eyes instead. She saw herself sprawled on the floor, some of the funny devices had fallen off and were laying next to her head. She saw the doctor's hand and the medical tool she was holding. She also saw through the doctor's eyes that the device listed her condition as 'stable' which must have meant something good because the doctor felt a sense of relief.

Finally, she did manage to open her eyes, and she tried further to ease her friend's concern. "Not to worry Sefi. I'm 'stable' now.

"Oh, I'm afraid this little adventure is far from over my friend."

Feeling horribly weak, she didn't have the energy to raise her head or respond. She felt as tired as she had when she collapsed after reaching the end of the mud plain. But the mind-pictures she got from Sefi were provocative. She had said some strange things while looking at the blackness and there were many unusual readings from the doctor's devices.

They must have moved her while she was asleep. She opened her eyes again and saw that she was in the healing place now. There were people moving in and out, but everything seemed to move too quickly, as she rose to the awake time only for brief intervals. She didn't know how much time passed before she began to feel better, but all the while it felt like her insides were vibrating with a kind of energy.

After what seemed like an eternity, the boulder-like weights became lighter and the strength in her limbs returned little by little. Slowly, and with a great deal of help, she managed at last to sit up and tried testing her limbs again. The pictures in her head still didn't make sense though and her curiosity was a hutz-fly fluttering just beyond her grasp.

“Sefi. I think that I feel well enough to ask you about what happened. Can you tell me if this helped you to understand the, um, thing with-”

“With your oracle? Well, possibly.” The woman paused. “Gelf, how much do you know about how your brain works?”

Although she still didn't understand the word that the doctor used, the sense-readin that she got was of some kind of directive consciousness behind the eyes of hue-maans which held things like memories and making arms or legs move. It was as good a definition as she could think of herself.

The doctor pushed a few points on the wall and an image showed up. “What you see here, is the lower portion of what we assume is your brain. This part in the back that's lit up is a part that we don't quite understand yet. But the same part lit up in the scans we took of you the first time you were in the medical bay. Gelf, the time that it did this is the same time that you woke up and spoke to me.”

Before Sefi even finished, she knew where the woman was headed. “When I tried to stop you from using the sleep medicine. So maybe it's related to the mind-pictures that I get from you”

“Exactly.”

“So, that means the Oracle would be able to do the same thing that I can?”

“I believe so.”

This brought up a whole new body of thought. It was said that the Oracle was chosen at the fifth anum of life. But she herself knew nothing of why a specific person was chosen. If *she* also had the same ability, then how many others did? That was a mystery which hovered beyond her understanding for the moment.

The doctor interrupted her thoughts as she continued. “Gelf, there's something even more profound that you should see.”

Before the doctor even started moving her hand on the wallside, she got a 'mind-picture' that she knew would be sensational. The image on the wall changed and now she was indeed looking at something much more amazing. It was a moving picture, and it was *her*. She was looking at herself in the past, standing in front of the black abyss and with the funny things all over her head. Did the hue-maans know how to travel into the past? No, that wasn't it. She got a word from the doctor that sounded like 'vid-ree-kord-ing,' but she didn't know what that meant. The doctor moved her hand again and she heard sounds. It took awhile for her to realize that the sounds were coming from the moving picture and it was her own voice speaking.

“Ffffff yieiddol sqoqpdid, elhoci the rthowsopk”

“Thiwqusinanwitqc lcneroq”

“Answers found beneath the auburn crown.”

“Foreigners learn truth in turn.”

“The signal transmit brings conflict and split.”

“Stone of black, brings leader back.”

Then she saw herself collapse to the floor. She stared at the moving picture which was now frozen still. It was the most otherworldly thing imaginable. SHE had been an Oracle. SHE had spoken prophecy. But there were no statues, no eternal flame, no temple. She didn't notice until Sefi laid a hand on her shoulder, how much she was shaking.

“Gelf. Dear, what's wrong.”

She wanted to answer, but she felt frozen by— some emotion that she couldn't put into words. How could it be possible for her to do what the Holy Oracle had done when she wasn't the chosen, she wasn't trained in the temple, and she wasn't blessed by Adeima. For that matter *she had committed the atrocity of interrupting the Oracle*, she should be cursed with never hearing prophesy again! This went against everything that her people had believed since before her kaba had formed.

All she could do was look up at Sefi with her mournful eyes, pleading for an understanding. She watched the doctor bring a chair and sit down next to her, the doctor held her hand and the loving emotions that she felt radiating from Sefi finally broke her daze.

“Sefi. I don't understand how it's possible for me to do what the Holy Oracle had done. Our entire village prays to Adeima and hears the Holy prophecy each year on the feast of blessing. Only a chosen women, living a holy ascetic life may sit in the temple and deliver prophecy. But I have no training, no prestige of any kind-”

She paused when the woman wrapped her in a loving embrace. They hugged for a long while until she felt able to process better. But it still made no sense. There was something missing, something vitally important. She could *feel* it but she just couldn't, couldn't quite absorb it into her waking thoughts.

But finally, as they let go, she at least found herself able to explain to Sefi what was so confusing. Immediately as she wrapped up her thoughts, she sensed the word *contamnayshun* again from Sefi. But she didn't know how that was related to all of it.

Still holding her hand, she sensed a deep seriousness. “Gelf, do you remember when I explained that some of our 'magic' only seemed to be so because your people had not learned how to make the same kind of tools? And that we once lived as you do, without this magic?”

“Yes Sefi.”

“Well, by the same token, there were people in our past who spoke prophecy. Long long ago in different parts of our planet, cultures would use plants either eaten or inhaled to create altered states of awareness that allowed them to-”

“NO! You are doing it again! You are saying that the Holy words of Adeima might simply be imagined or dreamed or something. But just because YOU do not believe, doesn't make it false.”

“Gelf, I-”

“NO!” She tried to swat at the doctor's arms, but her limbs still felt sluggish. “The Oracle told me that I would meet you. She *told* me the seekers would have broken smarati. She *told* me about your magic faery curtain. How can you say that the prophecy isn't true when *each and every time* the Holy words have predicted what nobody could have possibly known in the beforetime?”

Before the doctor even answered, she knew that she had prevailed.

“I, don't have an explanation for that. But what I can tell you, is that our ancestors long ago did the same thing. We had holy women who spoke prophecy, and we built temples to honor them and the gods. All that I can say is-” The doctor paused for a timespan, “our people have been where you are.”

Though she knew the doctor didn't believe, and she didn't see how the two could be equated, she also cared for her friend and felt a little ashamed of her outburst. So she accepted that her friendship with the hue-maan woman was more valuable than being right.

“I'm sorry for shouting Sefi. Thank you. Thank you for caring. I realize that we don't agree, but we don't have to let that stand between us.” She gave Sefi another hug and it helped her to feel at least a little better.

Chapter 36

Professor Umquo sat at the desk pouring over reports when the door chime sounded. He activated the door and was pleased to see the doctor appear in the opening.

“Yes Doctor, Me kake bukata ne?”¹⁷ [can I help you]

When she was seated, they got down to business.

“It's difficult to talk to her, because obviously she believes their religion to be factual. We're really playing with fire trying to straddle the line between revealing our technology and respecting her culture. But the irrefutable fact is, she displays the same neurological markers when exposed to the crystal as she does when she gets the strange visions from us, but stronger. They must be related somehow, I just don't understand their physiology enough to make an assessment.”

He gave a deep sigh before answering. “It's a terribly fine line, your right doctor. But what is undeniably clear is that the crystal is connected to the religion of their people. Somehow we must find a means of replicating it in such a way as to preserve their culture, or we will be stranded here when our own crystal finally deteriorates. Did you try exposing the woman to a depleted crystal to see if that would substitute?”

“No professor. I was afraid for her safety. The first exposure was taxing enough on her as it is.”

“I understand doctor. But please realize that not only is our own future at stake, but also the future of her people as well. Eventually the crystal which is beneath their temple will deteriorate and what will become of their religion when *that* happens?”

“I hadn't thought of that.”

“Do you think Gelf will concede to another test?”

17 Hausa expression ‘Can I help you?’ [finding a term for ‘come in’ would be better]

“I don't know professor. She seemed incredibly shaken up, but I couldn't tell if it was from the test itself, or the idea that our own 'magic' allowed her to experience what their religious leader does.”

“Well you seem to have made friends with her. So I will leave the diplomatic entreaties in your skilled hands. I just implore you to do whatever you can within the limits of our oath to find a solution.”

“Yes professor.”

“Now, about their ruler. We have to send the woman back to her village after a time that will appear as if she had traveled the whole round trip on foot. I need to know when we can get Ayube back into his disguise and have him meet with this Journgad fellow.”

“We should meet with Gelf to find out if she wants to travel back in the sararin or if she wants to walk.”

“Walk? Why would she want to walk for-” he counted on his fingers for a moment “nine of their days through all of that wilderness?”

“I don't know. But I think we should give her the choice.”

At first the professor seemed about to contradict again, but instead he merely shook his head.

“Alright. Please keep me updated.”

Chapter 37

For the second time, she stood in front of the strange wallside. This time the fraidness saturated every part of her body. The memory of what happened before, of what she might say, or of being punished for the blasphemy filled her entire being with dread. But Sefi had made an important point. If the hue-maans did not find out what helped the Oracle to receive Adeima's prophecy, then they were duty-bound to leave their 'tool' where it was which would mean they would soon run out of 'fuel.' So she held her trembling hands together and waited for Sefi to make the wallside move.

But this time, as she stared into the blackness, she was able to make out a faint shape. It was only the tiniest bit lighter than the space around it, but there *was* some kind of outline. She stared at the object, wondering if it would send her into another trance. But she was almost more surprised by the absence this time. Nothing at all happened, she felt completely normal. She looked at Sefi and put out her arms in the gesture that the hue-maans used.

“Nothing at all?”

“No Sefi. I don't feel anything.”

The doctor moved her hands and the 'shiyald' came down to cover the opening. “Well, at least that answers one question. We know that only an active crystal creates the reaction that you felt before.”

She looked back at the doctor. “So this means that you cannot use the crystal under the temple for your power source?”

The hue-maan had a pained expression and took a short timespan before answering. “I'm afraid Gelf, that we all must resign ourselves to being permanent inhabitants of your planet.”

She was taken aback by the intensity of the woman's emotions, which she both saw *and* felt. Sefi's eyes were overflowing with water and the doctor hugged her tightly for a long while. The waves of grief which passed from one to the other were stronger than anything she had felt from these people before. She kindly chose to wait for the doctor to recover before talking again. "So there is nothing that your people can do? At all??"

"I'm afraid not Gelf. The crystal which you saw the first time is the last functioning one that we have and it's not likely to last more one cycle of your planet's orbit." At first the words didn't make sense, but then she got a mental image that clarified things. "Once our crystal is depleted, all of our technology will be as useless as, as a scrap of wood."

"Oh Sefi. I'm so sorry for your people." She held her friend out at arm's length and showed an intense expression. "Sefi, I promise that I will use whatever influence I have with chief Journgad to help all of you."

Instantly, the woman's eyes opened wide. "What? No! Gelf, you can't! Remember, your people absolutely cannot know about us, or our predicament. I have to know that we can continue to trust you to keep your promise."

"But-"

"Gelf, this is about more than our own comfort. The risk of contamination is far too great. Please realize that we, every one of us, took an oath before leaving Earth that we would avoid influencing other cultures no matter what, even if it costs us our very lives. I only helped your people with the sickness because it was the consequence of *our own actions*. And you can see how that simple decision blossomed into this enormous catastrophe."

She was filled with a renewed sense of awe for these strange creatures who were willing to endure so much for the sake of a culture that they didn't even fully understand. She wondered if any of her own people would be able to display such a profound selflessness as the hue-maans.

"Well, I hope you know that you at least have the unwavering support of myself and any discrete help I can provide as intermediary."

Sefi hugged her again. "Thank you Gelf. That means a lot to me." The emotions of grief and pain still permeated Sefi's thoughts, but then the woman looked at something on the wall and changed subjects. "Now I'm sorry to switch gears on you like this, but there are other matters that we must address also. We still have the matter of your ruler and the meeting which he requested. We would like to know if you want to return in the sararin, the big moving box that you rode in before, or do you want to return home on foot?"

At first she was ready to take the magic box. It would save much time and she wouldn't have to negotiate the great mud plain. But then an idea came to her.

"Sefi. You were concerned about how to return the other seekers without risking their safety since they don't remember how to get back. It seems obvious that *I* be the one to walk with them, and escort them to Xenlaria. Then you can have Ayube meet us when we return for the meeting with chief Journgad."

The moment she said it, she got the feeling of strong approval from Sefi.

"That's a great idea. This way your kinsfolk will wake up roughly where we found them, and the suspicious one will not be left to wonder how he ended up somewhere else."

Chapter 38

It was difficult for her to resist prodding the girl awake as she stared down at the beautiful woman. But Sefi had told her that each of them had to wake up on their own. Valtreen had been the first to wake, and he was sitting next to the brook occupied with his own thoughts. Another woman who she'd named Pritcet was sitting with the other sleeping people. But finally, she saw a finger move, and her lovely Truini opened her eyes.

“My love.”

“You're here.” The girl raised herself up and looked around. “How long-”

“Shh. Please take your time. You've been out for awhile.”

She sat up anyway and quickly looked at her arm. “Gelf, the skin is healed did you? No. It was 'them' wasn't it?”

The woman's intuition was more than a little disquieting. She was beginning to understand how the hue-maans felt now. “My love, yes. It was those people who healed you and all the others.

But I must ask that you not inquire too much. For there are many things that I cannot tell you.”

Now the woman stared at her long and hard. “Yes, I think I understand. Just do me one favor.”

“What's that love?”

“Kiss me before I have to grab you and do it myself.”

She conceded joyously and held the beautiful warrior girl in her arms for what felt like many annums. By the time they were able to disentangle themselves, the rest of the people were awake. So she invited them all to come together to save repeating the story.

“My friends and kinsfolk. I realize that you do not remember much of what happened. I'm sorry to say that much of this cannot be revealed. But what I can tell you is that the people who we were all sent to find are a kind group who care about our familyland. Nobody could have known that the barbarians would make slaves of you and the fact that they cured you of the sickness is, I hope, proof of that.”

“So these people left us there, on purpose?!” Valtreen had an angry look about him and she worried that he might turn the group against her if she didn't respond wisely.

“Valtreen. Please understand. These people care for us, but they are staunchly eremite. They have tools which could prove quite dangerous if not used carefully. Every one of them has sworn an oath to protect our people from the harm of their influence, with their lives if need be, and I trust them in that.” She felt the hint of doubt in the man and decided to push slightly more to help deflate his emotions. “I have become friends with their healer, and I experienced *firsthand* the strong emotions of pain and fear while their healer struggled to find a way to remove the sickness from Truini.” Remember, that the reason I myself became a healer is because I have the sense-readin to understand the emotions of others. I swear to you all, on the holy throne of Adeima, that these strangers would never intentionally cause us harm.

Sensing that she finally had her peoples' support again, she continued. “As the only one of us with smarati, it has fallen upon me to lead you all back to our homes and our families. Some of you I know, and can introduce, others I do not know. But I'm certain that each of you have somebody back in Xenlaria who misses you terribly. Truini, your sister is the Oracle at the holy

temple, and she asked me to hold the straight-eye for you. Meyrhut you are the cousin of chief Journgad who prays for your return. Valtreen I already related is the grandson of my grandmother's sister." She continued giving each of them whatever knowledge she had of their backgrounds and describing, generally, what the trip home would entail.

"Now each of you has a pack along with a drinking flask. It should provide us all with enough to get back to the village without hardship. So as soon as everyone is ready, please meet me down by the brook."

"Gelf? What are these?" A woman whose name she didn't know held up two wide shoes.

"Those are to aid us in crossing the great morass. They will spread your weight so that you do not sink too far down into the underfoot. Each of you should have a pair, be sure to keep them safe until we get past that place."

It was only a short time then, before the entire group was assembled and they soon headed off towards the forest, leaving the looming mass of Higsthon behind. For the first day and a half, the journey was uneventful. She had the thrill of being with Truini again, and she had the companionship of her fellow kinsfolk to share the scenery and the trials of their walk.

One night while she was cuddling close to Truini, the girl shuddered for awhile and woke both of them up. The woman seemed upset, but it was hard to tell what could scare such a brave warrior.

"Gelf, I had the most disturbing dream. It, was really scary."

"I'm here for you my love. What was it that upset you?"

At first, it seemed that the woman didn't know how to start, but then she began to put a sentence together. "Well, it was all very strange. I was on some kind of flat surface, but not the underfoot. I was floating at about waist height. The wallsides around me weren't straight, but curved. It was like being on the inside of a hollow tree. Then I saw a person in the place looking down at me. Gelf they, they weren't denisovian. They had no knoborns, and they had peculiar growths... one in the middle of the face and one on each side of their head. The, person-" Suddenly Truini sat up and stared at her. "You know! You've seen these, these, um beings. You've seen them, but-" Her eyes opened wider now. "What is it that makes you scared?"

Now she was really horrified. How could Truini have seen the hue-maans when she had been asleep the whole time? Unless Sefi had told an un-true, Truini had never been awake around the hue-maans. What would happen if she found out more? Now she understood *exactly* what made the hue-maans so worried.

"Truini. I've seen them yes. But please, please I beg you to the last breath. Do not ask me more about them. There is enormous danger, more than you could possibly imagine, in finding out certain things. As I told you all before, we have to respect their strange eremite culture."

"Why Gelf. You're more scared than I was." Truini stroked her hand and gazed into her eyes.

"What could possibly be more frightening than these, strangely disfigured people?"

She was about to speak, but Truini put a finger over her mouth, as she had done long ago.

"No, don't tell me. You spoke of great danger and I will respect that." She paused for awhile in deep thought. "If these are the people who healed all of us, then as you said they must be a kind group."

She was almost crying with relief and kissed the beautiful girl on the forehead. "Thank you for understanding my love."

But the whole experience still left her feeling puzzled. How could Truini have seen what the hue-maans look like? How could Truini have been aware that she herself had seen the hue-maans?"

Chapter 39

When they reached the great brook, Gelf was grateful to have checked with the hue-maans beforehand. This time she knew which direction to travel in to reach the great tree that spanned most of the raging water. With her advice, Adewale had brought an additional log to bridge the gap that she had struggled with before. But even so there were some who were intimidated by the rushing water. Truini and Valtreen took the lead and helped the more cautious people to make it across the tree and through the thick tangle of branches.

After that the trip was uneventful. They all enjoyed a meal of djengourd each evening, and Ayube had somehow managed to create for each of them the same kind of water pack that Pelfren had provided to her a lifetime ago in the familyland.

It was another day further before Meyrhut saw the break in the trees marking the edge of the morass. "Gelf, I think that's the great plain ahead."

The woman was right, for within a timespan the group reached the huge plain of watery ground. She instructed them all on how to gather vines to secure the shoes and then everyone carefully traveled onto the soggy underfoot.

The going was slow, much as it had been for her in the beforetime, but at least now there was company and the beautiful voice of Tyrhut to break the monotony. His skill was found merely by accident as she shared with the group one of the holy psalms to Azealla and his perfect voice rose above the group. In the eerie silence of the plain, everyone else quickly hushed to hear him and as his confidence grew, so did the quality of his singing. By the time the psalm was ended, everyone stared spellbound at the wonderful performance.

The man radiated humility as he felt the gaze of the whole group. "I guess I was a singer, in the beforetime."

Chapter 40

It was the hot period on the second day that Valtreen commented about something peculiar on the horizon.

“Oh, I wouldn't get too excited. The eyes play funny tricks out here. I was so exhausted by the time of the third day that I was seeing trees constantly, and even when I finally did reach the solid underfoot I thought it was a trick until I finally climbed up onto it.”

The man looked downcast and she felt his disappointment. “Well, okay. If you say so Gelf.” But it turned out that the man had been right after all. Another few dozen footfalls later, nobody could deny that there was something ahead. It was too small to be a forest, so everyone assumed that it might be a small patch of solid ground, and there was much excitement at the possibility of resting their tired feet.

But as they got closer, her whole being filled with dread. It soon became obvious that it wasn't solid ground, it wasn't a place to rest either. It was a terrifying omen.

Chapter 41

There was no hiding the truth now from them. Obviously they all wanted to hurry to the thing and find out what it was. Only Truini sensed her dread and held back with her.

“Gelf, what is it? Is that thing up ahead dangerous?”

The look on her face must have said more than she could have expressed with words, because she saw Truini's eyes grow wide too. “My word. It has something to do with those deformed people-”

“Truini, it's not the thing itself that's dangerous. It's the knowledge of its existence that I fear. My love, once we reach that object ahead, there's no going back.”

“You mean,” her eyes fell to the underfoot. “We won't be able to see our relatives again?”

“I'm afraid that's very likely.”

“Hey Gelf. It's not solid ground at all. It's something much weirder. You've got to see this thing!” ‘Here we go’ she thought, slowly catching up to Valtreen. As she reached them, the whole group had formed a circle around it. There was no doubt now. It was one of the hue-maans' strange flying boxes. And as if she needed further proof, she saw the words ‘Saro-Wiwa’¹⁸ printed on the side. Sefi had told her that this vehicle was named after one of their great heroes.

“What is it?”

“I don't know. It looks kind of like a shelter, but it's too smooth.”

“What could create something like this?”

“Gelf, is this a gift from Adeima? Is there anything inside of it?”

She saw one of them reach out and her insides flipped. “Don't touch it!”

“Why Gelf? Is it dangerous?”

Her mind was spinning in circles faster than the river current. Could she salvage this, without revealing everything to them? “Whatever it is Meyrhut, we don't know what it could do. It's

18 Ken Saro-Wiwa was an activist killed for protesting against oil pollution of Nigerian farmland

safest to leave such a thing alone. I have been invited to speak with chief Journgad when we return. I will be sure to let him know that we have found something, unexplainable out here.”

“Well-”

“Gelf, is this why you tried to steer us away from this by suggesting it was a trick-o-see’n?”

Valtreen gave the strange object the straight-eye as if he could somehow understand it’s workings merely through the see’n.

“Please everyone, we don’t know if something like this could hurt us or not.”

“Gelf, I don’t understand why you want to keep us from such a thing as this. It must clearly be a creation of Dewos or Prijnak. Nothing in all the land could be made as smooth as this looks to be.”

“Valtreen, I beg of you. Please understand that there is terrible danger associated with such a discovery. You may...I mean I just don’t want you to be hurt.”

There was disappointment among many of the kinfolk, but finally a feeble ‘Okay Gelf’ was finally heard.

It took a lot of convincing and she was skirting the untrues very closely, but with resignation one and then a few more began walking on away from the sararin. Nevertheless, many faces continued to speak the quietwords behind as they trudged away along the mud plain.

“Anuli! Anuli do you hear? Please answer if you can hear this.”

“It speaks!”

First Valtreen, and then a few others quickly spun their heads at the sound. If she had the power of Adeima, she would have happily thrown a spear right into the breathing hole of whichever hue-maan was sending this magic voice.

“What language is that?”

“It must be Azealla, Gelf you told us about how Azealla created the whole underfoot and the forst.”

It seemed impossible now to keep her kinsfolk from learning the fulltrue. If she pushed them away now, the quietwords would be showering the village like huiltz-flies at sunset. And so, with sad resignation, she turned back to the magic box and looked for where the voice was coming from.

“Anuli, we know that you-”

“Whoever you are, you’ve made an enormous mistake.”

“Gelf?! Chineke mee, how did you steal the Saro-Wiwa?! You don’t know how to-”

“I didn’t steal it! By Prijnak’s spear, I’m just passing by where it landed and heard your voice, along with every single one of the seekers.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am absolutely telling the fulltrue.”

“Bura Uba!!”¹⁹ She didn’t know what the word meant, but the context was clear.

“How could you do such a thing?!” She shouted in her loudest voice. “You knew that we were returning to Xenlaria through the watery plain!”

19 [this has to be a very angry curse for emphasis]

But soon, her thoughts were interrupted by a strong sensation of reverence. Looking around she saw the eyes of every seeker riveted on her.

“She can speak to the gods! She must be a chosen of Azealla!”

“Is it true love? Are you a holy prophet, like in that story you told of Adeima?”

She looked back at Truini, and she was so angry she wanted to kick and beat on the sararin with everything she had. Only the sound of Sefi coming from the magic craft finally calmed her.

“Gelf? Gelf, are you there?”

“Oh Sefi. Oh it's all ruined!” She was sobbing uncontrollably now. “All of your hard work. They know. They're all right next to me and they've seen the sararin!” She beat her hand against the side of the magic box in frustration.

“Sefi, we were this close. I almost had them convinced to leave the sararin alone before Sodangi started talking.”

“Oh for the love of- I'll have that woman's head on a platter for this!” There was a short pause. “I don't suppose you could convince them this was— no I guess not if they can hear you talking to me.”

“I can't believe it. We must have the worst timing in the entire damn universe.”

“Sefi” she fought like Prijnak for the faintest scrap of hope. “could you do that thing that closes their smarati again?”

There was a timepause now before the hue-maan answered. “Gelf, that's easier said than done. Please understand that I only came here expecting to give healing to humans. We know almost nothing about how your memories work. Frankly, I'm amazed that it worked the first time. You must realize that it's enormously dangerous to try it more than once, at least on our own people. It would be immoral to risk the lives of your kinsfolk, even for something this important.”

“Then what do I do Sefi? What do I tell them?”

“Well-” there was a long pause. “I guess for now you'll have to do the best that you can. Only Ayube has managed to speak your language with any proficiency. I'm going straight to Umquo and we'll have an answer for you just as soon as we can. I promise that we won't abandon you. Just, please stay within hearing of the Saro-Wiwa so we can contact you.”

“Um. Okay Sefi. But I still don't know what I can say to them.”

“I have faith in you my friend. I'm sure that you'll do fine.”

She turned back to the group and saw every face staring at her open-mouthed. Not a single person in the group lacked some kind of fear or veneration among them. Only Truini seemed willing to even come within arm's length now. The warrior used a lightly trembling hand to brush delicately on her shoulder.

“I heard the magic voice call you by name. Whatever it is my love, we'll work it out. I trust you.” Just having the support of her warrior gave her a new strength that hadn't felt before. She gave Truini a long embrace before turning to the group.

“My kinsfolk. I have not told you any untrue. The magic box here is created by the ones who healed you. They are a very strange people. But they are not gods, but there is great danger. They wish to help us, but they also possess knowledge which can cause harm. The person that I spoke to is still back at these people's camp on Mount Higsthon-” She was interrupted by a sharp gasp

which permeated the group. Let me say it again. This is NOT magic. It is simply a, very powerful tool. Like, like Truini here using the spears to defeat the barbarians who enslaved you. Can you imagine if those barbarians were to find out how to do such a thing?" As soon as she saw a few nodding heads, she knew that her speech was going well.

One of the men now found the courage to speak. "But Gelf, why is it that they chose to speak with *you* while the rest of us were left with the barbarians?"

"As I said when everybody woke up. The enslavement by the barbarians was a terrible mistake. The hue-maan people feel horribly guilty about what happened and it was part of the reason that all of us were healed of the sickness. As for why they speak with me, well- I think it has something to do with the strange sense-reading that I have. It caused me to have to live outside of our village because the distraction of so many emotions is difficult for me. But with these outsiders I was able to sense more than just simple emotions. I was able to see some of their own memories."

"But, only a God would be able to do that." Several others began nodding their head in agreement.

"Look!" In frustration she grabbed Truini's dagger and slashed the top of her hand, Blue vital-fluid started oozing out and dripping down her arm. She then she held up her hand in the air for them to see. "If I were a god of some sort, I couldn't get hurt right? But I *can*. That means I'm just a simple denisovian, just like the rest of you."

"Well, if you spoke to them, what do these people want?"

Still wincing from the cut on her hand, she did her best to stay focused. "That, is a long story which I think should wait until I hear back from Sefi. She's my friend. She's the, the healer for their people."

"But what about-"

"Gelf, are you there?"

'Saved by the sararin.' She thought, as the voice of Umquo floated over to them from the magic craft. She hurried over to the side of the craft. "Yes professor. I hear you."

"Gelf, I'm sending Ayube out there. He's going to travel the rest of the way with you and then you both can meet with your leader. Please be sure keep all of your kinsfolk on one side of the sararin. We'll use that to shield them from seeing his 'magical' appearance. We don't want to make a bad situation worse."

"Alright professor. Thank you so much for helping us."

"Well, it's the least I can do after that royal screwup. Chineke mee."²⁰

She giggled to herself, thinking that if the rest of them could understand the language, it would sure convince them that the hue-maans were as fallible as anyone else.

"What's so funny love? Can you actually laugh in the presence of such magic?"

So, to help dispel their reverence, she told them of the huge mistake that one of the hue-maans made.

"But how can gods really make mistakes? Aren't they infallible?"

20 [since I portray the humans as atheist, it would help to have more words/curses for emphasis that don't invoke god]

“Meyrhut, as I said. They are not gods and they are not perfect. They live, they do some good things, they make mistakes, and they die. The only thing that's different is their tools.”

She was gratefully interrupted by the sound of the hue-maan Ayube coming from behind her.

“Good people. I am deeply sorry for the upset that our sararin has caused for you.”

Now the gasps were more pronounced among everyone. “Are you one of them?”

“Did Prijnak order you to punish us?”

“We ask forgiveness, please.”

As she turned around she smiled at the talent of these hue-maans. Ayube stood at his normal height, but his disguise was brilliant and he looked for all the world like a simple denisovian child.

Ayube held his hands up in the air making the peace sign. “Good people. I ask only that you listen to what I have to say. It is true that I am one of the people that Gelf told you about. We are called human and for the moment we dwell on mount Higsthon. We are there because one of our tools broke. It is true that we have some amazing tools, like this sararin. But it is also true that these tools break sometimes, as this one has. We wish no harm to any of you, we only wish to minimize the damage caused by the events that have happened so far.

“But, how did this magic box get here.”

“The 'how' is a very long explanation that we may someday share with you. The more important question for me, is the who and the why.”

“Ayube the person, I think it was Sodangi, was asking for Anuli.”

“Yes Gelf. We think that Anuli took the sararin out here. What we don't know however, is WHY.”

“But, if you are Gods, then how can you not already know the answer.”

“The reason is because we are NOT gods.” With ironic timing, the man used a tool to slice into his own arm. At first she wasn't surprised given that she'd done exactly the same thing. But the amazing thing was that the hue-maan's vital-fluid was *red*. They even had a different color of fluid running through them.

“Good people. Even though the color of my-”

Gelf sensed confusion from him, so she offered to help. “Ayube, we call it vital-fluid.”

The man smiled warmly. “Thank you Gelf.” He continued in a stronger voice. “Even though my vital-fluid is a different color, we bleed just the same.”

But as she watched, it seemed that the demonstration was less effective than her own had been.

There was quiet speak floating all throughout the group.

“The vital-fluid is so different.”

“What does it mean?”

“Where could they be from.”

Unlike Ayube, she could sense the reaction of her kinsfolk, and it was not particularly kind.

There was confusion yes, but also mistrust, fear, even anger from a few. Clearly something had to be done. But what should she say? It had seemed best to leave the diplomacy to the hue-maan. But her sense-readin clearly gave her an advantage. For a time she fumbled over the right words, but with the heightened feelings, she would just have to struggle through as well as possible.

“My kinsfolk, please let me speak for a moment. I realize that all of this is difficult for you to accept. You can ask Ayube here, it was just as difficult for me when I first met these strange people. The hue-maans *are* different from us, but they very much care for our wellbeing-”

“If you care for our wellbeing, then why did you leave us to get sick? Why were we made helpless, like fragile wingsqerls before those barbarians?”

Not knowing the person's name, she had to adlib. “My friend, please understand that Ayube and his people did everything that they could to make up for-”

“They did?! So were *they* the ones who rescued us? NO! It was Truini, the powerful warrior, and Gelf who helped us to be freed from the barbarians. These *hue-maans*, didn't lift a single one of their magic tools to help.”

Now she was getting worried, everything was spiraling out of control and nothing she said seemed to be helping. “Please, *please*. The hue-maans *couldn't* use the magic tools to help us. They have a very important promise. Think about it. If all of *you* thought that they were gods, what would happen if the barbarians had seen their magic? They would have started worshipping the hue-maans too. Maybe they would have attacked our village to force us to follow their worship.”

“What? That's ridiculous! We don't force anyone to-”

“But it happened! It happened to the ancestors of these hue-maans. In the far back beforetime. Believe me, I saw the mind-pictures from them. They cannot lie to me.”

“Your friend Gelf is right. There is a very important reason that we try to shield your people from the magic tools. We have seen many cultures badly harmed or even destroyed by meeting people with smarter tools.”

Now Valtreen found his courage. Despite the fear that everyone felt towards the hue-maans, he walked straight up to Ayube and gave him the straight-eye. “You hue-maan. If you want us to trust you. Then tell us where you come from. Are you really from an island in the western ocean?”

“Valtreen, right?” The man nodded. “We understand from Gelf that your worship of Adeima involves, among other things a strict edict to avoid the untrue whenever possible. We wish to respect that custom, as our culture feels the same way. But please understand that there are some things that would be dangerous to reveal at this time.”

“Dangerous? How could just knowing where you come from be dangerous?”

“Oh my friends. Please don't ask this.” She used the most pleading tone that she could, praying that she could be successful in stemming the peoples' curiosity. “The knowing is incredibly scary.”

“Gelf my love. You know, don't you?”

Now the same awe was coming from Truini, and something else. Almost like, jealousy. She quickly grabbed the woman and held her close, for it gave her strength and she hoped it would quell the unhappy feelings that she was starting to sense. “I, I do know Truini. And even now, even thinking about it among all of you,” she paused to take a deep breath. “It terrifies me down to the center of my being. My friends, there are some questions, that are just better left unanswered. Even the prophecy of the Oracle warned of such things.”

“Then what is going to happen to us? If the whole point of the forgetting was to keep us from bringing the knowing of your magic back to the village, what will happen now?”

Ayube walked over and put his arm on the taller woman's shoulder. “That, Meyrhut, is up to you” He paused and looked around “that will be up to all of you. Before I left, the other people at our, um, camp had a very difficult discussion. We want to help you, and of course you will need a place to be whether in Xenlaria or somewhere else. But above all, the rest of your people must not learn about our magic tools. So each of you must decide for yourselves. If you feel strongly about returning to Xenlaria, then we can try again to bring the forgetting to you. Our doctor, our healer is a very smart woman. But she knows mainly how to help us humans only. She knows very little about your own people. What we are like, inside, is different. Like the color of our vital-fluid. If you are willing to volunteer, then you will do so knowing that we are not gods, and that our doctor has made mistakes. The healing might not work, or you might be harmed in the process.

“And what if we don't want to risk all that?”

“Then I'm afraid, you will have to stay with us and you will not be able to see your village or your people again.”

“Never?”

“We'd have to stay with them?”

Now Truini faced Ayube with a strong and hostile stare. “What makes you think that you have so much power over us hue-maan? Even with all your magic tools? You are only one person and we are thirteen strong denisovians. What if we simply push you aside and head back to the village on our own?”

“No. Truini please!”

Thankfully, despite the aggression of the warrior, Ayube kept his calm. “Truini. We hope to help you in a peaceful manner. But if you force us, we can use more powerful tools. You might remember when you suddenly fell asleep on the rock face after speaking with Gelf.”

Now he clearly had her attention. “That was you?!”

“Yes. We also gave Gelf the use of the same tool to make the rest of you fall asleep in the barbarian village. I assure you that it was only to keep you from seeing some, very disturbing things.”

“So what you're saying, is that you hue-maans are no different from the barbarians. You give us a choice between being your slaves or being crippled by the forgetfulness again.”

“Meyrhut. Please understand that we would never make your people into slaves. If you choose to stay with us, you would eventually be given complete freedom. Any restriction we put is only for your own protection from, from the shock of being exposed to things like the magic voice you heard earlier.”

“I see.”

Finally, *Finally* she was starting to sense a feeling of grudging acceptance among at least some of the group. She did what she could to build on it. “My friends, I have been to the hue-maans camp and they are very kind. They did everything that they could to make me feel comfortable. At times it's scary, but not because of what they *are*, just because everything is so, so very

strange. I assure you that your safety and peace of mind will always be the highest priority, no matter which choice you make.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw a nod from Ayube and a feeling of— admiration. That was almost as shocking as the magic voice had been. That these advanced people would feel such an emotion for her was more than she could've ever expected.

“Well, how long do we have to decide?”

“Yes, and would we all have to agree on the same choice?”

Now she saw Ayube looking at her. She sensed that he wanted her to answer this. But how could she? What did she know that the hue-maans didn't?

“I'll let your friend Gelf answer this.”

'Oh great.' She thought. Now the whole thing is in my lap. Why would he put her on the spot like this? It seemed horribly unkind and she threw him a dirty look to emphasize how she felt. But there was nothing to it now. She couldn't leave her kinsfolk waiting. “My friends. We would like you to have as much time as we can allow to let you decide. But it will be necessary for you to choose before we get too close to the kinsfolk. Why don't we give you until the end of the morass and then you can let Ayube know what you would like to do. I will do everything that I can to ensure that whichever choice you individually make is honored and respected.”

This finally seemed to satisfy her kinsfolk and the waves of relief washed over her. Maybe the worst was done at long last. The sense-readin she got from Ayube certainly felt good. He was thinking that she showed great promise and skill. But it didn't seem like that at all to her. She felt like she'd barely muddled through without falling on her face.

It was only a few blinks of the eye though, before she was distracted by the hand delicately caressing her back. “Well my love, wherever we end up, I want you to be with me.”

Their embrace was deep and offered a joyous, if temporary, distraction from the whole great mess. She didn't think there was need for more words, and so she offered none. When they finally pulled apart, she spied Ayube watching out of the corner of his eye and sensed that he wanted to move on.

“Alright Ayube, shows over.”

The way his face turned red was quite funny to her, but he was right, they couldn't delay too long. Journgad was waiting.

Chapter 42

She summoned the group to resume their trip and and whispered to Truini that she wanted to speak to the hue-maan alone. The lovely warrior drifted ahead while she slowed down to join the back of the group as everyone got moving and she gave a solid punch to the man's arm.

“Ow! Hey.”

“Why did you do that to me?”

“What do you mean? And may I remind you that you're people outweigh us by about 50 kilos.”

She ignored the hue-maan's protest. “How could you just leave me hanging there? I thought the professor sent you in order to *help* me?”

“He did, and I did. You were absolutely wonderful Gelf.” He grimaced and rubbed his arm.

“Wonderfully?? You just left me to answer their questions at the end. Why would you just leave me to deal with the whole group alone?”

The man became serious, though his mind was still distracted by the pain in his arm. “Gelf, you may not recognize this because you can't see the situation from outside yourself. But you really are developing wonderful leadership skills. Your performance today in helping to calm your kinsfolk was nothing short of exemplary.”

Now her sense from the man helped her understand the admiration she had sensed earlier. It wasn't just because she had stood her ground, but she had shown real kindness and diplomacy in de-escalating a contentious situation. He was beginning to feel that she could be taught how to do the same thing with the hue-maans.

“Really Ayube? You think that I could actually lead a group of *your* people? But I don't know anything about how your magic works.”

“Look, I didn't say- Ewoo!²¹ I forgot how you can just pull the answers right outa my head. Yeee Gelf, what are we going to do with you.”

“You are changing the subject Ayube. Please answer me.” Her patience with the hue-maan was starting to wear thin.

“All right, all right. Just don't punch me again. Listen, I may not have the mind-reading ability that you have, but I'm getting the sense that we're going to have to find a place for these friends of yours. Even if they volunteer to let doctor Ikpeba try surgery again, there's no guarantee it would work. What I'm saying is, they're going to need somebody to guide them. You speak their language as well as ours. You've lived in both worlds. You may not understand our, 'magic,' but you've at least had time to become familiar with some of it-”

“Like the far-talking thing.”

“Yes. So you see, I gave you the stage to see if you had the skills that would be needed to act as intermediary between your people and ours.”

“Oh. Oh I see.” She saw more even then that. She got a mind-picture from the hue-maan of her being given responsibility like the professor had. This of course was absolutely impossible, and she would refuse if they tried to give it to her. But she knew how uncomfortable the hue-maans were with her sense-readin, so she decided to wait until Ayube's people brought it up. Instead she excused herself and joined Truini again.

The two of them walked hand in hand for most of the day in peaceful reflection. It wasn't that they didn't have volumes to talk about, but for herself, she just wanted to relish this time with the most beautiful woman in all the land.

As exhausting and monotonous as the trip was heading out, now on their return, with the warrior girl beside her it was almost joyous. They held hands loosely while plodding along through the thick morass with her ‘muscles’ as the hue-maans called them burning like fire within.

There were many complaints in fact, and the desire for rest was repeated on frequent occasions, with her continuously repeated advice against stopping for too long. It was only the superior design of the hue-maan boat shoes made the trip manageable at all for many of them. Gelf realized that while she herself had been able to find the strength to cross it, the others who were

21 Equivalent to ‘damn’ [I’m open to a better option]

still weak from their unhealth were experiencing a strain similar to what she endured with her own crude prototypes.

Farther along on the Saülé's path, she noticed another seeker veer closer and look over discretely. She could sense the curiosity, but also the nervousness. So she took control in order to help the man save face. "I am your kinsfolk, please feel free to ask me anything."

"Well, Gelf. I was wondering, do you know what *you* are going to do after this?"

That gave her pause. Aside from Fronin, there really wasn't much *for* her in Xenlaria. The people were uncomfortable with her sense-readin and as a result, she didn't spend much time among the kinsfolk. But then she wondered what would happen to Journgad. He had alluded to the desire to have her among his circle of advisers. This would unquestioningly bring her stature. But did she want that? So much had changed now, that the thought of being merely a footnote within Journgad's inner-circle didn't feel like it was fulfilling enough for her anymore.

"Honestly, I'm not sure. Ayube has mentioned to me that the hue-maans would like to benefit from my company since I can help to be a bridge between our two people. The chief of Xenlaria has hinted that I may provide useful council to him as well. I think that if I had to choose right now though, I would prefer to be with Ayube and Sefi. The hue-maans have always treated me with great kindness and respect."

"But then, what about the chief, and our people? Would you not be missed?"

"Well, sure. By some mayhaps. But my sense-readin always kept me apart from the villagers."

The man looked even more pensive now. "The problem for us is" he paused to choose his words "we don't *have* any memories of the village. We don't know if there are people waiting for us, people who miss us. We don't know if there is some unique skill that we have that the villagers would depend on."

She put a hand lightly on the man's shoulder to express empathy. "I'm so sorry my friend. There's no way that any of us can understand what it's like for you to have no smarati of the beforetime at all. I promise you, that we, Ayube and I, will do everything that we can to fill in the blanks for all of you as much as we are able."

The man looked at her and she sensed not just gratitude, but a respect as well. "Thank you Gelf. I do trust your sincerity."

Chapter 43

"Ayube."

He turned to look at the man. It took a minute to remember the name, but he was glad when he remembered and was able to show respect to the denisovian. "Yes Valtreen. How can I be of help?"

"Ayube it is not your help that I request, but your forgiveness."

Ayube instinctively raised a now invisible eyebrow at this. He couldn't imagine what the denisovian man would need to ask forgiveness for.

"Ayube, when I spoke with Gelf in the village of the barbarians, I spoke of your people with harsh disdain. I told her that I protested greatly against your isolation. It was because, well I

thought that you looked down on us and didn't think us worthy of giving us the straight-eye. I didn't believe Gelf that it was simply for our own protection. But seeing this magic of yours, well it makes a little more sense now.”

He was quite taken aback by the admission. “Why thank you Valtreen. That's very big of you to admit.”

“But I have another question, if I may.”

Ayube urged the man to continue.

“Gelf told me that your people looked strange, even shockingly so. But, well you look perfectly normal to me. Typical knobhorns, pleasant skin, quite a bit shorter is all. I know that Gelf would not tell an untrue if it could be avoided, so what is missing?”

He slowed and faced the denisovian directly. After a quick check to see that nobody else was nearby he continued in a quieter voice. “Valtreen, whether you choose to stay with us or whether you elect to let our doctor try the memory wipe again there is no harm either way in telling you. Our appearance is in fact very different. I am currently in disguise to reduce the trauma of my appearance among you. When I met with your chief we even tried to use a tool that made me look taller, but it was too difficult for me. If you choose to stay with us, then it is likely you will come to see my people in our normal state as Gelf has done.”

The man was silent for a time and he could almost hear the gears spinning in the man's brain. But the man surprised him by changing the subject slightly.

“I see. And how is it now, that Gelf has been allowed to see you in your natural state while the rest of us are not?”

This seemed innocuous enough, and so he related the tale of how Adewale had stumbled on his pack and fallen into the crevasse. “It was a simple accident which none of us could have predicted. So you see, my people can make mistakes and get hurt just as easily as any of you.” Now he chose a more somber expression. “But when we do, as you yourself have seen, the consequences are much more severe. The same was the case when you heard Sodangi's voice coming from the magic box yesterday. This is why we keep our distance, even the smallest mistake can have very large consequences for your people.”

Chapter 44

By the time the group reached the solid underfoot, everyone collapsed to the ground gratefully. The trip had been exhausting for all of them, not least was Ayube, who's weaker limbs struggled to keep up with the group. He staggered and collapsed with a grateful 'Oomph.'

“Gelf, I'm just amazed at how your people can do so much in this horrid gravity. I don't honestly know how well our people will do if we can't keep our tools working to give us aid.”

Because Truini was with her, he'd spoken cryptically. But from the mind-pictures she got, it was more than that. The man was genuinely terrified of what would happen if they couldn't recover the power tool from the temple. This brought her mind back to the strange mind-picture she'd gotten from Anuli, then she thought of the abandoned sararin. Instantly a terrifying picture presented itself.

“By the blessed Azealla! Ayube! I need you to come with me, *now!*”

“Oh for godsake, Gelf. Can't you let a man rest for a min-”

She didn't let him finish. She reached over and dragged him up by the shoulder. Looking back she asked Truini to keep an eye on the group for awhile. Then she half pulled, half carried the hue-maan away from where anyone else would hear.

“Geez, Gelf. Go easy on me. Look, I'm sorry if I-”

“By Prijnak's spear Ayube. Please be silent for a moment.” She spoke harshly, but still in a low tone. Finally she let him down and they both sat on the underfoot while she took a moment to collect herself. “Ayube, do you remember how we ran into Anuli once and she didn't want me to be near her? She was bothered by my sense-readin?”

“Yes, I hear she had the same reaction when her sararin went down.”

“And now the Sararin is again in the morass and Anuli is missing.”

“And you think there's a connection.”

“Ayube. I didn't think it was appropriate before, to share with you the mind-picture that I saw from her. Your thoughts should be your own, and I don't want to cause the ‘vy-olay-shun.’ But, things being what they are, well. You should know that the mind-picture that I saw from Anuli was of a bunch of you hue-maans sitting in a cave around a wood fire. Everyone was wearing torn up clothes and there was no food. Much like-”

“Like what I was thinking about just a few minutes ago. And now she's missing and we had a second unauthorized sararin launch.”

She didn't know know all the words they used for their camp, so it helped for her to let him fill in the blanks. “Yes, exactly.”

“Just a minute. Let me contact Umquo.”

But she grabbed his arm. This time being more gentle. “Ayube, we don't have time! Do you realize how much farther ahead she might be?!”

“Shàngbá ò,²² you're right. Okay. We have to secure your kinsfolk and haul ass to the temple.”

The man's speech was confusing, but she got the gist. She leapt to her feet and ran over to Truini.

“My love, I must leave you all on some urgent business.”

“I understand dear. Go, hurry.”

This she hadn't expected. “You do??”

“Well, not all of it. But there's something very important that you must take care of. Hurry and do what you must. I'll watch our kinsfolk and make sure that nobody goes into the village.”

“I love you.”

“And I, you.”

Now that it was finally spoken, she felt even more grateful for this perfect warrior-lady who was a true gift from Adeima. It took another brief timespan further before she could switch subjects in her mind back to the urgent business with the renegade hue-maan.

Akwukwu Biyar book five
chapter 45

22 [as before I'm looking for a term of excitement that does not invoke god]

Given the urgency, she merely slung Ayube unceremoniously over her shoulder and raced to the temple as fast as her legs would carry her. It was most of the day and she was down to the very final threads of her strength when she finally set the hue-maan down at the steps to the great temple. Slowly now, both from reverence and from exhaustion, they made their way into the solemn chamber.

What she saw in that place, would be seared into her mind for all of eternity. Even the magic of the hue-maans paled in comparison to her experience that day.

The whole temple was illuminated by a ghostly light, as if there were fires in every corner, but the light was steady like it was in the hue-maan's camp. The great statues each had a glowing auburn crown, but beneath that, the whole body of each glowed as well with a teal hue. It was as if the statues had become living representations of the hallowed ones.

The Oracle sat in her usual spot before the holy flame, but there was another hue-maan behind her and that woman was standing perfectly still with her arms outstretched. But even more strangely, the moment she stepped into the space, she felt herself similarly frozen. None of her limbs would respond to her commands and she could not reach Ayube or the stranger. It was almost like the feeling when she had woken up after being near the dark crystal.

She didn't have to look over at Ayube to see that the hue-maans' magic was not at work here, and that he too was frozen. She began to feel the fraidness building up to a crescendo within her as she tried to look around and see what was crippling her. But just as it felt like the fraidness would overwhelm and destroy her, she sensed it ebb slowly away, without any effort on her part.

Suddenly all of them were sitting on the floor in a cave. There was a small wooden fire surrounded by stones, and the walls glowed faintly in the flickering light. A small group of hue-maans were sitting around the fire wearing rags and covered in dirt.

"Why do you exist here?" She didn't know where the voice came from. It wasn't Ayube's voice or the Oracle, but it seemed to be coming from all around them at once. For a timespan, none of them could respond. The whole situation was so strange, so bizarre that words or even conscious thought could do no justice.

"Why do you bring me here?! I don't want to be here."

"But you exist here."

"What do you mean 'I exist here?' I'm trying to STOP this from happening."

"You believe that you can prevent what is already in motion?"

"I don't understand."

None of the voices were familiar to her and she was certain that neither one was Ayube. But finally she found herself able to form words, although it didn't feel like she was using her mouth to do so.

"Where are we?"

"The hue-maan quickly looked over at her, as if she had believed herself to be the only person in all the land. Not surprisingly, she saw that it was Anuli.

"Gelf, the native? How did you get here?"

"We were looking for you. Ayube and I thought that you might be trying to steal back the crystal."

"I was. But then I found myself here."

“Is-” She was almost too afraid to ask the question. “-Is this the after-time?”

“It is the after-time. It is the beforetime, it is the present-time.”

“What?! That doesn't make any sense.” She couldn't tell where the voice came from. The thought was hers, but she was certain that her mouth hadn't moved. As before, the sound seemed to come from all around.

“Are we... dead?”

“You are dead, you are alive, you are not yet born. All are true.”

“Wait a minute.” Ayube now looked around, as if searching for a presence to address. “Are you corporeal?”

“Corporeal, linear. Not linear. Not as your species is.”

“But why is it that you are here.” The man left a pregnant pause, “*Why are we here with you in this place?*”

“The choice to be here is not of our making. It is *you* who decide to exist here.”

Looking around, she couldn't imagine what would make anyone want to exist in a barren cave such as it was.

“But *I don't want* to exist here. This is, painful for me.”

“If it is painful, then why do you choose this?”

Having seen the mind-picture, she believed that she finally understood. “I've got it! Anuli, when they say you exist in the cave, they mean that your mind goes there a lot. It-” she struggled with the hue-maan's language “-dominates your thoughts. She wasn't sure that Anuli fully grasped what she meant, so she clarified further by describing also the picture that she got from Ayube. “Just like Ayube thinks about the blue plan-it because you miss it a lot.”

The scene changed to the inside of a small room. The window outside showed the large ball that Gelf had seen in the mind-picture. But as with the cave, this felt much more real. She could feel the coolness of the 'window,' and she could look through to see the blue plan-it floating above them.

“The healer sees the unknowable.”

She was immediately slammed with a denisovian-sized boulder. Those were the same words that the Oracle had spoken to her all those days ago.

“You are the voice behind the holy Oracle! You must be Adeima! Praise be to your holy presence!”

“Adeima. That is the god you worship. It is the belief of your people?”

“But you are the voice of the Oracle. You are the source for the holy prophecy. You must be the ruler of all!”

“What is 'ruler of all?'”

It was too much for her to even contemplate the idea that she was addressing the supreme Mother of all creation. If she was still within her body, she was sure that it would be trembling uncontrollably now.

“But if you are not the holy Adeima, then wh- what are you?”

“‘What’ infers linearity, physicality.”

“What on earth does she mean, that you’re the god to these primitives?”

“God, primitive, these are relative terms. When Gelf first encountered your people, she thought that *you* were gods. She later came to learn that you are not. By the same token, you might see beings with advanced ability and think of it as superior.”

“So are you aliens like us?”

“Aliens? What is this?”

“Olúwa ò! Are you people *from* this planet or aren’t you?”

“Neither from, nor destined to one place. This realm is sufficient for communication in your present experience.”

“Alright” Ayube cut in briefly. “But can you share with us *why* we are all here together, now?”

“As with your people, existing in this place allows for greater understanding, and in some small way to repair damage.”

“Damage? What damage?” She saw Ayube’s puzzled look.

“The cause cannot be revealed.”

“Because it is dangerous? Like the magic tools of the hue-maans?”

“The healer is wise beyond her days.”

“So do you have the same limitation that we do in keeping certain technology hidden?”

“Limitation. What is this?”

Gelf could not experience the sense-readin from Ayube in this place, but his tone belied his frustration just as clearly.

“What I mean is-” The hue-maan was clearly struggling to be patient. “-you are not allowed to interfere in the culture of less developed societies?”

“You refer to your oath to not influence the denisovians. Not the same, but, a practical analogy. Interference would disrupt the harmonious development of this plane. Sometimes guidance is necessary to prevent greater tragedy.”

“But if you are the great Adeima, what errors could possibly be made?” She was confused as to how any being so powerful could be less than perfect.

“You have come to accept the humans as imperfect. It would be more practical for you to accept that all beings are in some way fallible.”

“So are you saying that you unduly affected these people in their own ‘beforetime?’”

“Yea. Like, did you just casually discard something that these primitives started a whole religion around?”

“This is beyond what is necessary to reveal.”

“Well as you seem to have abilities far beyond our own, I wonder why you have chosen to interact with us here.” She still felt bothered by the lack of reverence that Ayube showed to the beings. But she could do nothing about this for the moment.”

“To avoid great tragedy, wisdom must be shared.” Instantly all of them were back in the cave with the fire. “Why is it, that this place would make you want to remove the conduit of wisdom without permission?”

“Why?? Because we don't want to have to live like this! That's why. Our people crawled up through *ten thousand years* of starvation and bloodshed to finally reach a point where we weren't struggling every day just to survive. I'm pretty damn sure that none of us want to go back to that. *I* sure as hell don't.”

For a moment she was stunned. The hue-maan had said that their people existed for ten *thousand* annums?! The concept was impossible for her to wrap her head around. The entire oral history of her people barely stretched back more than three generations, there was little known about anything in the further beforetime. It explained a lot about how the hue-maans could hold such advanced magic. They'd had so much more time to develop their tools. The distraction held her attention for a long timespan, but finally she began to notice something else. All conversation with Adeima had for the moment ceased. Strangely, as her attention returned to the hue-maans the conversation continued as if it had been held still while she was distracted.

“Intriguing. You claim to know what will happen in the future, yet you spend so much time in this place.”

“Perhaps I can help clarify.” Ayube's voice sounded more calm now, much as it had been when he was explaining the magic of his people to her. “We humans use our knowledge of the past to make hypotheses about the future. In Anuli's case, the very plausible fear that our loss of power will result in a starving existence comes from her knowledge of how our people lived before we developed a knowledge of science. Her fear is quite valid, though I am ashamed for her method of dealing with it.”

As soon as Ayube said this, she finally began to understand what made Anuli so full of the fraidness that the hue-maan would risk stealing the channel to the Gods. The hue-maan was desperately worried that all of her kinfolk would become like the barbarians if their magic was lost. The thought gave her the fraidness too. She didn't want the nice hue-maans (well mostly nice) to suffer any more than they themselves did.

“Your people make profound assumptions for a such a linear species. You claim knowledge of both the past and the future without real understanding of either one.”

“Are you saying that *you* understand our past better than we ourselves do? That's absurd. You've never even met us before.”

“Such a matter is trivial. Your evolution was quite spectacular, and before your advancement slowed, you showed great potential.”

“Look, our species may have made some mistakes in the past, but until now we've never encountered a species even slightly as advanced as humans are. And unless you can magically send us home, the most likely future we have on this planet is to live like primitive cavemen!”

“You are an interesting culture. Your people have come to view existence solely from the perspective of separate, individual forms.”

“Well, what else are we going to do?! We're the most advanced society on this planet. The only ones who can help us are millions of light-years away from here!”

On hearing this she would have joyously knocked Anuli to the underfoot for her hubris, but as it was, she still had no control over her limbs with which to do so.

“Ayube, would you share the meaning of ‘Ngumuntu’ please?”

The man spoke now with deeper respect and veneration. “Of course, it’s a famous Zulu expression that means ‘a person is a person [primarily] through other persons.’”

“Well of course. We all know about Ngumuntu. But that was written for *humans*. People who understand what we went through. Who understand the long struggle towards an advanced civilization.”

“You describe yourselves as 'advanced' and yet you speak of these native people as inferior. What gives you the belief that your culture is advanced? As you yourself admitted, your culture has only existed for ten-thousand of your planet's years.”

“*Only* ten-thousand years?! Don't you think that's enough? Our civilization advanced from banging on rocks to lifting spacecraft across the galaxy in that time! *I* sure as hell think that's a huge accomplishment, even if you don't.”

She expected Adeima to offer a critical retort to the rude and rebellious hue-maan. So when she heard her own name addressed, she was momentarily caught off-guard.

“Gelf, do your people have war?”

“What?” It took her a short time to consider the question. “Of course we don't. We don't even have a word for the thing that I saw in the mind-pictures of the hue-maans.”

“This shows the superiority of the Xenlarian tribe. Theirs is in fact a more peaceful society because of it. You humans believe that despite your wars, poverty, slavery, and inequality, that you represent an advancement over your predecessors.”

“Are we to assume then, that you believe our predecessors were living in some Garden of Eden back then?”

“Your analogy is most interesting. Would it be true to state that your culture in Lagos is unaware of the full story written about the Garden of Eden?”

Here Ayube’s voice answered for the other. “Well. There are researchers who have investigated the stories of the Christians, but that myth was too far back to have any relevance.”

“This would not be correct. The story provides a valuable window through which your species may explore your own history. Your story of the Garden of Eden was written as a response to the invasion of sustainable nomadic tribes by a single culture practicing totalitarian agriculture. The theme was that the emerging agricultural society was eradicating older tribal societies which had remained stable for hundreds of thousands of years. The idea that older cultures were 'primitive' or 'starving' was simply a myth created by the conquerors. There is a distinct shift in your species' history before this transition and after it. Before, there was no such thing as war, slavery, crime, insanity, or plague. However once gatherer societies were subjugated by this totalitarian agriculture, the suffering and disease followed soon thereafter. This pattern was repeated not only in the region where it originated but was spread like a sickness to ever continent on your planet.”²³

“So are you tryin to tell me that we have nothing to fear from being stuck in the stone age for the rest of our lives? That giving up technology will bring us to some kind of utopia?? Because that sure as hell isn't the way I see it.”

“These limitations invented become tangible creations to you in their own right.”

“Ya know, for 'superior beings,' you things have a lot to learn about making yourselves understood.”

“Be quiet hue-maan!!” She exclaimed it in a whisper, as if Adeima was not all-knowing and all-hearing.

“You refer to the experience of your people before your written history as a 'starving existence.' However you have no evidence to support this.”

“What do you mean, no evidence? If humans hadn't been spending all their time struggling to get enough calories, they would have left cultural artifacts. But there wasn't anything to be found until agriculture allowed us to have that one important thing, recreation.”

“In the same book which you referred to, there is a place which is described as 'the land of milk and honey.' What was this land like in your own time?”

There was a long silence in which Anuli seemed unable to offer a response. Finally though, Ayube gave his own answer. “I believe that the area you refer to is the near-East where Europe and Asia meet. But this area has been little more than a desert for thousands of years.”

“Yet your own historians spoke of it as a prosperous land.”

“Historians?!” Anuli made a strange sound like 'pfff' which was confusing to her, but she quickly caught on to the context as the hue-maan continued. “Those stories are just myths.”

“Very well, another example is needed. Are you familiar with the lion statues of Assyria?”

Here, Ayube confirmed that he knew of them.

“Given that an animal as large as a lion requires many prey animals for food, do you think that a lion could survive in the desert which currently exists there?”

“Well no of course. I guess that's kind of a mystery.”

“It was no mystery to the scholars of your planet before your great holocaust. The humans which existed before the rise of agriculture did not view themselves as superior to creation but as an integral part of it. They were nomadic and moved with their food supply. Many researches from your past discovered that surviving hunter-gatherer societies were among the best fed in the world. They worked much less in order to gather food and experienced less scarcity before agriculture took hold. Once agricultural societies conquered them, the concept of human superiority emerged. This caused humans of the region to select only for species which benefited yourselves and to eliminate many ecosystems in the process. The eradication of all life forms which didn't serve you, then caused a depletion of the landscape. This is why in a later part of your creation story, the son Cain, who was a tiller of the ground, did not earn the respect of 'God.' The

writers of these stories understood that the advancement of agrarian culture was wiping out the health of the land. Soon afterwards, class division, drought, war, and starvation were unavoidable.

“So are you saying that our modern society is inferior to the denisovians?”

“Superior inferior that is merely Nkali²⁴. Any culture which survives, does so because there is some innate value which it contributes to the greater whole.”

“How the hell can you say that and at the same time describe our culture as destructive? The way you put it, our culture did nothing but destroy stuff.

“You are familiar with the anti-gravity coil?”

“Well of course I am. That's my specialty on this mission.”

“If your sararin were fitted with a defective coil, would it remain aloft above the surface?”

“What? Of course not. It would never get off the ground.”

“What if the craft were launched from the peak of Mount Higsthon? Then would it would remain aloft.”

“Well sure, but wouldn't stay in the air for long. And what does that have to do with anything?”

“The agricultural societies which took hold on your world were much like a sararin with a defective anti-grav coil. They remained in the air briefly, but then they quickly collapsed, resulting in vast destruction. Göbekli, Mohenjodaro, Çatalhöyük, Uruk, and others were all soon destroyed.²⁵ They didn't have to remain viable for long however. They only needed enough time to wipe out the indigenous populations. Once the *cultural memory* was gone, your people knew of only one means of survival-- the technological one. It would surprise you then, to learn that the indigenous cultures spent less than a quarter of their waking time getting food and the rest was spent on recreation.”²⁶

“Look even if all this junk made sense, *which it doesn't*, I still don't see how this relates to **me**. We don't know anything about this planet or what we could make a fusion generator from. Or even how to survive!”

“If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk with others.”

“Dammit. Enough with the philosophy crap already-”

“Anuli. I believe that I understand what She, er, *they* are saying. The idea that the only help available is back on Earth is a belief that you've made up in your own minds. The enemy that is holding you back is your own fraidness.”

“Wisdom prevails.”

24 Nkali roughly translates as ‘hierarchy’ [would be great to find a term that more accurately describes arbitrary class divisions]

25 Based on Liverani M. (2013) “*The Ancient Near East: History, Society and Economy.*” Pg.21

26 Based in part on Narvaez et. al (2014) “*Ancestral Landscapes in Human Evolution*” Pg.200

“So are you tryin to tell me that we have nothing to fear from being stuck in the stone age for the rest of our lives? Because that sure as hell isn't the way I see it.”

“Seeking what is true is not seeking what is desirable.”²⁷

“For crying out loud, can't you just talk straight?”

“Anuli, for all of your hue-maan magic. If you do not learn to treat the the Holy Adeima with more respect, I will send you into the after-time. *Despite my vow.*”

“Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love; this is the eternal rule.”²⁸

Despite her fury with the hue-maan, she had to admit now that Anuli had a point. The conversation was quite challenging with all the obscure wordsongs. But unlike the hue-maans she accepted that the realm of the Gods could not be expected to be comprehensible by mere mortals.

“I humbly beg your forgiveness Adeima. I do not wish to be with the hatred. I love my people and I have fought valiantly to protect them, even at the risk of defying your own Holy edict.”

“Defiance is only so by your own perception.”

“Oh great Adeima. Please forgive my mortal ignorance. Your most hallowed wisdom is challenging for this humble servant.”

“Gelf, was any defiance on your part committed with the intent of causing harm?”

“What?! Of course not. Except perhaps for the barbarians, everything I have done has been with the hope of preventing the contamnayshun.”

“The humans have a wonderful expression from one of their far past scholars. ‘Your heart knows you, even if you don't yet know your heart.’²⁹

Your hue-maan companion will understand.” [~~This needs further work~~]

As with many of the experiences this day, the Holy Mother’s wordsong was beyond her mortal understanding. She looked across at Ayube, but saw no recognition in his eyes. Nevertheless, the hue-maan took the lead in their interaction, saving her the challenge of further questioning.

“Beings, I am very moved by this experience of relating to you. May I query why you do not contradict Anuli's assumption about our future. Is there some reason that we are not *permitted* to reclaim the energy crystal from here?”

“Your power source has been a necessary element in the repair of the culture here. Your attempts to remove the device could not be permitted.”

“So you would have prevented us from taking back the dark-energy crystal even if professor Umquo had authorized it?”

“The channel of wisdom remains protected.”

“Yes yes, but-” The woman's expression changed in a funny way and her mouth opened wide.

“Wait... are you saying that you were the cause of both sararin failures? For cryin out loud I could've been killed!”

“To avoid tragedy, prevention was necessary. There was no permanent damage.”

27 Albert Camus ‘*The Myth of Sisyphus*’

28 Attributed to The Buddha

29 Attributed to Luke Austen

“Oh sure- I didn't *die*. But I sure could have! You beings are... like monsters!”

“For a linear race, you assume to know a great deal about that which you cannot perceive.”

“What, so you're saying that you DID know the future?!”

“Future Past Present merely the constructs of a linear existence.”

“Alright, that's it. You two can keep arguing with this crazy ghost thing. I have absolutely nothing more to say to you, you fascists. Just let me outa here.”

She vowed to herself that in spite of her oath, she would knock some sense into the selfish hue-maan when she finally regained control of her limbs. But for now she could only use words in her dealings with the selfish being.

Chapter 46

“Oh great Adeima, may I query you why this crystal is necessary to receive your holy messages? How was it possible to recite your wisdom even in a place far removed from your holy temple, as I was able to?”

“Your temple is solely a creation of your own culture.”

The words did come from Adeima. But how could it be at all true? The experience here of speaking with the Holy Mother felt like something she was far from worthy of. “But our people created the temple out of reverence for *your* prophesy. How could I then witness the hue-maans ree-kord-ing of me speaking prophecy merely because of a tool that they invented.”

“Like the others, you *assume* knowledge which you cannot yourself know for certain.”

“Are you saying that the 'reekording' was not true?”

“All that you have seen is the fulltrue. But not all assumptions are accurate. Your belief that the introduction of the dark crystal to your two species is unrelated for example.”

“Wait, what?!” Gelf heard both Ayube and Anuli's voice speak as one.

“Are you saying that it was YOU who helped us acquire the dark-energy crystal drive in the very first place?”

“Oh come-on, that can't b-”

“A small interference was necessary for further advancement.”

“Otele mbgeke eeee!”³⁰

The particulars of the hue-maan's questions were beyond her, as was the strange outcry from Ayube, so she focused more on how their eyes could push so far out of their face without causing pain.

“I'm almost afraid to ask this, but-” There was no sense-readin necessary to grasp the utter astonishment from the hue-maans. “Were *you* responsible for the Nelson Mandela's loss of the crystal that started this whole thing off to begin with?”

“It was a necessary interference.”

30 Translates as amazement [open to one that strongly emphasizes amazement or aghast]

“Chi mooo!”³¹

“I can't believe you 'things' or whatever could be so cruel!” Anuli's face was now twisted into an angry grimace. “There were 213 *human beings* on that ship! How could you simply, throw them into the emptiness of space for what? Some kind of agenda?!”

“The beings which you refer to would only have survived one-third of the journey. Our only influence was merely to assist the vessel in reaching this system before the power crystal was lost.”

“Then, you're saying that our ancestors are not responsible for influencing the native culture here at all?”

The strange talk was confusing to her, but this felt so significant. She wanted, no *she needed*, to hear it in *her own terms* and with *her own head*.

“Do you mean, great Adeima, that you were responsible for the deliverance of the crystal to Xenlaria in the far beforetime?”

“Healer sees the unknowable.”

The implications of what she was hearing were more shocking than any smartknowin of the hue-maans, or chief Journgad, or even the Oracle Herself.

“Great Adeima, your glory is unmatched throughout existence.” The enormity of what they were saying shattered everything that she thought she knew about Adeima and the holy Gods.

“So, um, Adeima-”

It was not lost to her that Ayube *finally* referred to the Holy Mother by name.

“If it was always intended that our trip here would be a dead-end. Then why are we here in this temple?”

“The reasoning is incorrect.”

“Look, 'mystical being thing,' we're doing our best to figure this crap out. But if you wont give us a straight answer about why you allowed us to be trapped on this rock with them-” Anuli said the last with such disdain that she reinforced her resolve to attack the selfish hue-maan as soon as she was able. “Then what's the point of even keeping us in this temple-place?”

“Your attempt to remove the crystal proves that you view your own needs as separate from the needs of the native people.”

“Well of course! That's because they ARE.”

“‘All things, when seen and understood in their true relation, are not independent but interdependent with all other things.’³² The interconnectedness of your peoples has as much importance as the connection of your limbs to your body.”

“How in the world can you claim that we're connected to these primitives?”

“‘Differences are not intended to separate or to alienate. You are different precisely in order to realize your *need of one another*.’”³³

“Geezlewees! Can't you things just, talk normal-like?!”

31 A more mild type of surprise [I can't believe this]

32 Sogyal Rinpoche

33 Desmond Tutu

“It is only when you realize the need for one another, that the thing you believe is impossible becomes its opposite.”

Ayube was clearly the only one of them who was coming to understand the conversation, but that did little to dampen the emotion in his speech. “Adeima please listen. We can't simply stroll into some denisovian village and ask them to teach us how to survive on this planet! It goes against everything our-”

“The old learning ways of the new, will bring rescue.”

“Oh my! That's what the Oracle said to me. You-” She again struggled to form the words. “-you were providing me clues about this all along, weren't you. *That* was what I was in the temple for!”

“The healer is wise beyond her days.”

“I'm sorry great being. What does this have to do with our adjustment to a life without a power source?”

“Ayube, this was the prophesy from before! 'Old learning ways of the new' means your people learning our ways. That is what will bring rescue. Adeima was telling us about the future all along!”

“But that's, insane! Who the hell wants to live in a mud hut and eat tree bark or some such garbage?!”

“The alternative is to transition to the next existence.”

“Well, then I'd rather take my chances with some other existence then.”

“Then the consumption of nutrients will not be a concern.”

“Wait! The hell you're saying. You mean that the alternative to living like *them* (she almost spat the word) is to starve?!”

“Many options are available.”

“Adeima, er beings, I promise you that Anuli does not represent the norm for the people of our world. She had violated our most fundamental-”

“Nothing in the great fabric of the universe is without its proper place.”

She had the feeling now that this time, this present, was unmatched in all of the beforetime of her people. There were thousands of questions to ask. So many things to learn from the Holy One.

“Oh great Adeima. Was it always your intention-”

Before she could even finish, something clicked in her mind. The steady light was gone, the statues were back to their normal color, and she realized that she could now move her legs. As suddenly as it began, the profound experience was gone. Looking around, she saw the hue-maans as well testing their bodies as if they couldn't believe that they were actually in control again. She spent a long time struggling to come to terms with the enormity of what had just happened. She felt as she had when she first woke up after looking at the dark crystal. Her gaze leapt randomly from the holy temple, to the alter, and finally to the two hue-maans. And like them, she required a timespan to process all that she was remembering from the experience.

But it was the rebel hue-maan on whom she now focused her attention. That such a being could speak so horribly to the great Adeima filled her with an uncontrollable rage. She moved toward Anuli now like a wingsqurl, but her body stopped in mid-flight. Confusion permeated her entire

being, had Adeima returned to share further wisdom again so quickly? But then the voice of the Oracle, silent up to this point, floated across to her.

“Perpetrators who receive the gift of forgiveness are given a chance to change. When we realize that the other is actually the self, then that becomes the moment of repair.”³⁴

Instantly the force on her body released itself and she collapsed unceremoniously to the underfoot. It seemed that the great Adeima had left her with one final, and profoundly difficult, lesson. She understood now only a little more than she had before about the meaning of the Holy Mother’s wisdom. But it wasn’t until the hue-maan herself finally spoke, that she fully grasped the enormity of Adeima’s *power*.

Anuli turned to both of them with a puzzled look on her face. “Ayube? Is that you? My gosh, what happened to your face?! Where are we? And why do I feel so heavy? What on earth happened?”

“Anuli don’t you remember coming here to the temple?”

The woman now looked not only surprised, but soon became full of fraidness as well. “Who, I mean *what* is that?”

Despite the finger pointing at her, it took a long timespan for her to grasp what the hue-maan was referring to. “Anuli, you don’t know who I am? Or where you are?”

Now the hue-maan’s eyes bulged open wide. “What?! How on Earth do you know how to speak Yorigbausa? Geezlweez, *what is this place?*”

Ayube quickly put his hands up in a peaceful gesture. “Okay okay. Let’s just pause for a second. Anuli, what’s the last thing that you **DO** remember?”

The woman quickly turned back to him without letting go of the deep fraidness. “Well, the last thing I remember was locking down the Saro-Wiwa in the sararin bay before our orbit decayed too far for us to maintain altitude.”

“So you don’t remember anything from the surface at all?”

She didn’t understand all of the hue-maan terms, but the look on Anuli’s face told her that something beyond their understanding had happened. “You don’t even know who I am Anuli?”

As soon as she spoke, Anuli’s gaze returned to her and she approached slowly, looking up with fear still etched across her features. “All I know is, you’re the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. Clearly intelligent, you must be robustly built to survive this godawful crushing gravity.”

Barely had the woman finished speaking that she got the feeling of even more intense fraidness from Ayube.

“Gelf, we have to go. **NOW!**”

Chapter 47

At first she didn’t understand what he meant as he tugged at her arm and raced towards the door. But a shout from the Oracle, a moment later clarified the cause of the man’s fear.

“STOP! Who dares to enter the holy temple at any but the appointed time?!”

There was only the most minuscule timespan in which to develop a strategy for such a horrible circumstance. Even so a seeming eternity of annums felt like it played through her mind as she

34 Separately quoted from the work of Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

considered and rejected all manner of possible strategies. She prayed to the depths of her kaba that the one she chose would be successful despite the doubt permeating her whole being. She quickly turned around and did her best to expand her frame hoping it would block any sight of the hue-maans' departure.

“Oh great Oracle. It is I, Gelf who was graced by the wisdom of Adeima in Her glory.”

In the dim light, it was difficult to see the woman's expression or to judge whether she had seen the others.

“Gelf? So you have returned? But this is cause for celebration. Praise be to Adeima and Azealla!” There was a short pause as the Oracle moved close and gave her the straighteye. “But why do you come at such an erroneous time? You know as well as any that common people are not allowed here except at the Holy hour.”

She fell to her half-legs and lowered her head. “I beg forgiveness Oracle. There was-” she briefly panicked inside searching for an explanation that would suffice. “-an emergency and I came with the intention of preventing a disaster.”

“Well, did chief Journgad summon you here?”

“No Oracle. It was, instinct.”

“That is most unorthodox. You risk instilling the wrath of the Gods in your hubris.”

Though she knew that great Adeima was without vexation now, she also felt that it would be highly unwise to reveal the nature of what happened. So she remained silent during the Oracle's scolding.

The woman paused soon and again gave her the straight-eye. “Why does the mention of Adeima's displeasure not instill fright in you? Have you lost your reverence?”

“What?! Oh no great Oracle. If anything, my veneration of the blessed Adeima is now stronger than ever!”

It took some convincing to reassure the Oracle that she was speaking the full truth while not revealing too much of what she came to accept as a profoundly Holy experience. She did feel safe at least, to relate that she had come to understand now the meaning of Adeima's earlier proclamations. The smile on the woman's face told her that this went a long way towards alleviating the Oracle's suspicion. She also took delight in sharing with the Oracle that Truni was alive and safe, which gave the woman enormous relief. She told of the heroic defeat that Truni won against the barbarian camp and the woman filled with pride at the news. By the time the wordsong was finished, she felt confident that the Oracle would not punish her for the impropriety.

With her veneration amplified she slowly backed away from the Oracle, bowing to the statues in turn. Hesitating by the door then, she gazed surreptitiously until she was certain that the Oracle had returned to her meditation. Then she gave a quiet signal to the hue-maans and the three of them crouched in the shadows behind a statue to discuss their next steps.

While she had been speaking to the Oracle, Ayube had been filling in the experiences that were missing from Anuli's memory. But the most amazing aspect was that whenever one of them tried to bring up the issue of the hue-maan power source under the temple, they found that they could not speak about it. Clearly Adeima was more powerful than the hue-maans by many orders of

magnitude. It reaffirmed in her own kaba the faith and reverence for the Gods that the hue-maans had previously dismissed.

At least she knew now, that neither the hue-maan renegade, nor any others could tamper with her people's connection with the Holy Mother. Despite their advanced magic, they were just as powerless to disobey Adeima as any other creature.

It was her hope now, that the forgetfulness would humble the renegade hue-maan, for she still shuddered to think of the arrogance with which the woman had spoken to the Holy Mother. But first thing was first. They had to figure out how to safely get Anuli away from the temple unseen.

"Since it is forbidden to visit the temple after the appointed time, we should be safe here until tomorrow."

"But why are your people only allowed to visit this place at one particular time Gelf?"

"Probably so that the populace only sees the place in a certain light, when their star casts light on those statues. Many primitive cultures do this to make the natives believe that the statues have some kind of supernatural power."

She moved menacingly closer to Anuli and held her fury back only with conscious effort. "Anuli, you may have lost all memory of what you tried to do. But *I* remember your disloyalty all too clearly. It was only the awesome power of Adeima which held me from knocking you to the underfoot. Now that we are free to move our limbs again, you would be wise to not disparage the Holy One, or to dismiss Her everlasting power."

She could feel the fraidness radiating from the hue-maan and thought back sadly to what Adeima had said about forgiveness being the beginning of repair. Instantly she felt ashamed of herself for not embodying the compassion which Adeima taught.

"I'm sorry Anuli. I should be more understanding of the terrible loss that you've endured." She emphasized her apology by lowering herself to her forelimbs in order to appear less intimidating to the small woman. "You can return with us to the morass and be among some of my own people who have also lost their memory."

Ayube put his hand on her shoulder to gently interrupt the conversation. His face was somber as he addressed her. "Gelf, let's hold off on the explanations until we can get to a safer location. Even I would attract certain attention here being an unknown person and Anuli's presence would be catastrophic."

For a brief timespan she was surprised. Over the past few days, she had almost come to see the hue-maan as one of her own kinsfolk, despite his funny 'Yorigbausa' language. But of course, he stood two handbreadths shorter than any adult in the village. "You're right Ayube."

She spent a long timespan considering the conundrum. Where could she keep the two hue-maans hidden until dark? The paths leading to the temple were not heavily traveled, but neither were they completely idle. Anyone who glanced in their direction might be driven by curiosity to find out who they were. She gave the straight-eye out in both directions and saw a few people in the distance, so she bowed low in front of the statue of Ilhamet until they passed.

When the surroundings were again clear of kinsfolk, she was able to direct the hue-maans to an alcove housing a prayer scroll for Dewos. She told them to stay hidden until sunset and then gave careful instructions for navigating through the forst away from the familyland. Before departing,

she took Anuli's far-talking device so that she could assist the two hue-maans if they got lost. Then she wished them good luck before hurrying to the forest herself to join Truini.

Chapter 48

"You made it my love!" She had barely broken through the edge of the forest before she was nearly thrown down by Truini's excited embrace. They covered each other in kisses for what felt like half a day before the woman finally pulled away long enough to ask her what had happened. The wordsong was long and complicated, not the least due to her many struggles with deciding what was safe to share with her mate. But she did trust Truini enough to share the awesome conversation in the temple of Adeima. Not surprisingly, the woman was as stunned as she herself had been by the experience.

"So you were actually blessed to have conversed with a Goddess? Gelf, that's the most incredible thing that I've ever heard."

"My love, there are no words to express it. I'm still trying to come to terms with it all myself. You can't imagine how infuriated I was when Ayube's people would refer to our worship of Adeima as quaint and primitive. They certainly got a big surprise."

"You mean Ayube actually ridiculed the Gods in front of you? That doesn't sound very respectful."

As with the hue-maans, there were deeper and more powerful emotions than the warrior's words alone projected. The feelings that Gelf experienced were more like when Truini had threatened Ayube in the beforetime. The warrior's reaction made her realize how easily she could create a schism due to the forgetfulness that her companions had endured. She had to correct this quickly if there was to be cooperation between all of them.

"Oh no Truini. Please don't misunderstand. They were very kind to me. But remember that I can see, well, mind-pictures of what they think. In their own past, the hue-maans had worshiped gods that they later realized did not have actual power. So they *assumed* that Adeima and Azealla were also mere legends. But once they were forced to confront Her holy presence at the temple, I'm sure that it changed their views a whole lot."

"Wow, I kind of envy you. To be able to find out so much about, *them*."

She bit her mouthside as she pondered the words for a timespan. "Well, it definitely is amazing. It's also why the hue-maans couldn't hide their funny magic like, like the voice that you heard from the their box. But some of the pictures were more nightmarish than anything you could imagine." She told Truini about the image of their wars and the many thousands of hue-maans that were sent to the after-time. "Truini, these people may have incredible tools, but they have also endured horrific cruelties in their past. To be honest, I don't know how they were able to even keep their villages from crumbling to dust."

She hadn't realized until that moment how much sadness she felt for what the hue-maans had endured. Whenever she was with them, her thoughts were always dominated by awe for the incredible magic that they commanded. But here, with only Truini beside her, she was able to see the hue-maans almost like another type of kinsfolk. Though a very strange type to be sure.

"You really care for them don't you?"

Without even realizing it, she noticed her vision getting blurry and she rubbed her eyes. “Oh yes Truini. They were so kind to me, even when I saw mind-pictures that they didn't want me to know about, there was always the sense in them that they wanted to help.”

Truini put a hand kindly on her shoulder. “Well, it seems that we're both going to be part of their village, so I guess I'll come to learn about them too.”

It was almost too good to be true. She had of course hoped and prayed that Truini would be willing to join the hue-maan camp, but she would've followed the beautiful warrior even if it meant living like the barbarians. Now she could breathe a sigh of relief knowing that her love, and her friends could be together. She hugged the beautiful warrior for a great long timespan as if she could translate all of her desires into that one embrace.

“I'm so deeply happy that you want to join them.” Finally she pulled away. “But that brings up the other issue. Do you know what the rest of the seekers wish to do? Are any of them wanting to let Sefi try to clear their memory?”

“Sefi?” The woman gave her a questioning look.

“Oh, right, you don't know her. Doctor Sefi is the hue-maan's healer. She's the one who cured the sickness for all of you.”

“She also destroyed our smarati.”

Gelf was about to protest, but Truini interrupted her. “My love, I am not bitter please understand. While it may be quite difficult not knowing anything about my past,” she took a deep breath “it seems likely that you and I would not have met if this whole adventure hadn't happened. Gelf, you are absolutely worth everything that I've been through.”

She not only saw the sincerity in Truini's face, but she felt the emotions radiating off of her. They made love again near the trees, despite the chance that someone from their group might stumble upon them. It was a deep and passionate bonding for her and every time she held the beautiful woman in her arms, it reminded her again how much she felt like the woman filled a missing part of her own existence.

Even when the glow had faded from the Truini's face, she didn't want to peel herself away. But Truini had brought up an important point. She had to be a leader for the group and help them work through a very difficult decision.

Chapter 49

When they rejoined the group, all of them rose as one and she sensed the deep concern from nearly every person. Now she regretted telling Truini, because she had to repeat the tale (albeit with less detail) for the rest. But the one thing that she could not have anticipated, was the reaction that her tale induced. She watched horrified as, one by one, each of them fell to the ground forming a circle around her.

“What do you sit on the underfoot for? Are you all still tired?” The sense-readin that she got was one of reverence, but she prayed fervently that just this once her sense-readin might be wrong.

“Hallowed Gelf. You have told all of us about the wonders that Adeima and Prijnak did for our people. But not in any of your stories has a single person been chosen to speak face to face with

the Holy Goddess.” She didn't remember the name of the seeker who spoke first, but the expression he displayed was one of veneration.

“Oh no. No, no, no. Oh please.” She pleaded, both with her words and her tone. “Please don't do this. I'm-” Her thoughts then were interrupted by the impression of Ayube returning to them.

“Everyone *please!* Ayube is coming, please I beg you to not let him see this.”

But it was too late. Before she could even turn to face him, the confusion he felt was as plain as day.

“You see?” This time it was Valtreen who spoke, though he seemed to be speaking to the air around them. “She was chosen to have an audience with Adeima, she knows who tells the truth and who does not, and she even knows when the magical hue-maans approach.” He then looked directly at her. “Who can say other than that you are a representative of Her Holiness.”

She prayed for help from Ayube, but all that she felt from the hue-maan was confusion. She realized that he knew nothing of what had occurred among the seekers. So she struggled alone to find the words to extinguish their veneration. “Look, the only reason that Adeima spoke to us was because of the rebellious hue-maan who had attempted to take back their tool. It was merely happenstance that allowed me to witness Her holy presence.

“Gelf, wasn't it you who told us that Adeima sees all and offers prophesy to those who are worthy of Her guidance?”

In addition to her own frustration with the deification that seemed to be developing, she was also increasingly distracted by the images from Ayube. Finally both to give pause to the conversation and to draw the hue-maan in, she turned to face him.

“Ayube, who is Mohammed? And why does this remind you of him?”

“One thing at a time. Let's see if we can get through this.” He then spoke more loudly to be heard by the group. “My friends, brave seekers. I ask you to please listen to me before you make hasty conclusions. While it is true that we have been graced to experience the presence of the one you call Adeima, there is no superior power that we have been imbued with. The being chose to interfere in order to prevent a greater tragedy, that of cutting off your kinsfolk from Her prophecy. While Gelf was sharp-eyed to deduce the potential tragedy and brought me swiftly to the temple, it was really the renegade of our camp who was the cause of the experience. That woman has been punished in a most appropriate manner. Your sister Gelf and I are simply two very lucky people who were gifted with a deeply profound experience. We,” He pointed between her and himself “both of us, will revel in the memory of standing in Her holy presence for the rest of our lives. But be sure my friends, it was absolutely no great esteem on our part which allowed us to be there.”

As she listened, she found the man's speech enormously well worded and she prayed in her kaba that his support would put an end to the whole mess. In that, sadly, her prayers were not realized. Valtreen gave him the straight-eye and she could feel his disdain for the hue-maan. “Ayube, I appreciate how much you have tried to help us, but your people also caused the forgetfulness that left us easy prey for the barbarians. I for one, would like to hear more from our blessed Gelf who has always fought for our wellbeing.”

Hearing no dissenting comments, it was clearly up to *her* to quell *yet another* potentially catastrophic situation. She paused for a moment to collect her thoughts, but before she could give

voice to them she was almost physically confronted by the most terrible images. They weren't quite as severe as the ones with the big explosions, but the effect was nearly as frightening. She saw great masses of hue-maans sitting on the backs of many large animals. Some had long curved swords, some held flags with a crescent moon, and some held long round metal sticks which made an explosion. The men were speeding towards a group of people who had formed a circle around a building. The building displayed a large symbol of a hue-maan with much hair on his face and on either side of him an impressive set of wings.³⁵ What she saw next felt at least as traumatic as before since she could see in this image the faces of the people. First a person would get a large red stain (she had to remember that the vital-fluid of the hue-maans was red) and then they would fall over. This happened many times with dozens of people until the attackers came close enough to use their hand weapons. Whereupon they cut the other hue-maans down in short order. Finally one of them climbed up to the peak of the building and hung the cloth with the crescent moon from it's ramparts. The other hue-maans raised a closed hand in the air over and over again.

In the briefest timespan, she came to understand what Ayube had been wanting to say. She knew also that if the seekers would not listen to him, then she would have to relate the most difficult wordsong that she had ever attempted.

She took a deep breath and raised her hands to focus the attention of her kinsfolk. "My friends, my kinsfolk, I appreciate that you want to hear from me. I can respect and appreciate your wariness of the hue-maans. I was wary of them too, especially of their magic in the beforetime. However please listen to me when I tell you that Ayube and I are both expressing the same fulltrue. We both have been blessed to witness the awesome power of Adeima and to hear Her wordsong. The difference however, is that our own people have never fought in wars, we have never disagreed on who we worship, and we have never killed in any but the most extreme cases. The hue-maans are different however. They are different because they have the wisdom that only comes from many lifetimes filled with conflict, of great battles between people who believe one thing and people who believe another. Though the hue-maans did not have Adeima, they *did* have their own gods which they worshiped. And not all of their people worshiped the same gods. Different villages would worship different gods, and each group's belief that their own god was superior to another tribe's god would result in constant battles where thousands of hue-maans were killed. And not just warriors were killed. Mothers, children, and even wise elders would be killed if they did not submit to the attacker's belief. Ayube's own ancestors many lifetimes back were conquered in this way by a group who believed that a man named Muhammad was the prophet of the one true god. Those people nearly wiped out the 'Ig-bow' people who were his ancestors. Other hue-maans were conquered by a group called 'kris-chins' who made war with many people over their own belief in which god to worship.

I beg of you from the depths of my kaba, please don't hold me or *any* of our kinsfolk to higher stature as a spokesperson for Adeima. If you continue on this path, we could draw ourselves into great conflict with other people who know nothing of the experience that Ayube and I shared. Neither of us are in any way superior or 'chosen.' I am a simple denisovian, one of your kinsfolk. And Ayube as not a god or a magician, but simply a man with access to some amazing tools. We

35 Description of Ahura Mazda, source of worship for followers of Zoroastrianism

both care about you all very much, but we can do nothing beyond what any mortal person can do. Like the hue-maan, I was born, I grew into an adult and learned a trade, and eventually I will submit to Pritlaxtl on the journey to the aftertime. That is the nature of being mortal, for each and every one of us.

She paused for a moment and heard a strange sound that Ayube made by smacking one of his hands into the other. It took only a short timespan before the other seekers were mimicking him and the sound grew much louder from the combined effort. The gesture confused her until she glanced over and saw him grinning broadly. Then he walked over and gave her a warm hug. In no time at all she was blinded by the tears that flowed liberally from her eyes and soon she was hugging not only Ayube, but also Truini as well.

She could tell from the emotions of the seekers that she hadn't convinced all of them. Valtreen for example was still skeptical. But she had convinced a large enough percentage of them that she felt confident in dealing with Valtreen and the other one at a later time.

With the crisis more or less resolved, she sat on the ground with Truini and the other seekers to discuss next steps with her kinsfolk. She still felt nervous as she brought it up mainly due to the trepidation that Truini was feeling. But as she couldn't sense her lover's memories as closely as she could sense the hue-maans, there was no way to prepare for what came next.

“My kinsfolk. Would you feel ready to share your thoughts on how many of you would like to stay with the hue-maans and how many would take the risk of the removal of your smarati in order to return to Xenlaria. Please understand that we will respect whichever choice you make and there is no pressure to choose one or the other.”

She felt Truini's tension mounting, and she worried that perhaps all of their kinsfolk would choose to risk the clearing of the memory. But the response was far more surprising than she could have expected.

The first person to speak was Meyrhut, she didn't so much as stand up, she just sat taller and straighter as she spoke. “Gelf, it was originally my intention to risk the erasing of the hue-maan healer in order to return to Xenlaria, even though the risk might be great. Like the others, I was deeply upset by their violation and by the secrets being kept. The whole time that we traveled through the morass, I could think of nothing better than to leave the hue-maans far behind and do what I could to reclaim my previous life.” She paused and her expression softened noticeably.

“But thinking more deeply about how hard they worked to protect us, even sending one of their smaller people to travel with us, I have to admit that we could stand to learn a lot from both of you. If Adeima can trust the strangers by revealing Her great presence to them, then I think it's worth giving the strangers a second chance. So I choose to stay with you and these hue-maans.”

One by one, the answers all came to the same result. Now the seekers were unanimously in favor of staying with the hue-maans. There was some concern among a few still, that the hue-maans would use their magic tools to take advantage of group, but Valtreen spoke out convincingly that their 'hallowed leader' would protect them. It was clear that he continued to view her with a barely-diminished reverence despite her impassioned speech and there was nothing she could think of in that moment to eliminate it. But she hoped that, given time, their people could all join together without the danger of what Ayube called 'cult of personality.'

Chapter 50

With the immediate danger passed, Ayube brought Anuli in from the forest to meet the group of seekers for the first time. Both Ayube and she herself were on careful guard since this would be a touchy experience for both Anuli as well as the seekers.

It took a long timespan and the hue-maan female was very scared at first. "So these are the seekers that you mentioned?"

Myerhut was similarly amazed to see the hue-maans in their normal form. "Your people are so strange looking."

The comments flew back and forth for a long timespan, with both herself and Ayube giving translations for the rest of the group. But she hoped that this experience helped the seekers to recognize that the hue-maans were nothing more than a different kind of person and had no supernatural powers. And for Anuli, she hoped that it would ease the female's integration back to the present. For the sake of the hue-maan, she shared the wordsong of the seekers' experience since waking up near the barbarian village to give the woman a sense of context. It wasn't perfect, and the language barrier kept the female somewhat isolated, but it felt as if the meeting was a first step towards building a bridge between their disparate people.

Despite her effort though, Anuli remained somewhat skittish around the seekers and stayed close to Ayube whenever she could. By the time that the Saülè became tired and sank towards the land, she heard the female ask for 'transport' back to her camp.

Ayube was more open now about using the communication device, but he still instructed Adewale to approach after dark so as to protect the other seekers from seeing Anuli go vanus behind the faery curtain.

Chapter 51

That night, as she lay with Truini along the edge of the morass, she learned that it was the feelings of the other seekers which had caused the woman's trepidation in the beforetime.

Though Truini's sense-reading wasn't as strong as her own, the woman could get faint impressions from a small number of people. The feelings that she had sensed were filled with uncertainty and distrust. It seemed that Myerhut's wordsong had understated a much deeper disquiet among the seekers. The men and women had felt a very deep level of mistrust regarding the hue-maans, which was completely understandable, and they had been tempted to turn on Ayube despite his warning. It had only been their respect for *her* which had held the rest of them back. So when she returned with the hue-maan and spoke of both of them having personally witnessed the Goddess, it made the doubters second-guess their earlier misgivings.

In speaking about it again now with Truini, she realized that Adeima had rescued not only Xenlaria and the temple, but the fledgling community of seekers and hue-maans as well.

What might have happened if their small group were to become subdivided, even assuming Sefi was successful at wiping their memory? It was something she did not want to think about. There were already so few of them as it was that she didn't know if a community could thrive or not.

Aside from Truini the warrior, none of them even knew what skills or knowledge they had in order to provide for everyone. Here in the dark, with all of the struggle and wordsongs behind her, the wondering about what would happen to the seekers now came to dominate her thoughts even more acutely.

Chapter 52

With all of the sacrifice and time devoted to aiding for the kinsfolk, it was finally time to enjoy a day off to focus only on Truini. They wandered casually through the forst, had many playful wrestling matches and made love often. Looking back, it was her favorite day of the whole long time of transition. She felt, at long last, that they could plan for a future together as a village of their own. The professor might even relent to giving the seekers an understanding of the hue-maans' magic, though she imagined that last would take much convincing wordsongs beforehand.

Akwukwu Shida book six

Chapter 53

The Saülé was still low in the morning sky when she sensed a deep feeling of unease from someone nearby. It couldn't be Truini, as she was sleeping peacefully. She slowly disentangled herself and gave the woman a kiss on her knobhorn before getting up to look around. Some of the seekers were awake, but none were in any danger that she could sense. Three of them were sitting on a fallen log and talking calmly, another was doing warrior exercises on the edge of the morass. So she wandered over to Ayube who was doing some kind of silent sitting that the hue-maans called 'medy-tayshun.' He didn't like to be bothered, so she wandered into the forst hoping to discover for herself the source of the strange feelings. This experience in the forst was unique to her because she didn't know quite what it was that she was looking for or where it would be found. All she could do was attempt to move in the direction where the emotion felt the strongest.

The Saülé was well above the treetops before she finally began homing in on the disturbance. There were no noises or tracks along the underfoot and she constantly swayed between stronger and weaker sense-readins. It wasn't until she finally caught a smell of something deeply unpleasant that she was able to discern the hint of danger. The scent brought her back to the horrid experience among the barbarians and for a moment she feared that one of them had made it here. But then finally she saw a tall man laying face-down next to a log. The contents of his digestion had been what she had smelled and she slowly bent down to examine the man. She first checked his breathing hole and gladly felt a light puff of air on her hand, but then she got a much bigger shock when she turned the man over.

It was Pelfren! But what would chief Journgad's personal assistant be doing way out here beyond the edge of Xenlaria? It wasn't until she pulled at his arm to check his life-force and saw the rashes all over his arm that the cold reality gripped her. She almost dropped the limb in her

shock. How could a man who was seven or eight days' journey from the barbarians contract their horrible unhealth?

There was no time to think about that. She jammed her hand into the secret pocket on the inside of her pants and dug out the hue-maan talking device.

“Hello? Hello, I need to speak with Sefi right away.”

She didn't know who answered, and at the moment she didn't care. Pelfren was already in the deep sickness sleep and she didn't know how much longer the man had before he was beyond the point where Sefi could help him.

“Hello. Gelf is that you? Aren't you still with Ayube?”

“Sefi. No. I'm in the forst. Listen, there's not much time to explain. I'm with Pelfren, one of my kinsfolk, and he's very sick. I think that he has the same sickness that the other seekers had. But he must have traveled from Xenlaria. We've got to help him.”

“Gelf. You know that we cannot interfere in the affairs of your people. I was only given permission to help your seeker friends because it was a direct result of our intervention-”

“But Sefi, if this *is the same sickness*.” She used her most pleading voice. “That means that he must have caught it from the barbarians.” That brought a new terror to her mind. What if the remaining barbarians had fled to Xenlaria? If that was the case, then her entire village could be at risk.

“*Please* Sefi.” She put all of her emotions into the appeal. “Couldn't you at least *look* at him to see if it's the same problem? He is not awake and so he would not see you.”

There was a pause that felt like it took a full day. But when she heard the woman's sigh, it told her that she'd made some headway. “All right Gelf. I'll see if Adewale can take me in the sararin.”

Relief permeated her being. Sefi could get to her in the shuttle faster than even Ayube could travel from the-

“Wait! Sefi you can't!”

She could almost picture the woman's funny raised 'eyebrow'. “Can't? Can't what. Just now you were begging me to-”

“No, well” It took a moment to get her jumbled thoughts together. “It's just that if you come in the sararin, then all the seekers on the edge of the morass will see you. It would be, well, I mean it would bring the contamnayshun that you fear.”

“Gelf, I appreciate your caution. But if this man is as bad as you say, then there wont be enough time for me to walk two or three kilometers to reach you.”

There was a pregnant pause as she pondered what the doctor was saying. But there just *had* to be a way. How could Sefi get from their sararin to the spot where she sat next to Pelfren without Valtreen and the others seeing the flying box?

“Sefi? How far can you travel with your magic faery-dust column?”

“The kefatz? Well, I don't know the technology well, but I've heard that two kilometers is already getting dangerous.”

She didn't know the hue-maans measuring system, but she hoped that her hunch would work nevertheless. “Sefi, wouldn't the distance be the same whether it was sideways along the underfoot or straight up into the sky?”

“Oh right! Yes, I see what your getting at Gelf. I'll check with Adewale and we'll get to you as soon as we can. Be sure to leave the sadarwa-belun on so that we can hone in on you.”

The funny hue-maan words were much more confusing without the mind-pictures, but she carefully put the talking device next to Pelfren without touching it otherwise and began saying prayers to Azealla that Sefi would be able to repair his unhealth.

Chapter 54

It was only a short timespan before she heard someone walking nearby and felt the deep concern radiating from the doctor.

“Over here!” She called to her friend and gave the woman a brief hug before standing aside to let the healer examine Pelfren.

Sefi used many tools, only some of which she recognized from the time she had spent in their healing place. But as the doctor worked, her sense-readin soon told her that her original fear was right. She wanted to ask more about what Sefi planned to do, but she was learning that it was best to stay silent and let the doctor concentrate. So just as she did in the healing place, she sat and waited, with much greater fraidness now.

“Gelf, I'm afraid that we're going to need to bring this man back to the medical ward. Not only does he have the same disease, but he's very dehydrated. He must've been alone in the forest for a couple of days.”

“Does that mean-” She was almost too afraid to ask, “would he have to lose his memory too?” She couldn't imagine what would happen if the chief's right-hand man was stricken in the same way as all the other seekers. There was no doubt at all that Journgad would become suspicious enough to create a problem.

“Well I certainly hope not Gelf. But I think it would help a great deal to have you come with us.”

“But what about Ayube? He was supposed to come with me to meet chief Journgad.”

But the moment she said it, a terrifying thought gripped her. And Sefi's response did nothing to quell her fraidness. “Gelf, if this man was your chief's assistant, then it's very likely that the chief is sick as well. We're going to have to hurry to resolve this before it turns into a full scale epidemic.”

The woman signaled Adewale to bring them both back to the craft and she was forced to endure the strange faery curtain again. As soon as they were on board, she used the talking device to try and reach Ayube. He gave her a hushed response to call him again in two minutes.

Sefi helped her to figure how long that was, but as the craft sped back to the hue-maan camp, she heard his voice calling *her* now. “Yes Gelf. What can I do for you? And where are you by the way?”

Quickly she told him about the sense-readin she'd picked up and what had happened.

“Gelf, you know that we're supposed to meet with your chief. How long is this little detour going to take?”

She was about to respond, but thankfully Sefi heard and repeated her earlier warning which silenced Ayube immediately.

“Alright. Well if it's that serious, then I guess you'd best help the man out. But let Umquo know that we could use fresh supplies. We're running low on food and I was expecting to have a meeting today to make longer term plans regarding that.”

Once again she watched in amazement as Adewale guided the magic flying box into the giant room and Sefi used the faery curtain to bring Pelfren quickly to the healing place. She followed slowly behind and when she got there she felt instantly what Sefi was going to ask.

“Heal Pelfren myself?! You've got to be kidding! I don't know-”

“Gelf. Gelf please.” She got the funny mind-picture from Sefi of the woman slapping her forehead with her hand. “Listen, I understand that you can sense what we're thinking, but really. I need you to not jump to conclusions.” The woman motioned her to a chair and they both sat down. “Now I want to minimize the chance of having to wipe this man's memory, but you know more than anyone what it's like when I guess wrong with the sleep medicine.”

Sefi described the situation in which she herself would do the healing, but in a darkened room and with no hue-maans around. This would minimize the risk of the contamnayshun. Sefi promised to guide her very carefully in the use of their magic tools.

The experience was amazing. First she used a funny tool to ‘injetet’ something like water into his body without him drinking it. She then got to remove a small amount of the vital-fluid and put it into another device that allowed her to see very small things. Then she put a few drops of the fluid into a strange container that was clear just like the wall she had seen the first day she met the hue-maans. She added another drop of the medicine that Sefi had invented and brought the results out to her friend.

The hue-maan smiled when she looked at the container. “Gelf, do you understand what's going on in here?”

She had to think about that one for awhile. Even with the mind-pictures from Sefi, there was such a broad amount of knowledge involved. “Well. The medicine that you invented should be able to kill off those yellow dots in Pelfren's vital-fluid. If it does, then we know that the sickness can be cured, but if it doesn't then we have to try something else.” The doctor moved aside and she looked through the funny eye-tubes. “But Sefi, the yellow dots are still there. What I don't understand is that all the symptoms are the same. So it should have worked.”

Just to be sure, Gelf repeated the process but instead brought the vital-fluid to Sefi who performed the test. Sadly, the results this time were still the same. The woman paused and looked back at her seriously. “Gelf, the symptoms may be the same. But your friend may have been exposed to a slightly different strain of virus, or the virus may have mutated, um changed but in such a small way that we might not detect it.”

She felt the frightened emotions that had led her to Pelfren earlier and feared that he might have woken up. Quickly, she left her friend and returned to the room.

“Why is it so dark? Has my vision failed me? Is it time to greet Pritlaxtl?”

“Great Pelfren. Your vision, I am certain, is as sharp as ever. It is dark now.”

“Gelf? Healer is that you?”

“Yes Pelfren. I found you laying in the forst. You are very sick.”

“Never mind me, healer-” He tried to get up, but the hue-maans magic held him down on the bed. “Why can I not raise myself up? What has happened?”

“Pelfren please. You are very weak. You almost succumbed to Pritlaxtl in the forst.”

“Gelf you don't understand, my own unhealth is beside the point. Our liege, chief Journgad has fallen ill. He tasked me with finding you and bringing you back to the village to heal him.”

“Oh no! The chief? We must help him.”

“Leave me as I am healer. Go, be quick with your feet and return to Xenlaria. Help bring gudstrength to the chief.”

“Pelfren. You are a worthy servant to our ruler. I have friends here who can help you. But without a doubt, we must take care of chief Journgad. Rest easy good man. Your message has been delivered and your honor preserved.”

Sefi had told her about the magic potion that worked much like the leaves she had used to defeat the barbarian. But the doctor also stressed how dangerous it was to use on somebody as sick as he, so she gave him only a small amount before hurrying out of the room. She saw Sefi working in front of the 'my-kro-skoap' device and though she didn't like interrupting the doctor, this time it was necessary.

“Sefi, we need to act quickly. Pelfren has told me that the chief of Xenlaria suffers from the sickness too. We must save him!”

The woman looked up and she got the mind-picture of the woman slapping her hand against her forehead again. Now she realized it was a gesture of frustration. “Geezlewees, if this gets any worse we're going to have to quarantine your entire town.”

“Sefi, what can we *do* for the chief? We need to help him, but I can't leave Pelfren in this place without anyone familiar to watch over him.”

The doctor went over and talked to a spot on the wall. “Professor Umquo, can you meet me in the medical bay right away?”

“Yes doctor. I'll be there shortly.”

The wait was not long before the professor arrived. When he did, Sefi filled him in on the situation. He listened quietly and she could sense his mind processing even before the doctor finished. Then he invited everyone to sit at a small table in Sefi's office.

“Alright, so it sounds like some deadly virus has infiltrated your village. We'll ignore the 'how' and the 'when' for the time being.” He turned to look at Sefi. “What IS important now is, establishing that this is the same virus that the seekers caught from the barbarians. Doctor?” He turned a questioning gaze towards Sefi.

“Well professor. It doesn't react to the vaccine, but the symptoms are very much the same, and on the molecular level the virus looks exactly like the one we saw with the seekers earlier.”

She could sense that the professor was deeply disturbed by this turn of events. “Well, normally I would think it safer to simply let the virus run it's course and stay out of the situation. But from what Ayube tells me, we're likely to be stuck here forever without a replacement power source.”

The man gave a deep sigh. “So I guess we might as well do the most good that we can with our remaining energy. And if this *is* a variation on the same disease, then we'll be halting it's spread... I hope.”

She felt sad for the hue-maans, and the sadness that the professor felt reinforced her own emotions. But all of that was secondary to the deep worry she felt about Xenlaria. If Pelfren and the chief were both with the unhealth, then it was likely that many people from her village either had the same unhealth or soon would be struck with it. What she struggled to consider though, was how they could find out the situation in the village at all? She would be needed to keep an eye on Pelfren, and Ayube was with the other seekers.

“So we know that the Denisovian chief is probably as sick as this man, uh Pelfren is. But we don't know how far the disease has spread. Gelf, how many people were in Journgad's presence when you visited him?”

Her thoughts were quickly brought back to the present. She had to concentrate on the vague memories of the two times she had been invited within the great courtyard. Both times she'd been too focused on chief Journgad to pay attention to the plutolatri. “Professor, I could only guess, but I'd say something like twenty people, including Pelfren.” The minute she said this, both hue-maans were very scared.

“My word! If that many people fell ill, we really *could* be dealing with an epidemic!” He quickly walked over to the panel on the wall that Sefi had used moments before. “Hello? Yes, patch me through to Ayube right away.”

A short while later the man's voice came to them from the wall. “Hold on please.” There was a pause which Gelf assumed was the man's need to talk away from the other seekers. “Yes? What can I do for you?”

“Ayube, I'm tying you into a meeting we're having here. Doctor Ikpeba and Gelf are already with me in the medical bay. Ayube you heard about the man that Gelf found, right?”

“Yes professor, the doctor told me.”

“Very good. Well the man woke up briefly. Which was less catastrophic than the last time due to the doctor's foresight. But we did find out that the Xenlarian chief has the same sickness. What's more, the vaccine that doctor Ikpeba used on Gelf and the seekers doesn't work this time. So we're assuming that it's mutated. We need to find out the condition of things in their village and how seriously this man Journgad's health is. Doctor Ikpeba would rather keep Gelf here in case the denisovian wakes up again. Do you think that you could check things out?”

“Wow professor. This is starting to feel like some holo-vision story.”

“Ayube, please let's stay focused.”

“Well, I don't know how long it would take to reach their village, but from what Gelf has told me, it's at least two days travel. It might be more practical to wait until nightfall and use the Lumumba to get there.”

“Ayube, what if you used the same method with your faery column that Sefi used to pick up Pelfren?”

“What do you mean Gelf?”

She quickly repeated for the professor how they had kept the flying machine too high up to be seen from the underfoot and then used the magic faery-column to travel down to the forst unnoticed.

“Gelf that's an excellent idea.” The professor then turned to the wall again. “Alright Ayube, please keep your sadarwa-belun on active scan and we'll send Adewale to pick you up.” He then pushed a spot on the wall and told Adewale about their plan.

Chapter 55

“Truini I must speak with you for a moment.” Ayube led the denisovian warrior back to into the forst where the others wouldn't hear.

“Yes Ayube, what is it that frightens you?”

Instantly he stopped in his tracks causing the alien to briefly wander ahead. “You. What?” How did this alien know that he was frightened? E no fit happen!³⁶ If this one was able to do the same thing that Gelf could... He didn't want to *think* about what that would mean.

Even before he asked the question, he felt his stomach quaking at the possible outcome. “Truini do you see pictures, in your mind when you're near me?”

But the surprise on the woman's face assuaged him before she even said a word. “What? Oh no Ayube. I just get, um feelings. I sensed just now that you were worried. But it's stronger than what I sense from my own people.” The female made a gesture that he equated with a shrug and the tension in his body slowly melted away.

“Alright. Thank you Truini. We can talk about that later. There's an urgent business right now with chief Journgad that I must see to. Would you keep an eye on the group for me while I'm gone?”

“Yes hue-maan. I'll help wherever I can. But-” Though her voice trailed off, he sensed a great deal of concern in the unspoken silence.

“What is it Truini? Please, you can ask me anything you need.”

“Well.” The emotions of their people were still tough to discern, but in this case the pained look was crystal clear. “Gelf has told me that there is great danger from knowing about your magic. But-” She couldn't seem to get the right words out and seeing her pain, he didn't rush her. “Well I was just wondering if it is possible to know where my beloved has gone? I worry about her.” Ayube reached up and put a hand on the tall woman's shoulder. “Of course Truini.” Now it was his turn to struggle for the right words. “Gelf was right to warn you about the dangers involved. If you plan to stay with us, then you will come to learn about our tools. But for now, please just know that Gelf is safe and she is helping our healer take care of another victim of that strange sickness.”

“Oh good. I know that she is an excellent healer.” Without another word, the woman ran off toward the group and Ayube was left to marvel at the speed and power which the aliens could command.

Only 15 minutes passed before he got the call back from Adewale signaling that the man was ready to bring him up to the sararin. He briefly endured the discomfort of the kefatz before finding himself among familiar surroundings again. Then Adewale set a large store of foods similar to what the natives ate and transmitted it to a spot near Truini's camp. Once that was

36 Literally – no & true, it can't be true [open to another expression]

finished, they sped off to the court of the denisovian chief. Despite the urgency, Ayube requested that Adewale pause for a few minutes so that he could use the telescopic site.

“It's an amazing sight to see isn't it? Like going back in time to see Mohenjo-daro.”

“Mohen-what??”

The man shook his head pittingly. “Really Adewale, it's well known history. Mohenjo-daro was one of the earliest cities. It developed in the Indus river valley almost 5000 years ago. You would really be wise to brush up on your ancient history.”

Adewale blushed slightly with shame and Ayube quickly apologized for the judgment. His own love of languages had necessitated a thorough understanding of how Earth's cultures had grown and developed. So history came second-nature to him. But out of respect for his compatriot, he focused instead on the current conditions and on the task at hand.

“Adewale, there doesn't seem to be any movement down there. In the middle of the day, I take that as a *very* bad sign.”

The man's expression quickly went somber. “I would say that you're quite right on that. Here, I'll send you down into that field out to the rear of the compound. This should allow you to enter from the ground without being seen in case anybody *is* walking around.”

Ayube contained himself from offering the retort that it was Adewale's clumsiness which had set off the whole catastrophe to begin with. But quickly he realized that by introducing them to the native healer, the man's actions had actually brought them a lucky break. So instead, he quickly double-checked the field medical kit and glanced back at the pilot. “Alright, let's get this unpleasantness over with.”

A moment later he was in the same field where Gelf had spoken to the chief a lifetime before. He glanced around quickly and then entered through a handsomely carved wooden door which was clearly more utilitarian than the one at the main gate. The sight was mystifying. There was not a single figure in sight. The hall was utterly empty and the tables bereft of anything but a few settings of clay pots. He briefly wondered if the ruler had abandoned his post before he dismissed the idea and began exploring the doors leading off of the hall.

It was at the third door that he finally spied a figure. The woman was laying prone on a bed of marvelous quality. There were stout wooden posts at each corner and sticks that looked similar to bamboo forming the frame. On moving into the room, he saw that the woman had the now all-too familiar rashes and she didn't move when he touched her. But still, he had to be sure. He held the sphygmomanometer against the woman's skin and found no pulse at all. So, with sadness slowing his movements, he took a rough grass cloth and covered the woman's face.

The next two rooms were also occupied, but the men there were merely unconscious. So he made a mental note of their location and moved on. It wasn't until he reached a fourth and much larger room that he found someone strong enough to move.

“Who are you?” The man attempted to bellow in an intimidating voice, but his diseased state left his voice with not a hint of vigor. “How dare you enter the hall of the powerful chief Journgad? Your futile attempts-”

He didn't want to interrupt, but time was too precious to waste on the man's feeble attempt at intimidation. "Please, great sir. I am assisting Gelf the healer. She sent me to cure the chief of this severe sickness which has plagued your people."

Now the man looked at him more closely. "What?! But you are too small. How many anums do you live now?"

"Sir, I am a full adult. My people are not as tall as yours. I am the human Ayube and I was on the way here with Gelf to meet with your chief when we encountered-" He struggled briefly to remember the name of the man. "Pelfren. He warned us of this heinous disease which afflicts your people."

The man continued to stare at him. "So *you* are one of these strangers that Gelf told us about?"

"Yes. Now please, time is very critical here. Can you tell me how long your chief has been with the illness?"

The man paused. "You think that you can simply walk in here while we are in the weak-state and take over? Well, you can think again. The chief is mighty and powerful. Any untrue that you speak will be revealed, for we are worshipers of Adeima and Prijnak the powerful warrior!"

He couldn't afford to waste precious time convincing this man of his sincerity. So he very briefly recounted what Gelf had shared of their escape from the barbarians and that he had only left Truini two day's walk from here.

Finally it seemed that the man was convinced. He didn't so much sit into the chair, as collapse into it. The man must have been using the last of his strength to project an intimidating presence. His voice now, was barely above a whisper and Ayube had to lean close to hear fully. "This, this unhealth. It struck us like a meldabeast. First Jinleya fell ill, then Prichto, soon there were too few people with the gudstrength to assist the weak ones. Our generous chief worked long hours bringing food for the sick until he depleted his own vigrus and succumbed to the unhealth as well."

"But how many days has it been?" He implored the man to offer something of relevance.

"I'm sorry. There has been too much to do and too few hands to do them for me to watch the Saũlè."

He lowered his voice in sympathy for the man's plight and thanked him for doing so much. "My good man, I will run swiftly to our own chief to bring all possible resources to your aid. I cannot guarantee that everyone will recover, but we will do as much as we are able."

The man's voice now held a deep reverence as his eyes gazed imploringly, "if you manage to save chief Journgad, I assure you that you will be honored with praise and song on your return."

He gently put a hand on the man's shoulder. "Please, let us not speak about that now. I must hurry back to our healer. We will return to you as quickly as possible."

Having little more understanding of the disease than he had on arriving, he returned to the room of one of the unconscious men and took a blood sample. He also took another sample from the deceased woman for comparison. With these grisly deeds complete, he pushed his way slowly through the large ceremonial gate and into what looked like a town square. The village was humble, constructed of clay walls spanning between roughly carved wooden supports. There were many cloth overhangs and benches, but no people could be seen in the entire courtyard. He

hurried to what looked like a house and found another unconscious native which told him everything that he needed to know.

He hurriedly signaled Adewale to bring him back up to the sararin. The heartbreaking destitution pervading the natives dragged his heart down as well as if they were his own countrymen.

“So how bad is it down there?” Adewale's face displayed an ignorance that he wished he could preserve, but sadly the situation would not allow it.

“Let's get back to the ship immediately. The people down there are worse than we could have imagined.” He gave Adewale a brief summary while they sped back to meet with doctor Ikpeba.

Chapter 56

“All of them?!” She couldn't believe it. That chief Journgad's entire court could be struck down in only a dozen days was impossible for her to imagine. Yet the mind-pictures that she got were impossible to misinterpret. The emotions now were much worse than merely seeing sixteen of her people lying ill in the camp of the barbarians. She now had the mind-picture of her entire familyland stricken with deadly unhealth.

“I'm afraid so Gelf. Now please, let me speak with doctor Ikpeba and the professor in private. We need to get help to them as quickly as possible.”

With that Ayube disappeared with the other two behind a wall that quickly went from clear to solid. Meanwhile she was once again left to her own thoughts while she waited for the hue-maans to have their meeting. It was deeply troublesome for her to be excluded from the decisions involving her own people. But the mind-picture she got from Sefi told her that it wasn't from a lack of desire to include her that she was left out, but it was due to her habit of blurting out responses to whatever she saw in the mind-pictures. The hue-maans simply worked at a slower pace due to their different ability. So to pass the time, she checked on Pelfren once more. His condition had not improved, and so they had placed him in the ‘stays-sis’ in order to keep his unhealth from ‘dee-tear-iyor-rate-ing.’ At least, she thought, he wouldn't die from the lack of fodiens. With Sefi's instruction, she had used a funny tool to... what was the word? ‘Injekt’ a concentrated type of substance into his system. It was something equivalent to fodiens. That one was confusing, but Sefi had explained that it was like Jadzaben pudding and it would be easier for Pelfren's body to absorb while in the state of unhealth. She once again spoke the healing prayer over his prone form in the hopes that Adeima would show compassion after the great risk which the man had taken for the sake of the chief.

Finally Sefi told her that the hue-maans were ready to talk with her and so she left Pelfren's stays-sis bed and rejoined them in the main healing room. The hue-maans were very worried, and for the first time her sense-readin told her that Sefi was unconvinced that she could save them. Instantly she wanted to shout out. To say something, anything that would make the healer more confident. But of course that was what had made them exclude her in the first place. So she held back the flood of words and waited for them to share their decision at the hue-maans' own pace.

The doctor gave her a strong hug and faced her somber eyes. “Gelf. I'm so sorry that we didn't find out about this situation earlier. It sounds like the sickness has progressed incredibly fast among your people. Even if there wasn't the risk of cultural contamination, we simply wouldn't have the room here to treat so many of the people in your village. And I still haven't figured out if this is a totally different virus or simply a more resistant form of the one you and the seekers caught.”

“But what about the vital fluid that Ayube brought?” As soon as she said it, she got something from Sefi that felt like either pride or respect, she couldn't quite tell. But it seemed that she had said the right thing.

“Yes, that's good to be aware of Gelf. I'm hoping to use samples from the two villagers that Ayube visited as well as your own blood and Pelfren's to try and find something to knock this thing out.”

She put a hand on Sefi's shoulder, as if through physical touch she could imbue the doctor with more support than mere words could provide. “Sefi you know that I am more than ready to help you in whatever way that I can.”

Chapter 57

She sat at the table while Sefi held the strange vital-fluid tool against her skin. But a thought struck her and she jumped up from the impact of it.

“Gelf please, I need you to-”

“No Sefi, hold on. You don't have to do this all on your own you know.”

The hue-maan was puzzled by her statement, but also annoyed by the delay when time was so critical. “Gelf, I understand that you want to be helpful but really, I'm the most knowledgeable doctor-”

“No. Sefi, I'm sorry. Please just listen for a short timespan. You remember how I had the strange experience looking at the dark crystal device?”

The doctor nodded.

“Well, as hard as it is for me to believe, that appears to be the same as the Oracle receiving prophecy from Adeima. When you showed the ‘ree-kor-ding,’ one of the prophecies was ‘stone of black to bring leader back.’ I think that means looking at your power device would help the chief.” Though she hadn't expected complete agreement, what she experienced was even less congruent. She pushed on nevertheless. “We could ask the Goddess for advice on this! She has never let me down when I was puzzled by an unhealth in the beforetime.”

But the moment she finished, she could feel the hue-maan perceiving her like a misguided young'in. It made her furious and she cut off the doctor before she could get more than a word out. “I am *not* ignorant, and I am NOT misguided! Sefi, you might not believe in Adeima. But she is REAL and besides, Ayube saw her too. She offers prophecy, and every single one has come true including the one about Ayube and I finding answers in the temple.”

“Gelf please.”

“You're still doing it! Sefi, I care for you as a friend, but it makes me so full of the unhappy when you think of me as some poor ignorant neeyand... neeyanderdal (whatever that was)! I'm a denisovian, I have a rich culture, and I have smarts just as valuable as yours. I'm not-”

Though she expected the doctor to become angry in return, the hue-maan did the last thing that she could've expected. Sefi pulled her close and held her in a long embrace. It was strange, almost intimate like with Truini, but somehow different. She still felt furious, and beat lightly on the hue-maan's back. But little by little the emotions calmed and she was able to get the mind-pictures of the doctor's own feelings more clearly. It wasn't that the hue-maan didn't care for her, and it wasn't that she didn't respect her culture. She simply, couldn't experience the same faith in a deity that she only knew about through hearsay.

“Gelf. I know that you can read my emotions, so I won't try to deceive you. It's true that I view your gods in the same way that I view the old human gods. Call it prejudice, or cynicism if you like. But well, I simply cannot risk the lives of everyone in your village based merely on the stories of two people. We humans have 3000 years of medical history that I'm afraid we're biased towards. I just need to do this in my own way.”

If she had only heard the doctor's words alone, she would have dismissed them as 'kon-des-sending'. But with her sense-readin she not only heard, but *felt* where the doctor was coming from. And while she still disagreed with Sefi, she at least could feel some empathy for her. So she apologized and let her friend continue doing the 'reesirch' that the hue-maan wanted to do.

But hue-maan smartknowin aside, she *KNEW* that Adeima would not let her down. If only there was *some way* to contact Her. It was a confusing and frustrating enigma for her to try and figure out. How could she get the hue-maans to understand, when they had not witness-
Something switched in her head and instantly she knew what to do. Though what she did not know, is just how much trouble it would get her into.

Chapter 58

Praying that she had the right spot from having seen the hue-maans do it, she pressed her hand next to the recess in the wall and it parted for her. She glanced back, but saw that Sefi was too engrossed in the 'mike-row-skoap' device. So she bravely made her way along the strange round-shaped corridors until she reached another hue-maan. This one was a person she hadn't met, but she had no time for introductions.

“Excuse me. Could you tell me where Ayube is?”

The man looked up briefly and she got a picture of the big room where the flying boxes were.

“Okay, thank you.” And she headed off down the corridor while the puzzled man spoke his answer to her rapidly retreating back. She didn't know how much time her people had, or how long it would take to carry out her plan, or even for that matter if her plan would work at all.

Her steps were hindered by the doubt which grew within her insides like a bowl of the barbarian fodiens. But she forced herself to keep moving nonetheless. There was an entire village at stake here, and the cares of one single person were of little consequence next to that.

She watched again in amazement as the funny door to the sararin-room swung open and she soon found Ayube working on the crumpled front of the damaged flying craft. He must have heard her hurried steps because he watched her approach with a puzzled expression.

“Ayube. You witnessed the great Adeima right?”

Now the hue-maan was even more confused. But he nodded his head as their kind did for 'yes.'

“Ayube. I want to ask for your help. And I hope, I pray that you will not dismiss me as the other hue-maans do for my reverence of Her great wisdom.”

The man put down whatever tool he was working on and stood up to face her (even though she could still gaze at the spot with no hair at the peak of his head). “Gelf. I can't rightly understand *what* we witnessed. But, I guess I can accept that it's beyond anything that my own people view as a deity. What is this about anyway?”

Quickly she explained her idea to him and emphasized how much was at stake and how little time might be available. As she expected, the man was resistant and offered a great many objections. But she was ready for all of them and her sense-readin told her that he was at least willing to *entertain the idea* that Adeima wasn't merely some 'prim-ee-tiv' concept.

As before, she stood before the huge column in the strange room. And as before she wore the funny pads on her head and torso. And as before her limbs and insides shook from the terror of knowing that she would not only be risking her physical wellness, but that of her kaba as well. After all, the first time she had not known that being exposed to the crystal would connect her with the Holy Mother, but now she was taking on the role of the Oracle *intentionally*. There was

no way of knowing this time if Adeima would accept her request or approve of her method. But now that she was in the hue-maans' power room, there was no turning back. So she looked over at Ayube and nodded her head in their manner.

Once again the panel slid open and she gazed into the incredibly deep blackness. Her body felt the burning fire and she struggled with all her being to keep from yelling out as the intensity threatened to overpower her consciousness. If the hue-maan closed the door now, the chance would be lost forever.

Chapter 59

“Well, it looks like she's stable for now.” The doctor seemed to wear an eternal frown as she gazed at the denisovian's medical readings. “That woman better hurry up and get better, so I can have the satisfaction of murdering her!”

Professor Umquo put a steady hand on her shoulder. “Now now, doctor. Let's please not be too rash. You can be certain that I will have a long talk with the woman when she's fully recovered.” He paused for a moment and his expression came to resemble the doctor's. “And when she *does* recover, you can be certain that the consequences for her will be *quite* severe.”

Ayube then spoke up. Though his eyes remained focused on the director's feet the whole time. “Professor. It wasn't her fault. I'm the one to blame. After all, I was the one who allowed her to be exposed to the energy crystal in the end.”

The man turned to face his interpreter with furrowed eyebrows. He didn't pull any punches in his response now. “Yes Ayube, and unlike the denisovian, you should have known better. We will have a very serious discussion, you and I, when this is through.” He gave a long pause and glanced back at Gelf's readings. “But at least let's hope that the woman's sacrifice was not in vain. I assume that you had the recorder on to document her 'experience?’”

“Of course professor. But, that is.” He paused and tried again “I don't think either of you are going to like what you see.”

“We wont know that, Ayube, until you show it to us. Isn't that right?”

The man's nervousness was clearly no longer due to his impending punishment. “Of course professor. We can view it in the doctor's office if you wish.”

They watched as Gelf stood transfixed in front of the dark energy crystal. Her form was unmoving for a couple of minutes while they waited for something to happen. Then there were a few incomprehensible sentences before the strange premonitions began.

“Seeker who travels last, brings sickness fast.”

“Blood of neither B nor A, brings wellness to a people in dismay.”

“Stone of red, new village fed.”

“Last spark from crystal source sends ship to change course.”

Every face in the room was frowning by the time the video showed the denisovian collapsed on the floor. It took the doctor and the professor several minutes to come to grips with what was said.

“Ship changing course?!” How could she know about ships or course changes?” Now the professor's face lost all of its previous anger as the wheels spun in his mind.

“Professor, you must remember that this isn't Gelf actually relating the knowledge, it's these, beings we witnessed.”

The frown returned briefly as the professor looked over. “Ayube. I can't count or discount whatever it was that the two of you saw. But without some kind of real evidence, you would be wise to remember that your standing as an adviser has no validity at the moment.”

“Wait you two.” Sefi paused and replayed the recording as she stared intently at the screen.”

“Blood of neither B nor A? What could that mean? We don't even know that the natives HAVE different blood types.” The doctor stared at the ceiling as she remained lost in thought for a moment.

Ayube now, unwisely chose to offer advice despite the professor's warning. “Doctor I think she means, us.”

“You're right Ayube, I don't like it. *Not one bit.*” The professor's face grew flush and his hands flew like birds around his body. “I absolutely will, not, have it! Haven't we caused enough contamination as it is?! We've kidnapped and wiped the memories of over two dozen people, thrown them into a life of slavery, allowed one of their people to see our technology, played god when they caught some kind of alien whooping cough, introduced one of them to an artificial version of their own deity, and now you want to infect them with *our blood*? I absolutely will not allow it!”

The doctor looked at the expedition leader with a calm and cautious face. “Professor, we may not need to use full blood cells. All that this thing said was that blood that's neither A or B will provide an answer. Perhaps one of us has an antibody or something in our white blood cells which would provide a cure.”

Neither of them had seen the professor so upset before. It was very much the exception to the rule for him to take a stand without careful debate and the support of at least half of the researchers involved. But this time his face was as hard and cold as the walls of their dysfunctional ship.

“Doctor. You know that I respect you. But I fear you may have allowed your personal feelings for this particular native to cloud your judgment. Even if we do see an improvement to the one you have in stasis. What's to say that he doesn't develop some other kind of malady down the road? What's to say that we don't somehow cause them to evolve in some unforeseen way? The very idea violates *every single article* of the oath which we've all vowed to uphold!”

There was a light on the board at the doctor's desk which distracted her. It looked as if the denisovian's vital signs were beginning to reach normal function.

She raised her hands in a peace gesture and spoke slowly to Umquo. “Professor, can we delay this while I tend to our patient?”

Chapter 60

The first thing she felt was a strange mix of emotions. There was anger, very strong anger. There was guilt. There was some admiration. There was a deep fear and worry also. And something she

couldn't quite recognize. It was something like the love, yes it was love. That last was very confusing. It wasn't like the love she had for Truini. It was more like the love she felt for little Falia.

Then she started to get mind-pictures. She saw the tool that the doctor used to read that she was 'stable.' She saw herself lying on the table in the healing room. She saw professor Umquo standing behind Sefi as they looked down at her.

Once again she had to fight through that strange and exhausting barrier, seeking that one shimmerer that would lead her to break through the transition to awakeness. This at least helped her to sort out the emotions better. The guilt, not surprisingly, came from Ayube. There was a mix of admiration and anger from professor Umquo. The anger though came from Sefi, which shocked her the most. She would've thought that her decision to seek the wisdom of Adeima without interrupting the doctor would have been the most practical course to follow. But the emotions she was feeling had less to do with her decision to bypass Sefi's 'ree-sirch,' as the risk she had taken with her own life. Now she at least understood *what part* of the emotions were causing the confusion. But why should Sefi be the one who was upset? After all, it was *her* life that she was risking. She hadn't risked Sefi's life, or Ayube, or any of her kinsfolk.

"How are you feeling?" The kind face looking down at her made the hard fought battle towards the awake-time all worth it. She summoned strength that she didn't think she had to sit up and embrace Sefi. But the effort was too taxing and as soon as the doctor released her, she fell hard back to the bed.

"Please Gelf. You need to save your strength."

"No Sefi. You must use the hue-maan vital-fluid. Adeima commands it."

Now the doctor didn't just *think* the image of slapping her forehead, she physically did it and said something under her breath like 'chi moo.'³⁷

She was sorry for causing upset for the doctor, but if Sefi could only see the wisdom of Adeima-

"Gelf. I'm sorry to say this, but the decision isn't yours to m-"

"Not my decision?!" Her voice rose higher and stronger in her frustration until she got the sense of someone's pain and saw Sefi holding her hands over her ears. Then she quickly lowered the timbre of her voice, but not the intensity of her emotion. "Sefi these are MY people. I care about you hue-maans and respect you. But when it comes down to it, you hue-maans can just live here in your magic camp with your magic tools and your flying boxes. You don't have kinsfolk who are dying from the unhealth and waiting at the door to Pritlaxtl. I know you don't *believe* in Adeima, but she is REAL, and *I* for one will fight to the last of my strength to heed he-"

Somehow her voice and her body stopped listening to the commands she gave it. The image of Sefi and the healing room faded along with her anger and soon all that she saw was blackness. But within the blackness was a small point of light which caught her attention. Thinking that this would lead her to the awake-time, she focused more intently on it. But instead of seeing Sefi, she saw a picture that made no sense. There was a wide sploch of red with little bubbles of white scattered around. It was a beautiful pattern of colors and organic, curvilinear forms. As she watched, the picture that she saw drew closer to one of the white bubbles. There were several

37 [Instead of 'chi-moo, I would prefer to find a translation of 'for crying out loud']

spots within that were a beautiful dark green, like the color of the moon after the Saülè disappeared. Without really wanting to, she found herself moving farther away from the image and towards another image. This looked similar to the first, but it was colored blue and there were strange patterns of black permeating the blue. She saw a spot move in from the left which was the same beautiful green. It moved towards the black clouds and multiplied until it completely covered the black. Then the dark green faded slowly until it was possible to see beneath and she grasped that the black clouds were gone.

“Gelf? Can you hear-”

She tried to swat at the noise as she would a hutz fly. But the distraction had already stolen her away from the beautiful scene. She was very annoyed at being thrown back to the healing place so suddenly. But no matter how much she struggled, she could not return to the wonderful picture. Resignedly, she looked up at Ayube and Sefi, and accepted that the beautiful images were part of a marvelous dream. Still, she held on to the pictures in her mind, they were so touching.

“I think she's coming out of it.”

“Sefi. I didn't want to wake up. It was soo pretty.”

“My word, Gelf. What did you see?!”

She got the mind-picture of something the hue-maans called 'near deth ek-speer-ense.' So she had to correct them. “No no. It wasn't the after-time. It was just a dream. But it was so beautiful. She described the pattern of red, and the bubbles of white and how the little green spot within seemed to change the other blue pattern.” But as she described it, she got an emotion of shock from the doctor. Something about the life-force of her people. She was still too groggy from the strange unhealth to figure any of it out, so she told Sefi that she wanted to rest for awhile and let her body recover.

The whole time she lay still, the funny pictures kept teasing her mind. She wondered about them and what they had to do with the hue-maan's life-force. But now even her mind became too tired to focus on anything.

Chapter 61

She was finally feeling better, and she had an inkling of what the pictures might be a clue to. But in order to be sure, she would have to do something that was very very wrong. More wrong she feared, then asking Ayube to expose her to the hue-maans' power device. She worried this time about the implications for a small eternity. Would Adeima punish her? And even if She didn't, the hue-maans most certainly would. Beyond that, would she even be able to live with herself afterwards? And for that matter, was it even possible for her to succeed? None of these questions had easy answers. But then she thought of the hue-maans description of her village, and she decided, finally, that protecting her own kaba at the expense of the whole of Xenlaria was a selfish thing to do.

So very carefully at first, she felt with her mind for Sefi. She saw the lighted panel that the doctor was looking at and learned that she was treating something called a 'my-grain.' But then she began to feel within the doctor's mind, as if she were looking for a particular plant in a large

field. She saw pictures of hue-maan faces, hue-maan injuries, even hue-maans who had gone to the after-time. It took a long while and she became very very tired. But finally she saw it. A memory from when Sefi was looking through the thing they called 'myk-rohe-skope.' The image was a very small picture of the hue-maans' life-force. And it matched perfectly with the first picture she had seen in the darkness before.

But now she was left with an even more frightening thought. Could she? Would she destroy so much of what had been built up over the timespan since she'd left her home? She didn't know. But it seemed as if there was no other option through diplomatic avenues. Sefi had been so unwilling to listen, and the lives of her entire village were depending on this. With a great deal of fraidness and with deep mourning inside, she finally decided that it would have to be done. She cried all through her kaba for the possible harm she was doing to her friendship with the outsiders but, if she was totally honest with herself, no price would be too high to protect the familyland and the kinsfolk.

Chapter 62

She was still feeling weak, but she at least had the energy to stand and to walk small amounts. She searched among the hue-maans for the one named Anuli. That was the only hue-maan who didn't have a memory of her people or of anything that had happened between her and Sefi. She finally found the woman in their exercise place doing something their people called 'yoh-gah' and it was amazing to watch. She sat looking at the hue-maan who had her whole body into a kind of ball position and balanced on her hands. It must have helped the hue-maan to have an extra finger on each hand. She struggled with her patience as she watched the hue-maan move to another position with her legs in the air as she continued for a long timespan.

Finally the woman was finished and saw her sitting in the corner. "Oh. I didn't see you. You must be the native woman."

"Yes, I'm Gelf."

"Wow. I'm sorry to stare, but your people are so—" The hue-maan paused while searching for a word. "So exceptional-looking."

She smiled at that. It was such an interesting experience to witness, in real time, how the hue-maan reacted to seeing *her* people. "Oh I don't mind Anuli. My people have size and strength, and your people have the magic tools."

Suddenly she got the same fear from the woman that the others had felt upon first meeting her.

"Oh, I hope you don't think of us as superior beings."

"Don't worry Anuli. I don't see your people as godlike anymore. You just have very amazing tek, tek—"

"Technology."

"Right. And that is what I would like to ask for your help with. I wonder if you can show me how to use the 'myk-roh-skope' device."

"The microscope? Well if you want help with that, why don't you just ask doctor Ikpeba? She knows it better than I do."

Now she was treading very dangerous territory. “She, um. She cannot help me. I think that this is very urgent for the people of my familyland.”

“Well, okay. Can you give me fifteen minutes?”

Gelf was slowly starting to understand the hue-maans' way of keeping time. She didn't yet know how they knew what the current time was, so she just told the hue-maan that she would wait in the healing room.

Thankfully Sefi was sleeping, and so she did not need to explain her presence to anyone within. She sat next to Pelfren and recited the healing chant for a timespan until she heard the door open and Anuli came in.

“Alright Gelf. What is it that you would like to look at under the microscope?”

“Anuli, you have type 'Oh' blood, right?”

“Well, yes, but-”

“I learned about it from Sefi.” She knew that the hue-maans didn't like when she jumped ahead of them, but she didn't know how much time they might have or if someone else might enter the room. She asked Anuli's permission to use their device for pulling out some of the life-force and the hue-maan showed her how to put a drop onto a clear plate which she inserted into a slot.

On the screen, they both saw the image from Gelf's vision. The sea of red with the white globules, and with Anuli's help, she increased the 'mag-nee-fee-kayshun' in one spot and she saw the green dot which Anuli called 'anty-body.' That must be what she needed. She found a sample of Pelfren's life-force and they added some of the anty-bodys into it. In only a short timespan, she saw the same thing happen on the screen that was in her dream. The little green dot repeated itself many many times and took over the black parts until there was none left.

“That's amazing Gelf! Adewale had mentioned that you were a healer, but I would never have believed that you could have developed a grasp of immunology so quickly.”

She didn't dwell on the hue-maan's words because she had to see if the green dots would actually take away Pelfren's unhealth beyond just what she could see in the hue-maan device. Despite her better judgment, she found among Anuli's memories the button to turn off the 'stays-sis' and gave the tall man a 'in-jek-shun' before someone could stop her.

For a long while, nothing happened. She thanked Anuli and told the hue-maan that she could either stay or go as the woman wished, but that if Pelfren woke up, she should not be in sight. However the man must have been in the deep sleep of unhealth because he did not wake up the whole time she was there. But after a long timespan during which she dozed awhile, it did seem that the splotches on his arms were less dramatic in their color.

What did happen however, was that Sefi came in for her morning shift and quickly sized up the situation as if the woman had a sense-readin of her own. Gelf needed no special ability to understand what the doctor was feeling this time. “Chineke mee, Gelf. What on Earth have you done?!!” The woman turned a shade of red that might otherwise have been amusing, but Gelf was not laughing at all now. She knew that it was time to face up to what she'd done. And she was willing to accept whatever punishment the hue-maans deemed fit as long as it saved her people.

Sefi didn't even speak to her however. She just stabbed her finger hard against a button and spoke to professor Umquo. Then finally the hue-maan put all of her emotions into just one

sentence. “Don't you dare move a muscle, healer. You haven't the faintest idea just how much trouble you've gotten your sorry ass into!”

Soon the door opened and she sensed Sefi explaining what happened to the professor. The hue-maans spoke in fast sentences and with great changes in the pitch of their voice. Both would point at her intermittently and move their hands in strange patterns. But finally, professor Umquo told her to follow him into Sefi's office.

Umquo's face had a strange look wherein the hairy lines above his eyes formed a deep 'V' and his mouth pointed downward severely. “Gelf. For the life of me, I can't fathom what would cause you to utterly destroy the deep sense of trust that we've so carefully developed with you. Is one man's life really worth all of that?!”

She was about to respond, but he put a hand up to stop her.

“Quite frankly denisovian, I'm not the least bit interested in your excuses. What in the whole damn world made you think that it was okay to inject one of your people with *human antibodies*?! Doctor Ikpeba has already told me that she explicitly pointed out the dangers to you in no uncertain terms. And you *blatantly* ignored her very sound advice. Is this how you repay our trust?! Is this how you respond to people who have put all of our vast resources towards helping your people?? Not only did you take advantage of my trust and of the doctor's, but the entire crew to boot.”

The hue-maan's statement was strange in that he asked many questions, but he seemed not interested in hearing answers to them. His hands moved wildly, but the gestures were similarly without meaning.

“But I saved his life professor. I'm completely certain that this will cure the unhealth-”

The man seemed not to have heard her. “You even took advantage of Anuli's strange amnesia. For crying out loud Gelf, the woman is barely recovering from whatever injury she received in your village, and you just used that for your own gain!”

She tried to stay calm and to let the hue-maan leader run through his emotions, but the way he talked was fueling her own emotions and soon the unhappy bubbled over. “Just like you took advantage of your magic tools to put my people into slavery.”

“Gelf, don't change the subject. You know that's entirely different.”

She put her hands on her waist, not realizing now how much she was mimicking the hue-maans' body language. “How? Please explain to me how it is different professor.”

The man stood up, seeming to *actually* look at her now, and made strange motions with his own arms. “Gelf, that's beside the point! That man is a respected and integral member of your tribe. We can't just erase his memory and remove him like we did with your mate.”

Now the hue-maan was walking back and forth in quick steps. “Gelf, you're not one of us, this doesn't affect you the way it does us. It's bad enough that we've interfered this much with a-”

“Go ahead and say it. Say it professor! A prem-eetive race! You think of us as lesser, as inferior.” Now the professor's face became even more red. “Damn it Gelf. You know that's not how we see you.”

She was now beyond any scrap of sensible thought, but at the moment she did not care at all.

“Isn't it?! Your people are so strange. When you are calm, I sense only kindness from you. But in times like this now, I feel the hir... hire-arky between you hue-maans and my people. On some

level you DO see us as inferior. I don't understand how, but inside of you there is some kind of superiority complex between your people and mine.”

Something clicked within the hue-maan. She didn't quite understand it, but she could tell that it was *very* severe. He stood up again and pointed to the door. “*Get out right now!*”

She stood up as well and stalked heatedly back into the main healing room. She had pushed the hue-maan too far and she knew it. What she didn't quite understand was exactly *how* it had happened. It was something that felt too complex for her to understand through the turmoil of emotions. But all too quickly her introspection and remorse were interrupted by the face of Sefi, and the woman was radiating fury to a degree that she had never imagined possible. Her frown was very deep and her face was the color of the setting Saülè. She spoke in a whisper, but one riddled with unmitigated outrage.

“Gelf, your companion is awake and quite upset. You get your guilty denisovian ass in there and you calm him down.” She paused briefly before continuing. “And you will be monitored *very* closely. If you even breathe a word of anything that will contaminate the man, I swear to you we will shuttle you so far across the planet that you'd never get back to your people if you walked for *a dozen lifetimes!*”

Now finally, with the emotions dissipated, she was beginning to recognize how severe the hurt was that she had caused. The professor was right, both her and the strangers had worked very hard to develop a trust between them, and the hue-maans had given her what they called 'benefit of the doubt' beyond what she probably deserved. She didn't necessarily regret her actions, for she still believed that the familyland would be saved through them, but she did very much regret her words to the professor. It was likely that after this she would never see the visitors again. Maybe she would ask Sefi to try the memory wipe on her so that she could go back to being just a village healer.

Putting future plans aside for the moment, she made her way to the bed where Pelfren lay and spoke calmly to him. “Great Pelfren, please be calm. It is I, Gelf the healer.”

There was too little light in the room for them to see each other, but she laid a hand on his own to let him know she was nearby.

“Gelf? Have you been with me the whole time? Why would you focus on me when our chief is with the unhealth?”

“No Pelfren. I was not with you this whole time. I have been working to find a way to remove this terrible unhealth that holds Xenlaria in it's grip. I have received great wisdom from Adeima. Do you feel better now?”

“You visited the temple? Then does that mean that the Oracle is still unaffected?”

That left her silent for a timespan. There was too much damage committed now for her to risk an untrue. “Pelfren please, I beg you to answer my question.”

“Yes healer. I do feel less unhealth inside. But I am still not able to move at all. So I am not yet of gudstrength yet.”

“I understand. Please accept that we are very close to removing the last of the unhealth from you-”

“Healer you must not focus so much on me. We must rescue chief Journgad!”

“Pelfren you are absolutely right. However it would be unwise for me to use a dangerous cure on our leader before knowing if it might cause other problems.”

“Oh, I see. Yes Gelf, that is a most enlightened decision. It is better that you test it on his humble servant first to be sure that it is safe. Now if your healing removes this hold on my limbs, then you must immediately use the same herbs on the chief. For I no longer feel the pain inside and the normal hunger has returned.”

“That is good to know great Pelfren. I will be keeping watch over you and if you fully recover then we will absolutely heal chief Journgad and the others.” She patted his hand lightly. “Rest now faithful servant and I will check in on you soon.”

She walked out of the darkened room and again was faced with the professor and Sefi. Both of them were still frowning and had their arms in a strange position crossed in front of their chests. “That was well done healer. It will do little to mitigate your punishment, but you have at least saved me from having to do the unthinkable.”

In a very short timespan, a hue-maan that she had never met walked into the room and told her in no uncertain terms to follow him. She sensed nothing but coldness from this person as he led her back to the room that she had been given to use. Before leaving, the hue-maan turned off the light source leaving her in darkness so complete that it was like staring at the energy crystal. She gazed into the blackness and finally let her emotions spill out onto the underfoot as she succumbed unashamedly to the bottomless pit of melancholy.

Chapter 63

The professor had been too worked up over the whole situation to return to his office, and so he remained in the medical bay while the doctor analyzed the one named Pelfren. Despite some concern for the health of the native people, his thoughts now were dominated by what was to be done with the alien healer. He had been severely tempted to carry out his threat and just take her across the planet in the Lumumba. But that of course was only reactionary. Now that he was calmer, he knew that something would have to be done to bridge the gap between them. Gelf was too valuable as an intermediary with the other natives and she was the only one among their people who the other seekers trusted. He regretted more than ever the decision to wipe their peoples' memories. It had opened up a giant Isu-ata yáan yàan³⁸ that he doubted would ever be completely resolved.

“Professor. Please come here a moment.”

Feeling his age now, he got up and went slowly over to the doctor. First thing's first he thought.

“Yes doctor Ikpeba? What have you found?”

Her pained expression was so severe that for a moment he wondered if their chief's assistant had died from whatever the native girl had done. “Professor. I wonder if we were wrong to criticize Gelf.”

For a second he couldn't believe what he was hearing. “Wrong?! Doctor the woman defied your explicit orders and manipulated our crew members. *Twice*, mind you. I was half tempted to follow through with the threat regardless of what she said to that native man.”

38 Yoruba expression meaning ‘can of worms’

“Well professor, I've been pouring over all of the medical data that we've collected from each of the seekers, from the sick villagers, even a sample from one of the barbarians.” She paused and showed a graph on the wallscreen. “Professor, this man we have here, is now the healthiest Denisovian of them all. He's been able to fight off all elements of this plague without any side effects whatsoever. I honestly can't figure out how she knew, but somehow she isolated exactly the right antibody to reverse the biological degradation within his immune system.”

“But that's great news doctor.” He smiled for a moment, but then looked at her more closely. “So why are you frow- Oh.”

“Professor, we delegitimized their religion, we ridiculed her suggestions, and we obstructed her attempts to offer the solution to what we ourselves were trying to do. Chi mooo, you even threatened to banish her to the other side of the planet. And all for doing nothing more than trying to save the lives of *her own people*.” The doctor took a short pause to gather her thoughts. “Professor, understand, she only defied us because we left her no alternative. Remember, these are *her* people. Even though we all might be (or at least *were*) friends. These are the people that she's known her entire life. They're 'kinfolk.’”

Now the professor stared pensively back. “I see what you mean doctor.” He paused to contemplate the woman's words and it was several minutes before he could respond. “As reticent as I am to admit to the fact, it does appear as if we ourselves are the ones who must swallow the bitter pill of remorse.”

Chapter 64

The darkness was as thick as if it were a physical thing, perfectly reflecting her own black disconsolation. Her kaba lay at the bottom of the deepest canyon with no kindness at all to light the emptiness, and she was full of fraidness that she would never feel anything different. This wasn't like when her pack had blocked her view of the shimmer, this was a deep and hopeless feeling that she would have no friends in the whole land ever again. If the hue-maans didn't trust her to keep their magic secret, they could decide that it's too dangerous for her to even live among the other seekers. They might prevent her from ever seeing Truini again.

This last brought a long wailing to her heart and she grieved all the more intensely over it. The hurt felt like it would last until she finally succumbed to the aftertime. She even prayed that such a thing would come sooner as it felt like a less painful alternative.

An eternity of days passed with nothing but sorrow before she finally saw a crack of light show against the wall. It very quickly expanded until it spread up the wallside and she was momentarily blinded. At first she thought that her wish might actually have been granted, until she felt the presence of the hue-maans. But this shocked her nearly as much. For the sense-readin that she felt was not anger or punishment, but a severe guilty regret.

It was deeper then the regret she herself had felt when she told them of the barbarian enslavement. This was an overwhelming and profoundly painful feeling. The pain was so severe radiating off the hue-maans that she began to experience the emotions as if they were her own. It was an incredibly intimate ordeal for her. She experienced the rehearsed wordsong, the knowledge of being so wrong, and the doubt that forgiveness and healing could ever prevail.

“Oh professor and Sefi. No! I forgive you. Please don't be hurt. I do, I do forgive you!” She wanted to run over to them and embrace them, but she was still too blinded by the shaft of bright light. But as soon as the rest of the room became light, she nearly knocked the two of them over in her eager embrace. Both of them were trying to talk, but she couldn't even hear them for her own heartfelt reassurances. It wasn't until she felt a hand on her mouth that her gaze was brought down to the two others. The hue-maans had a pained expression and now she grasped that they were trying to talk.

“Oh, I'm so sorry. I guess the emotions overwhelmed me.” Now that the hue-maans were free, she felt something new from Sefi. A deep and terrible fear.

“Sefi? Are you alright?”

The doctor wasn't standing straight and her pained expression remained even after being let go.

“Gelf, I think you cracked a couple of my ribs.”

“Oh no Sefi. I'm so sorry, I just wanted to-”

“Gelf, Gelf please, I understand how you feel. We all are relieved to patch things up with you. But for now I need to get back to the medical ward and patch *myself* up.”

The doctor slowly and carefully made her way out and she was left now with the professor.

Though she had earlier been a bubbling pot of words before, now the silence hung thick in the air like the fairy dust of the Saülé within the forst.

“Gelf. I'm sorry for what happened before. What you saw, well-” The professor did something funny with his throat. “It opens up very deep fears among my people. You see, long long ago on my planet, there was in fact a hierarchy that existed between some types of humans and others. Not all humans look the way we do you must understand. There are some humans with straight hair and pale skin, some with elongated eyes, some with a tan skin and others who are even darker than me. There are also the different genders as you know. At many points in the way far back, some groups of humans came to dominate people who were different because they had smarter technology-”

“Did this have to do with the pictures I saw of the large and terrible ‘booms’ and the many hue-maans sent to the after-time?”

“Well, it's possible. There were parts of the world where people with smarter tools used them to kill or injure people who did not have those tools. But my point is, that our world endured centuries of this stratification before we were finally forced to accept that humans are all equally capable. It was not easy mind you. It took the near destruction of our race for that to happen. So your, mind-picture struck a deeply troubling chord within me, an aspect that our people are ashamed to face up to.”

As with many things, the mind-images from the hue-maans helped her to understand more than the man's words expressed. So she put a hand on the professor's own, looked him in the eye, and told the man that she understood his difficulty. Really and truly.

“Thank you Gelf. I'm glad to hear that we can be friends again.” The professor paused. “And despite her hasty departure, you can be sure that doctor Ikpeba feels the same way.”

Once again she embraced the professor in her joy at the new peace. Though she was careful now to be gentle with the fragile beings. When they finally pulled away the hue-maan put up a hand in what their kind used to stop the direction of a conversation.

“Gelf. I'm glad that we've been able to work things out with you. But we must not forget that there's an urgent situation among your people-”

“Chief Journgad! Yes, we must help him, and the people of the familyland. So what-” Now she got a new and disturbing mind-picture from the man.

“You want *me* to go back with you to help remove the unhealth?”

“Yes Gelf. Despite our anger at the time, you've probably gotten the, 'mind-pictures' telling you how very impressed doctor Ikpeba is by your rapid understanding of the healing arts. Our own people spend many years studying medicine before reaching that level of proficiency.”

“But it was all due to the wisdom of Adeima.”

“Yes of course. But *you* were the one who actually cured him. This and the fact that you're the only one among your kind who has seen our, magic, means that we must rely on you primarily to give the same medicine to the rest of your village.”

“But professor. Most of the kinsfolk are in the sleep state of the unhealth. They would not see Sefi's face-”

“Most, Gelf. But not *all of them*. Please realize that if even a single one of your people were to see us as we really are, it would be enormously dangerous.”

Though she still felt unworthy of their faith, it seemed that no rebuttal would be sufficient. She reminded herself that this was not the same as the seekers' veneration of her. The professor respected her for the skill which she possessed and the deep caring that she displayed. So at last she acquiesced. “Very well professor. I understand.”

“Now, Ayube can go with you in disguise. Between the two of you it should be possible to administer the antibodies within a few hours. I'll have Sefi tutor you in the use of the vitals recorder so that we can bring any of the code-red people back here for more intensive care.

Chapter 65

She found Sefi in the healing room, not surprisingly, and the woman flinched a bit as she gave her a hug. But she made sure to be gentle this time and felt the deep friendship once again to her profound relief.

It took very little time for her to learn how to use the hue-maan tool and Sefi was impressed by her quick grasp of it's controls. She tried to explain to the doctor that it was due to her ability to see what the hue-maans saw. But the woman refused her 'hue-mil-atee.'

“Gelf. I can't know what it is that you see in your mind. But I think that you fall back on that 'sense-readin' of yours to deflect compliments. You really are an incredibly intelligent being. I believe that you will continue to be a powerful healer and a strong asset to your people in the future.”

She didn't know what to say to this. Nobody from her own village had ever considered her as anything more than a capable medicine girl. She wondered, not for the first time, if she would be able to live up to Sefi's high opinion of her.

“Now, as much as I enjoy your company, there's a village out there which needs to be saved. So let's Se kía.”³⁹

She didn't get the joke, but Sefi's smile told her enough that she dismissed the meaning of the ‘eks-press-un.’ She followed Sefi back to the huge ‘sarin bay’ where Ayube and Adewale were waiting for them. Ayube was in his typical denisovian disguise and the two were busy loading containers of supplies into the back of the flying box. When she arrived, Ayube made a motion to Sefi and the doctor took over. Ayube then pulled her aside and explained that they were bringing a great quantity of medicine and healing tools to the village to do as much as they could without having to move anyone.

“We still don't know how many people we're dealing with at the moment, so we're planning for the worst but hoping for the best.”

“How many of your magic tools do you think can be brought there without risking the contamnayshun?”

“Well, at least two people in your chief's court were already in the, ‘aftertime.’ So we can use those quarters to keep the equipment that we need. As long as there aren't too many people with the gudstrength to walk around, those rooms should remain undisturbed. As soon as everything is finished getting loaded, we'll head out to your village. But-” The man smiled menacingly. “I suggested to Adewale that we should be able to spare a few minutes to let you visit with your mate and reassure the other seekers. That is if you're willing to endure the kefatz one extra time.” She smiled back at the hue-maan. “Oh thank you Ayube. That would be wonderful.”

“Yes well, I'm sure that your people must be getting worried.”

Chapter 66

So once again she watched in amazement as the underfoot flew quickly beneath them until they reached the morass and then the forst. It was only a short timespan before Adewale told them that they were about 1500 meters directly above the camp of the seekers. She pulled up a bag of supplies packed into a rough cloth bag and soon found herself standing in the quiet forst only a few dozen paces from the camp. She whispered over to Truini who's face shone like the Saülè upon seeing her. They kissed seemingly till the end of time until she finally had to pry the beautiful warrior's arms away and explain that the mission to save their familyland was still quite urgent and she only stopped briefly to reassure the seekers that all was still well.

Her wordsong was brief and she left out a great many details out of necessity. But the emotions from many of them, especially Meyrhut, held at least as much admiration as Sefi had expressed. She again had the fraidness that her people would elevate her to some kind of superior status as a result of her success. With no small amount of struggle, she put that aside for the moment and focused on the group's wellness. She quickly let her people know that she would return as soon

39 Se kía – to hurry [would be great to find something closer to ‘hop to it’]

as the people in the village had regained gudstrength. Then she gave Truini a last, and painfully short, embrace before running back into the forst.

It was an amazingly brief timespan further that the magic box brought them in sight of the familyland. She marveled at the experience of seeing Xenlaria the way a huits-fly might see it. There was a random pattern of shelterspaces surrounding the marketplace, the grouping of little huts built against the walls of Journgad's Great Hall, the hall itself with the stout walls to protect against the occasional herd of meldabeasts. Then in the distance, a green band of water meandering from a group of hills down all the way to the horizon. But soon enough, her distractions were thrown aside as the unpleasantness of the magic faery column delivered herself, Ayube, Sefi, and their magic tools down to the field outside the great hall. Sefi had told her that Adewale would bring the bodies of those two who were in the after-time back to the healing place to go into the stays-sis. Looking at the man, she continued to be impressed by the generosity of the hue-maans who were putting so much effort for the sake of her people's customs. She couldn't imagine the barbarians doing anything so selfless.

As soon as they arrived, Sefi asked her to walk through the village and see how many people had been affected while the two hue-maans moved their tools inside. She reluctantly obliged and entered the compound with no small amount of trepidation. The experience of wandering past the great hall now devoid of people was disturbing enough. But once she passed through the giant gate, she had the singular experience of seeing the whole familyland as well in a wholly deserted state. As Ayube had described, there were no more than five people who she saw that were even awake, and even they could do little more than raise their heads to gaze awe-struck at her. For those who *were* awake and could squeak a word or two, she quietly reassured them that with the help of some kind strangers, she was bringing a cure for the unhealth and that they would all be feeling well very soon.

As kind and warm as her smile was on the outside though, she felt a deep and crushing melancholy within for the kinfolk. Even with the mind-pictures from Ayube to prepare her, the experience of actually *being* in the village and sitting next to them all was so much more traumatic than the hue-maan's wordsong. One particularly crowded shelterspace held such a strong smell of sickness that she nearly passed out from it and had to quickly retreat back outside. It was such a vast and pervading sorrow that her kaba felt completely shattered. Where before she had wanted nothing but to reach the familyland and offer what help she could, now she was greatly relieved to at last return to the empty hall of chief Journgad and take her mind off of the sickness even for the briefest of timespans. But sadly, her respite was brief indeed. For she had to quickly advise Sefi of the situation beyond the gate. The wordsong was nearly as challenging as the experience itself, and her voice broke many times from the horrible mind-pictures that she herself recalled.

From that point on, she and the two hue-maans worked non-stop for the rest of the first day and on into the next. She gave the medicine to those who were conscious, Ayube helped those who were sometimes awake, and Sefi helped those in the deep-sleep.

She could never have imagined, walking into the trading square, what a heavy toll it all would take on her kaba. This was even more difficult for her than the barbarian village had been. Now

she was actually *living the real experience* of the mind-picture from before of the familyland. She felt so powerless, so impotent, staring into an endless chain of helpless and pleading faces as she prayed with everything she had that Adeima would work to remove the unhealth through her. With her body aching, and her kaba shattered to pieces, she was finally able to give medicine to the last man at the edge of the path, and with her healing tool depleted, she dragged herself on wooden stumps back to the hall. By now her strength was utterly vanus and she could do nothing more then collapse into the nearest chair and stare blankly ahead.

It was impossible to say how long a timespan had passed, but she woke up to the sound of faint whispering. She didn't have the energy to pay it any serious attention, her sense-readin filled in the gaps and the words '-be able to keep it from her you know.' floated among them. Then sleep blissfully returned and all was blackness for a timespan.

Chapter 67

She awoke to a room that was so dimly lit that she couldn't see more than a few paces in front of her knobhorns. Everything was silent and she struggled at first to remember where she was. It took several moments of reviewing events before she remembered the unhealth, and the forlorn faces and the hue-maan tools for healing. But strangely, Ayube and Sefi were nowhere to be found. She called out hesitantly, assuming they were in the room somewhere, but there was no answer at first. It was only after another short timespan that she heard the faint sound of someone calling out. The voice was unfamiliar, but she was able, with some concentration, to trace the source to a door that she could vaguely distinguish along the near wallside.

"Hello? Is someone in here?" She couldn't see anything, so had to use smell and sound to aid her detection.

"Who's there? Are you a loyal Xenlarian?" Speak, quickly." Despite the attempt at authority, the voice held little gudstrength to it.

"I am Gelf the healer. I am indeed a loyal Xenlarian."

"Gelf?! The seeker who returned from Higsthon bringing the terrible unhealth? Do not approach any closer!"

This she could not have expected. Not that she sought any high praise for working so hard to help end the sickness, but to be confronted with anger and distrust took her by very much by surprise. "My kinsman I do not understand why you do not wish to let me provide healing."

The man attempted to show power in his wordsong, but his speech cracked from the effort. "It is not healing that you bring, but the visitation of Pritlaxtl. This unhealth began only three days from the morning that you returned with news from Higsthon. Since that day, the village has become a doorway to the aftertime. Is it not enough that even chief Journgad has been struck down by your attack? Must you vi-"

She didn't know what caused the man's speech to be cut off, but she moved in the direction that it had come from hoping to offer what she could. The man gave a few more weak protests, but then fell exhausted to whatever bed he lay on.

She found a hand and checked the life-force and found it to be faint, but not dangerously so. The most likely medicine was rest and water. But if the man would not accept her to offer aid, then

she could think of nobody other than Ayube. So she carefully sought out the doorway and returned to the great hall. It was noticeably brighter now and she could see that it was indeed empty. So she dug into her pocket for the strange talking device.

“Hello? Hello Sefi? Ayube?”

“Gelf? This is Sodangi. I'll put you through to the medical bay.”

It was only a short timespan later that she heard Sefi's voice coming from the device.

“Oh good, you're awake. Listen my friend. Ayube and I had to return here with ten of your people who were in critical condition. I have four of them stabilized, including your chief-”

“Chief Journgad?! You have our ruler there in your healing place??”

“Yes Gelf, please. Let me finish. These people are all in a deep state of, 'unhealth' and I'm going to need to focus on giving them the best care that I can for awhile. So if there's anything you need, please talk to-”

“Can you connect me to Ayube then?”

“Um. Sure. Hold on.”

“Yes?”

This random changing from one hue-maan to another without being able to see them was very confusing to her. “Is this Ayube?”

“Yes it is. Gelf? Is that you?”

“Ayube, Sefi told me that you have the chief in your healing place. But you can't! It would bring the contamny-”

“Gelf, Gelf please. Slow down a minute. Yes we have Journgad here. The man was extremely weak and the doctor has him in stasis until you can return here to administer the injections.”

“But-” She didn't like this. Not the smallest amount. The risk of the chief learning about the hue-maans' tools was terribly high. But realistically there was nothing she could do to affect the hue-maans' actions from where she stood in the village. She had to consider that Sefi had done what their people thought was best and pray to Adeima that it would be alright. So she took a deep breath and worked to keep her focus on the present.

“Ayube are you still in the 'dis-gize' to look like us?”

“I'm afraid so Gelf. Doctor Ikpeba hasn't had a moment's rest since we returned-”

“Ayube, could I ask you to return here and help me with the kinsfolk? There are some unusual things going on, and I think they need more help to get better like-” She didn't know the names for the hue-maan's tools. “The thing that helps people drink when they are asleep.”

She heard Ayube make the sound like the blowing out of air, which sounded almost funny through the talking device. She guessed that it meant he was unhappy. “Alright Gelf. Give me about a half hour to get prepared. I'll see you in a little while.”

She was starting to get a sense of the hue-maans' terms for time. But her head was too filled with other quandaries, so she rested and had a short nap until the hue-maan arrived. When he finally touched her shoulder, the Saülè was finally up and she could clearly see the weariness through the hue-maan's disguise.

She took a moment to stretch herself before filling the man in on what her kinsman had said. She could immediately sense Ayube's concern and she caught something related to her time in front of the energy crystal.

“Gelf, I'm sorry to say that this aligns with what you said the last time that your God spoke through you. It was difficult to understand, but it *did* sound like it was something to do with you and this plague among your village.”

Just when she'd thought that the worst of this tragedy was at long last complete, her mouth fell and she collapsed back into the chair she'd been dozing in. The possibility that the unhealth of her entire familyland could have been her own doing was more painful than a full day staring at the hue-maan's energy crystal. She let out a great long wail and let her head fall into her hands. By the will of Ilhammet, how many more burdens would she be forced to endure before Adeima would forgive her. What could she-

That was it. There *could be no further forgiveness*. After all, she had already spoken an untrue, interrupted the prophecy of the Oracle, consumed the flesh of Azeala's creations, and she had even purposefully taken it upon herself to act in place of the Oracle at the camp of the hue-maans. She had defied the Gods so blatantly that it was clear she could expect no kindness whatsoever from Adeima. This endless cycle of hardships must be just punishment for her defiance. There was clearly nothing-

Her thoughts were interrupted by the hand of Ayube and she looked up to see him gazing down with concern. But in that moment, the concern did nothing but spark her frustration even further. None of this heartache would have occurred if not for the foreigners. In that instant, she wanted absolutely nothing to do with them. “Don't touch me hue-maan!!” She threw his hand aside and marched right out the hall and out into the glade beyond. She collapsed against the hue-maans' cargo container and wept again until there was nothing left within her. It felt as if there was nothing at all to live for in the entire extent of her ‘plan-it.’

Chapter 68

She must have fallen asleep, because the next time she looked up, the Saülè was high in the sky and someone was standing over her. For a moment it was disorienting because something about the person didn't look quite right. But then she heard the voice and her kaba rejoiced. She pulled herself up and gave Falia a long hug.

“Gelf? But dadji said that you had gone away-” There was a short pause and she held the girl out at arm's length to drink in the sight of someone who was finally, at long last, without suffering.

“What is this big funny box doing here?”

She kneeled down now so that she could talk to her young friend on the same level. The brief joy at seeing the girl was replaced for a moment by the fraidness once again. “My wonderful Falia. This funny box is, is nothing that you need to worry about.”

“I'm hungry Gelf. Dadji said that he was going to get fodiens for me. He went out yesterday but he never came back.”

This finally brought her out of the melancholy that she'd sunk into. How could she be so selfish to be thinking only of herself. There were still people here in the familyland who needed help. Even if the unhealth was cured, there would still be a long road ahead for her kinfolk before they could take care of themselves. She realized now, that Fronin hadn't been among the people she

had treated. Maybe there were other people who had been unable to get back to Xenlaria when the plague came. “Falia, do you remember where Fronin might have gone?”

The girl made a strange expression as she struggled to remember. “Well, I wasn't feeling so good, and dadji said he was going to look for kadja roots. But he didn't come back and I don't know how to find him.”

This was worse than she thought. There was little time to help any kinfolk as it was, and if she had to search the forest to find them well, there would be little hope at all. “Falia. I will make sure to get you fodiens. Could I ask you to wait in your shelterspace while I go and search for Fronin?”

“Are you going to bring the funny-looking people back?”

She almost fell down from spinning around so quickly. “The *what?!?*”

“Oh my goodness! So they are real. Did they bring the unhealth? Are they messengers of Pritlaxtl?”

She didn't take a second to even think. She wrapped the little girl and hoisted her into her arms.

“My dearest Falia. What do you know about funny-looking people?”

“I saw them!” The girl's expression changed then. “I think I saw them anyway. I was in our shelterspace waiting for dadji when I heard someone outside. As the door opened, I got a bunch of funny pictures-” the girl pointed to her head, “in my head. They were focused on using some kind of strange tool on everyone in the village. I was afraid, and so I hid in the blankets. But the person I saw, I think it was a she, had no knobhorns but instead had a big horn in the middle of her head. And she was so small and had a strange color to her. I thought later that it was just a nightmare, but now I feel like you know them.”

Now she even sensed a fearful trembling from the girl.

“Gelf. Why do they want to hurt us?”

This was a horrible turn of events. If Falia had the same sense-reading that she did, and was able to get mind-pictures from the hue-maans it would mean forced isolation for the girl as well. Now she understood professor Umquo's warning about even one Xenlarian seeing the hue-maans. She rushed through a number of possible responses and finally focused on defusing the girl's fear first and foremost. “Falia you're right. There are people who were going through the village. But these people and I, we were working *together*. We weren't trying to hurt the kinsfolk. On the contrary, we were all working very hard to save them from the unhealth that everyone suffers from. These people have very good tools and a skilled healer. Their healer's name is Sefi, and she's my friend.”

She sensed that the girl accepted this, and so she quickly switched subjects hoping to protect the girl from the 'contamnayshun.' “Falia please share the fulltrue, do you have the ability to sense what other people are feeling?”

“Well sure. Doesn't everybody?” The girl's expression went pensive. “Why does that give you fraidness? Oh goodness, you're scared, of me? What did I do? Did I do something wrong?”

Quickly she hugged the girl and made cowing noises. “No, no no Falia. Shhh. You haven't done anything wrong. It's just, well people like Sefi have certain things that we aren't supposed to know about. I found out by accident, but knowing about them makes things more difficult. I'm afraid for you that you will have the same problem.”

“Oh. I understand. You are not afraid *of* me, you are afraid *for* me.” The girl paused and thought briefly. “But what is so scary about the tools of these people? Doesn't everyone use tools?”

“Oh Falia. I wish that I could give you the fulltruth. The tools of the hue-maans are very strange and difficult to understand. Even the names for them are difficult for me.”

“You care for them a lot, don't you?”

“Yes Falia I... they are my friends, just like you and Fronin.”

“I'm still hungry Gelf.”

She chuckled inside at this, thinking how quickly young people can dismiss things that aren't relevant to them. “Alright Falia. Let's get you back to your shelterspace and I will bring you fodiens as soon as I can and hopefully we will find your dadji soon.”

Once the girl was safely back home, she rushed to the great hall searching for Ayube. She finally found him in one of the abandoned rooms. He was sleeping soundly and she hated to wake him, but it was necessary if they were to save any remaining kinsfolk. It took a short timespan of gentle nudging before the hue-maan came to. He had been having a dream about the big blue plan-it.

“Oh lord Gelf. Go easy on me this time. You almost knocked my arm off.”

“I'm so sorry Ayube. I was just frustrated and feeling selfish. Really, I did not mean to hurt you.” She recounted for him her brief thoughts of unhappy and apologized again. “Please we need your help quickly. Can you use the flying box to help look for any missing kinsfolk who aren't in the village?” She repeated for him what Falia had said before.

“A human's work never ends, does it?”

She didn't understand what that meant, but dismissed it as one of their 'ekspres-shuns.'

But then his tone changed and he became serious. “Do you think this little girl could read our mental images the way you can?”

“I'm not completely sure yet Ayube, but I believe that we should be extra careful. We should not risk letting any of your people near her.”

“Agreed. Alright, then you get food for the girl and I'll make a pass over the village looking for any natives out among the trees and the river.”

Chapter 69

She spent the rest of that day getting fodiens for Falia, playing with her, and reassuring her that everyone would indeed be just fine. By the time the girl went to sleep, she was almost feeling better herself. The walk back to the great hall however returned for her all of the fraidness for what would happen in the future. Being alone in her village that was normally filled with voices and people, even after dark, quickly eliminated the calm which had just barely taken root.

Finding the chief's hall empty as well did nothing to quell her foreboding. Quickly, she pulled out the talking device and asked to speak with Ayube. What she found out was at least some relief.

Fronin had been found a short distance away and he was in a deep weak-state and so was brought back to the hue-maans' camp. Sefi was working as hard as she could-

“Who is there!”

She shoved the talking device into its secret pocket and spun around.

“Gelf? How dare you? I thought that I made it quite clear that you were not welcome within the courtyard of chief Journgad!”

She didn't know the name of the man, but she recognized the voice from the difficult conversation earlier. Now she prayed that her performance as a diplomat would be successful in returning her to the man's good graces. “Noble plutarch. I beg forgiveness for intruding within the great hall. I merely sought for the man Ayube who has graciously offered to help bring healing to our people-”

“Healing for the very unhealth that you yourself thrust upon us! Did you really believe that the great people of Xenlaria could be so easily conquered? We are a mighty people, with a powerful chief. The great Journgad is-”

It quickly became clear that gallantry would not appease the man and she was still feeling too overwhelmed by her emotions. That any kinsfolk, much less one of the plutolaty would show her so much unhappy after the seemingly endless sacrifices, well it finally became too much for her to endure. With less care than she'd shown before, she interrupted him forcefully. “Yes, the mighty chief Journgad is in the deep state of unhealth. I spoke to the hue-maan healer only a short while ago and she is desperately working to save his life. Believe what you wish, but I will continue to fight valiantly for the good of our kinsfolk. *No matter what the cost.*” She raised her voice perhaps more than necessary to make it clear that she would not be intimidated. But storming out of the hall did nothing to ease her agitation. She worried what would actually happen to Xenlaria now. Even assuming that Sefi could remove the unhealth from her people. Could Journgad, and Fronin, and Pelfren and all the others just go right back to the way things were? Could the other seekers do the same, for that matter? There was no way to know for the moment. With no small effort, she realized that this was not the time for concerning herself with the future. She still had people in the present who depended on her, notably one scared young'in.

Chapter 70

With the kinsfolk finally treated by the hue-maan tools, and with the last few stragglers picked up by Ayube (there had been two others outside the village), she finally had a timespan to sit and think about next steps. First, and most important was the safety of the chief. For there was no possible rectification if Journgad or any of the plutolaty were to discover even the smallest element of the hue-maans' magic. Then of course, there was Falia, for someone clearly was needed to watch over her until Fronin recovered, and it couldn't be Ayube or any other hue-maan. And not least, she had to be sure that the rest of the kinsfolk recovered their gudstrength in short order.

Since there was nothing she could do for the chief at the moment, she went searching among the villagers for any people who were well enough to keep an eye on little Falia. Unfortunately though, the prospects for this proved quite grim. Nearly everyone in the village was in the sleep of recovery. The familyland was so deserted, that to anyone who wasn't a healer it could easily appear as if Pritlaxtl had conquered the whole land. The only way she could even detect that a

person was merely asleep was due to the hue-maans' tool that showed her the improving 'immuno-something' (she didn't remember the term).

It took many visits to almost every shelterspace in the village as she searched among the dead silence pervading her people. Finally as the Saülé began to tire and fall towards the ground, she entered a space and was immediately confronted by a face staring back at her.

“Excuse me?! Don't you ask permission before entering someone's shelterspace?”

She was so surprised to see anyone awake that it took a moment or two before she could respond. “Oh, I'm so sorry. I did not know if anyone would be with gudstrength.” She backed out to the doorway until offering proper introduction.

“I am Gelf, the healer. I have been checking on the kinsfolk to help everyone recover from the great unhealth-”

“Gelf the healer?!” Instantly, the woman's face lit up. “It is you? Lierjen spoke of your visit to the chief and the assurance that whatever was causing the disappearance of the seekers had been defeated. We are deeply indebted to you. Please, please come in.”

Thinking of the reaction that the man in the great hall had shown, she felt even more thankful that this woman was showing kindface. She entered and was immediately shown to a stately looking chair which belayed this woman as a possible plutarch.

They spoke for a long time and she learned a great deal from the woman, who's name was Djentra. Apparently the woman was indeed among Journgad's inner circle. She had fled the great hall when first one and then many others began suffering the unhealth. The shelterspace that they were in was apparently her brother's dwelling. She quickly asked about the man, but the woman had no knowledge of where he had disappeared to.

Gelf guessed that the hue-maans had brought him to their camp for more intensive treatment and relayed for the woman how the strangers were offering assistance in bringing the gudstrength back to their village.

“And these, 'hue-maans' have been assisting you with the healing of our entire familyland?” The woman radiated awe and gratitude.

“Well.” She did not want to allow the kinsfolk to develop the same worship that the other seekers had, but at the same time she could not risk an untrue. “It would be more correct to say that we have worked together. Their healer is very wise and understands some things that I do not.”

“My word. Then we are fortuitous indeed that you were able to convince them to share their smartknowin. You can be certain that I will speak highly of you to the chief when he gains gudstrength again.”

“Thank you Djentra. That, may in fact be of great help.” She briefly mentioned the man who blamed her for bringing the unhealth to their village.

Now the woman radiated a strong concern. “Oh, that would likely be Ilmuhut. I pray to Azealla that it is not, for he is highly respected for all of the days that he spent building the walls of the great hall. The man carries strong influence among the plutolaty.”

Now she regretted not paying more attention to the politics of the familyland. If she had known what great standing Ilmuhut held, she would have shown more patience in the beforetime. She wondered, for the thousandth time now, how many great punishments Adiema would thrust upon her. It seemed that no matter how many countless hours she spent working to help the kinsfolk, it

would never be sufficient to regain the favor of Azealla. She hung her head and sobbed quietly while the other woman moved to her side. Djentra clearly wanted to help, but she dismissed her fragility as mere fatigue after all of the work which she had done.

“I will be leaving to check on our wise chief shortly. But first I have need to ask a favor.”

At this the woman nearly leapt off of the sleeping mat which she had been sitting on. “But of course Gelf, anything you need.”

“I would like to ask if you can watch over little Falia. She herself is with gudstrength, but her father sadly was outside the village when he succumbed to the sickness and so we did not find him until yesterday. The hue-maan healer is attending her father along with Pelfren and our chief.”

“My word, what a generous people they are.”

‘You don't know the half of it’ she thought. But instead she simply shook her head in agreement.

“Well please do bring the young'in here so that you can concentrate on her father and on our chief.”

She thanked the woman fervently before rushing back to the girl's shelterspace. Barely had she entered before the girl jumped up and smiled. “You bring good news.”

In joy at finally having something besides fear and worry to report, she lifted the girl high and confirmed that yes, there was good news at last. “Yes my beloved young one. Your father has been found and he is in the care of the hue-maan healing woman. Falia I have asked one of the women to share company with you until your dadji recovers. She is a kind woman and she will treat you well during the time that I am gone. But I must ask you-”

“Don't worry. I wont let the conta...contam-”

“Contamnayshun. Yes, please. That is very important for you to keep the strange appearance of these people between only us.”

Praying that the young'in would be able to honor her promise, she introduced Falia to Djentra and quickly took leave of the two kinsfolk in order to return to the field where Falia had first found her. Thankfully, it looked as if the hue-maans had removed the last of their equipment, for it did appear that her kinsfolk would soon be vigrus enough to venture outdoors at long last.

Chapter 71

She was just about to contact the hue-maans and request that Adewale bring her back to their camp when the thought came to her of the Oracle. Nobody had checked on Her! Instantly she changed her focus and made faststeppins to the temple hoping that the Oracle had remained isolated enough to not be struck with the sickness.

In her flight now she barely noticed the grand statues as she hurried through the entrance praying all the while that the Oracle might be receiving wisdom, or at the very least meditating peacefully.

In that however, her hopes were dashed as she found the woman laying crumpled at the foot of Adeima's statue. She checked the 'pulse' over and over on the woman's arms, her shoulder, and even her breathing hole. But there was not the slightest sign of life or breath at all. It took another timespan before she caught on to how cold the woman's skin was.

Despite her minimal connection with the seer, the Oracle was the spiritual leader for their people and the flow of grief that she felt was overshadowed only slightly by a pang of guilt. After all, the great Oracle had given her very life for the sake of her people, as so many holy women before her had done. It was the greatest act of selflessness that any of her kinsfolk could display. She turned the woman's prone form over in order to lay the reed mat on top of her when she saw the mat that the woman had fallen on. There was writing on it! She looked closer and saw a single line scrawled in what looked like a last desperate feat of strength.

'Young of three, be replacing me'

'Young of three?' That didn't make sense, the only- "Falia!" The instant the name flew from her mouth it all made sense. The girl had the same sense-readin, she was clearly intuitive, and she was already showing a deep fealty to Adeima. But at the same time, she was reticent to accept that the innocent young'in should suffer the foreshortened life, however holy, that the Oracle led. Could there be anyone else?" But nobody except Falia had displayed the sense-readin. None but a young'in with the gift of the sense-readin could lead their people in the path that Adeima chose. Her thoughts were interrupted by the funny sound of the hue-maan's far-talking device. She almost cursed inwardly despite the lofty surroundings. As much as she disliked the interruption, she could think of little more that could be done for the blessed Oracle now. Besides, there were other concerns as well which needed to be addressed. Concerns which could not be put off as easily as this discovery could.

With no small regret, she exited the Holy temple and pulled out the talking device. "Yes? This is Gelf."

"Oh good. Gelf this is Sefi. I would like to know how things look in your village?"

She told the doctor that people appeared to be getting better. Only a couple were walking around (she didn't mention that one of those wanted her head) and Falia seemed to have escaped the disease, perhaps due to her young age.

"Gelf, as soon as you are able, I'd like you to return to the camp. We can't risk anyone but you to provide healing to your chief. Even Ayube might cause the man to become suspicious. And professor Umquo is concerned that he be returned to your people with as little delay as possible." Though she regretted leaving the temple, the situation with chief Journgad was more urgent.

"Yes Sefi. I can return to your camp. I can happily say that the kinsfolk will be able to take care of themselves now."

The hue-maan's joy was clear even through the device. "Wonderful. I'll have Adewale pick you up then."

"Oh, Sefi-"

She asked as well that Adewale bring the Oracle's remains to the human camp and their 'stays'sis' machine to honour her kaba. Then she waited quietly for the unpleasant faery-column.

Chapter 72

The experience of returning to the hue-maans' camp and traveling through their strange 'corridors' was becoming less astonishing after many times experiencing it. Yet the transition still took some getting used to. In the time it would take to travel from her shelterspace to the market,

she could travel in the magic box all the way to the mount of Higsthon, and without being tired at all.

Though she still needed directions, it was getting easier as well for her to navigate the very strange round passageways of the hue-maan camp. She was making her way through these passageways to the healing place when she came upon a most unusual looking hue-maan (as if anything about them *wasn't* unusual). This person had wavy hair of a light tan color and skin that was more pale than any hue-maan she had seen. The woman looked somewhat like the mind-picture she had gotten from Adewale of the people in the big boats. She stopped for a long timespan to just gaze at the person. It took a moment before she sensed the person's discomfort and offered a guilty apology.

"I'm sorry hue-maan. But I've never seen any of your people with such strange looking skin. Are you a different type of (she had to think a minute for their word) 'speesees?'"

For a moment, the woman stared back at her radiating confusion and discomfort. But then the hue-maan considered how her own people had reacted when finding the seekers. The woman thought of her looking as strange to Gelf as the denisovians had looked to her. "Oh. I think I understand your confusion. You've only met the darker-skinned people like professor Umquo and doctor Ikpeba. My own people aren't a different 'species,' we simply come from a different part of our planet. My own ancestors came from a more northern, um colder place, and so our skin is more pale. My name is Regina."

Gelf did the hue-maan shaking of hands and wished her 'E pèlé' the way their people did. She also apologized for making the pale hue-maan uncomfortable. "So are you not from the same place (she had to think back to where Sefi had said they were from), um Lagos then?"

"Yes Gelf. I actually do come from Lagos, it's just.. I guess professor Umquo hasn't-"

Suddenly she experienced the most awful picture she had ever gotten from the hue-maans. She saw a vast stretch of land but without a single living thing to be found anywhere. Nothing but lifeless dirt interrupted the endless landscape. This was where the ancestors of Regina were from. The big land, it was called something like 'Yorup' had been completely devastated in one of the many hue-maan conflicts and the only places with enough plants for their people to eat was the part of 'Afreeka' where Sefi was from. She instinctively put her hands over her mouth in shock at such devastation. As if the pictures of the giant 'booms' weren't bad enough, these people had ruined the life of nearly half their plan-it.

"By the spear of Prijnak! Your homeland was completely destroyed? That is so horrible!"

This woman must not have heard about the mind-pictures, because she radiated confusion again. Gelf had to describe for her the pictures that she saw in her head from these people.

"My word Gelf. That's quite a, um." She paused trying to think of a word that wouldn't offend.

It was difficult to remember not to talk about the pictures she saw because of the 'violayshun' that the hue-maans experienced.

"That's quite a gift you have. But it's true. Where my people came from in Europe there is not much left. A few places have patches of forest coming back now, but it will take centuries more before we can live there. In the meantime we all live in the area of Nigerland, just like the doctor and the professor.

“I am so sorry for your people Regina. That must have been such a horrible thing to live through.”

“Oh no Gelf. Please don't feel bad for me. This all happened long before I was born. Our people had to go through enormous destruction before learning to temper our conflicts. But at long last, humans have learned how to work together without the prejudices and hierarchy of the past.”

“My word. And I was so strong-focused on our own kinfolk who suffer the unhealth. It is beyond what we can imagine to think of such vast harm to the living creations on your land.”

The woman apologized but stated that she had to continue working on something the hue-maans called 'eksperement,' so she moved on to a different corridor leaving Gelf to wander in a daze back to the healing place.

She found Sefi using some kind of machine on a hue-maan patient and told her about the earlier conversation. The doctor, not-surprisingly showed great surprise and sadness.

Sefi stopped her work, put a hand on her shoulder and gazed back morosely. “Gelf. I think that it should be clear to you now that this gift of yours is both a blessing and a curse. We, all of us, would have preferred to shield you from the knowledge of our destructive past. But, with this ability of yours, it seems that nothing is secret and we will just have to give you time to work through that.”

If she had felt sad for the hue-maans before, now she felt a hundred times more-so. There was nothing in her imagination that could equal what their people had been through.

“Now please Gelf. Let's not dwell so much on the past. We still have much to do in the present, and I would very much appreciate your help with the other people from your village.”

Chapter 73

Despite the doctor's plea, it took her a timespan further to re-orient herself from the highly charged mind-pictures. The transition was much more challenging than simply traveling from the familyland to the hue-maan camp with it's magic tools.

With enough of a timespan to put her emotions in order, she finally became able to concentrate on chief Journgad and the other kinfolk. First she had to turn off the 'stays-sis' as she had done with Pelfren in the beforetime, then she checked the life force, or 'pulse,' and then she gave each of them an 'injekshun' to provide their bodies with water. Once that was done, she spent a long timespan speaking the healing prayer over each one before finally needing a break to rest.

It took many 'hours' according to the hue-maans' timekeeping device, but eventually one of the seekers became weakly conscious. She remembered him as Freetlak who she had often traded with for pots and water vessels. The man was highly skilled in the forming of containers. He had mated with Juntilan, but she and their young'in had fallen victim to a most severe unhealth and were both with Pirtlaxtl several annums now.

“Where am I? Why do I feel so weak? Why is it so dark? Hello. He-”

“Freetlak. You are not alone. I am with you, it is Gelf the healer.”

The man did nothing to hide his surprise. “Gelf? You were not struck down by this most powerful unhealth?”

“No friend. I was lucky to have come in contact with another very skilled healer. She helped to save me from the unhealth.”

“This healer must have taught you well. For I no longer feel my fodiens shaking inside of m-”

“Who is there? How dare you enter the private chamber of chief Journgad!” The words were meant to have great force, but sadly, there was little volume behind them and she worried for the man.

“Great chief Journgad. You are safe, please do not be upset. I have brought you to a place of healing.”

“Gelf descender of Sigfrend? So it is true. You did bring the unhealth to our village. Now you have removed me from my private chambers to this darkened cave for what? To send me to Pritlaxtl and steal my position?”

This she could not have expected, not in a hundred annums. “My liege, no never! I want nothing but to heal you.”

“You sayso. However the quietwords of Ilmuhut appear to have proven true. You spoke before of having no straight-eye on my position. Yet here I lay in the deep state of unhealth, so weak that I cannot even raise my limbs, meanwhile you speak to me in a voice full of vigrus. You are without the unhealth, for sure.”

“My liege, I swear to you. I have been working with all of my energy to remove the unhealth from you and the kinfolk ever since discovering Pelfren-”

“Ah, loyal Pelfren. And has he survived this great catastrophe which you have brought?”

“My liege, please. I beg you to see that I speak the fulltrue. I would never wish to bring any harm to the kinfolk. And, you can be assured that Pelfren is nearly healed of the unhealth. He was the first one that I tes-”

“It is good to hear that he has survived. However your own reputation is not nearly so secure. Even if you would swear, on the crown of Azealla, that you had no intention to destroy our people it would do little to convince me.”

“Oh my liege, of course I do. I swear on the crown of the holy Azealla that I never have, and never would, take any action that might bring harm our people.” But as soon as she said it, the evil seed of doubt planted itself in her mind when she thought about what Ayube had said. There was a timespan of quiet before there was any reply. “I hear your words Gelf. And I know that you would never speak an untrue, especially invoking the holy creator's name. However the quietwords were most convincing. It is difficult to accept as coincidence that this unhealth struck the familyland only two days after your return to us. You must admit that the timing is most suspicious.”

“My liege. May your humble kinfolk speak?”

“Who is there? Why am I not in a private chamber?”

“My liege I am Freetlak, creator of vessels. I pray you to hear me that I have known Gelf for many annums and would trust her word as well as I would trust that of my own departed mate.”

“Freetlak I thank you for your counsel. It is kind of you to speak on behalf of the healer.

However I will not allow this debate to be had while I lay here like a newborn young'in. We will speak when I am fully recovered. And healer, it would very much improve your standing, to ensure that I suffer no permanent damage from this tragedy.”

“My liege, you can be assured that I will do everything that I can to bring gudstrength to you and the rest of the kinsfolk.”

“We will see” was all that he said. When she laid a hand on his shoulder, she could sense a severe weakness in him. Like the man in the great hall, he must have been putting all of his energy into displaying a false image of vigrus.”

With the chief asleep now, she checked on several others and found that Fronin and the other woman who had been outside of the village were in a worse state than before. Their 'pulse' was weaker and the breathing was uneven. She thought quickly, but did not know all of the tools that Sefi used. So she used the sleep medicine on Freetlak and asked Sefi to hurry in.

The timespan was long and she struggled with feeling ineffectual while the woman used all of her smartknowin in her efforts to remove the unhealth from them. The worry poured off of the doctor like meed from a cup as she worked so very hard to help them. But no matter how many tools she used, their bodies were too weak. She sensed from Sefi that the two of them had been away from the village for too long and did not have enough 'antee-bodyz' in their system to recover the gudstrength.

“Who is there? Why can I not see?”

Despite the joy hearing that another of the kinsfolk was recovering, she almost cursed inwardly at the interruption of her prayers. She wanted so much to concentrate on the healing, but the risk of the contamnayshun superseded all else once she recognized the voice. She hurried over to the man who, thankfully, was on the far side of the room from where Sefi was working. She saw Pelfren shaking his head back and forth in obvious distress.

“Pelfren, dutiful servant. Please do not worry yourself. I am here for you.”

“Gelf the healer? But how? Are we in the realm of Pritlaxtl?”

“What? Oh no, not at all. You are safe Pelfren and very much aliv-”

“But I cannot move. I cannot see. It is as if a great nightmare has enveloped the land.”

thinking quickly, she took his hand and held it firmly. “Great Pelfren, you cannot see because it is dark, and it is likely that you cannot move because the unhealth is still w-”

“NO! I do not see the dim outline of the courtyard or the torch flames rising up the wallside. I do not see shimmeri above the trees. I see only a pale blankness, such as I've only witnessed on the darkest nights during the time of mists.”

She wanted to offer more to the man, but then she heard Sefi say quietly that there was nothing more she could do, and it was clear what she meant. With no conscious thought, she hurried over to Sefi and dimly saw the hue-maan pull the blanket over Fronin's face. She cried out then, collapsing on his prone form wishing and praying for Pritlaxtl to release him. But no matter how often she recited the healing prayer, the man remained unmoving. It took an endless timespan of weeping and stroking his breathing hole before she was forced to accept that her only real friend in the village was truly and completely gone. She wallowed in the pit of sorrow, dwelling on the loss of Fronin, the chief's accusations, the great weak-state of the village and all manner of failings until she was finally interrupted by the hand of Sefi on her shoulder.

The doctor whispered to her quietly. “Gelf, I know this is hard for you. But I must ask you to find the strength to help the other man over there.”

Doubting that she actually *could* find the strength, she put all of her effort into setting aside her own mourning so that she could focus on the advisor. “Loyal Pelfren, I am sad to bring news that Fronin and another of our kinsfolk are with Pritlaxtl now.” She squeezed his hand tighter, hoping in some way to convey the strength of her emotions to a man who could not see or move.”

“Gelf, thank you for telling me. I am sorry to disrupt your grieving. Please, take all the time that you need.”

But she could sense that Pelfren was only being polite. He didn’t have the closeness to her that he had with the plutolatri and he had never personally known Fronin. So, still raw with emotion, she turned around and hugged Sefi like she was the beloved Truini and wept until there was nothing left.

“Did you know that man well Gelf?”

Finally, she pulled back and stared at Sefi’s dim outline with new eyes. As she thought about it, she finally realized that she was not merely mourning for Fronin, or even the suffering of her kinfolk. It finally became clear that she also had wanted to create offspring with Fronin. She knew the man was kind, and strong, and he had been very creative with kraboo. But now, sadly, her only connection with the man lay in the kaba of a young girl who might well become the next Oracle.

“Oh Sefi. I wish that I could have saved him. He was such caring man.” She thought back to the many times that she had cried on Sefi’s shoulder, she wondered again now if she weren’t destined to be punished till eternity for the innumerable edicts of Adeima which she had disobeyed. There was so much heartache in these times that her kaba felt eternally shattered beyond repair.

Chapter 74

Sefi had considered it *very* lucky that the chief had not woken again during his healing. The ‘injekshuns’ that they used to replace water and fodiens needed to be given to him many times to help him regain the gudstrength. The only happy part was that she was becoming more familiar with the strange hue-maan tools. The many settings didn’t all make sense to her but with Sefi’s help she could at least use the most relevant ones comfortably.

With so much upheaval among the kinfolk, she wished so much to have Truini next to her. But when she brought it up, Sefi had told her how important it was that she stay with the chief to provide any medicines and prevent him from getting the contamnayshun. So, reluctantly, she was kept from her beloved until Sefi felt comfortable releasing Journgad. But she decided to use the favor to leverage a small favor for herself in return. She convinced the hue-maans to invite Truini back to the crashed sararin so that they could at least talk via the hue-maan tool. Both Sefi and Ayube had been against it, but she reminded them that Truini had already experienced the far-talking device when Sodangi had called them. Besides, they had all agreed to remain with the hue-maan camp so she would be exposed eventually to the magic tools regardless.

It took much more effort than she wished, but eventually the professor gave in. The professor relayed the message to Ayube, but it was a full day further, before the voice of her beloved at last rang through the air in Sefi’s office.

“Gelf?! Are you in there somehow?”

The moment she heard the lovely warrior's voice, all of the stress and turmoil fell away to the underfoot. She drank in the feeling of her beloved as she thought back to her own first experience with the hue-maans' magic. The woman's uncertainty reminded her of what she must herself have sounded like back then in the beforetime. "Yes my love. I hear you clearly. I am not actually in that magic box. I am back at the hue-maan camp on the mount of Higsthon." It took awhile to explain what she knew of the talking device, which was only very little. But she was certain, even without the sense-readin, that hearing each other's voices was vastly more comforting both for her *and* Truini than the process of passing messages through Ayube. Even though she couldn't hold the woman in her arms, she knew that with Truini and Ayube watching over the seekers, everyone would be safe. She spent a long timespan sharing what little she could with the lovely woman and basking in the sound of her voice, but at last the matters with the hue-maans had to take precedence and she bade her love farewell, promising to return to the people as soon as chief Journgad was brought safely to the familyland.

Chapter 75

The wait took longer than she had expected as the healing with some of the more fragile people was difficult for Sefi, and both of them had the fraidness that she would not succeed in chasing away the unhealth. Her worry was only made worse when she learned that the chief had been one of the weakest survivors, which meant that Sefi had kept the rest of the group in the 'stays-sis' until everyone could be moved at once. Watching the kinsfolk slowly recover, had put a great stress on her patience, for she worried both for her chief, for the others struggling through unhealth, and not least of all, for the accusations which he had made. Would Journgad hold her responsible for the great sickness? And could it be true that she might have brought the great 'ep-peedem-ik' to the familyland? The fraidness of such a thought was almost worse than staring at the hue-maans' energy crystal. There was seemingly no way that she would be able to live with herself if such an accusation were to prove true. She cried long and hard then for Truini. It felt right in that moment that nobody, not even Sefi, could really ease the worry that pervaded her thoughts.

At long last she watched Sefi walk towards her and the mind-pictures were of happy sights. Nearly all of the kinsfolk in the healing room were now 'stable' and would likely recover in a few days. The healer related more of the specifics for her and the steps ahead that would be necessary to safely move the recovering kinsfolk to the familyland. It was a profound relief, to finally be able to join all of the other survivors, and the two hue-mans in a now-crowded flying box where they returned at dawn to the hall of chief Journgad. At least the activity helped to take her mind off of the politics surrounding the chief and the plutolatriy. Though Higsthon had not yet lifted the Saülè into the sky, there was the faintest brilliant glow along the horizon and this allowed them to carefully begin moving one and then another of the recovering kinsfolk through the rear door and into the great hall.

If she had believed her work to be finished with the delivery of the surviving people back to the familyland, that hope was quickly dissipated after a terse discussion with Ayube. For it was necessary to bring each person to their own separate shelterspace. After all, as Ayube pointed out, they couldn't leave a dozen people laying on the underfoot of the great courtyard. Thus it took another few 'owers' as the hue-maans measured time, before the rest of the people were returned to their sleeping matts. The extra effort brought the heavy shaking of exhaustion to her body from carrying the many sleeping kinfolk throughout the familyland. Her limbs were nearly as sore as they had been crossing the morass even as she struggled to carry the last few survivors into their respective shelterspaces.

By the time she walked with Ayube to the last person, her arms were two ku-rubr branches hanging limply at her sides. It was her deepest hope to merely collapse and rest on the underfoot but Ayube encouraged her to help with the one last person before they quit. So with every fibre of her limbs screaming in protest, she struggled to move the last of their portable 'cots' when the two of them were interrupted by a strong voice.

"Who dares enter the hall of chief Journgad. The great chief is not to be disturbed!"

Hurriedly, they moved the man into one of the empty rooms off of the courtyard and she rushed back out. 'Here we go again' she thought, before even turning her gaze to address the voice. But when she did look, she saw that it was Pelfren looking around excitedly. Praise Azealla! He at least, wasn't after her head.

"Pelfren, honourable one, it is Gelf the healer. I have been working to return you all safely home."

The moment she spoke, the man approached towards her. His steps were still slow and he moved with limbs that seemed unfamiliar. But finally, he put his hand out and felt her shoulder. "Gelf? It is you? Tell me straight away that our ruler is safe."

"Yes, yes of course Pelfren. Chief Journgad should make an excellent recovery."

"Gelf, this news is cause for celebration. Knowing this will allow me to greet Pritlaxtl without shame.

"Honourable Pelfren. It is due in no small part to your own sacrifice. If you had not traveled so deep into the forst to deliver the message, it might have been too late."

She had of course prayed that the gratitude of the kinsfolk would supersede their suspicion. She could only hope now that the chief and the rest of the plutoltry let go of the suspicion that she sensed from the chief back at the hue-maan camp.

The advisor made his way slowly to the great table and gave her the stright-eye. "Gelf. I realize that you will be asked to share the wordsong with the chief when he is with gudstrength again. But, my curiosity is too strong to wait. I must ask you to share the wordsong with me now, of how you were able to discover the healing medicine to chase off Pritlaxtl and rescue our people. Though she was becoming quite fatigued from the repetition, there was no sagacious option to deny the request. So she repeated as much of the wordsong for Pelfren as she safely could and felt the man's respect grow enormously as the wordsong unfolded. It was just as she began searching for a means to describe the cure within the hue-maans' life force when another of the kinsfolk interrupted the telling. She gratefully turned around only to see Djentra give them the

straight-eye and sit by them. This required yet more clarification for the sake of the plutarch such that by the time her tale was complete, she felt thirsty and much fatigued with the effort. “You have truly performed with the greatest honor and courage, healer. Adeima was wise to choose you for the task.”

“Please forgive the interruption Pelfren. But speaking of the chosen ones, what is to become of the others who were sent on this task? Gelf, you spoke of them being given the choice to return here or to stay apart. Why, in all the land would our kinsfolk choose not to return to those who care for them? My own dear Breydjut departed from the familyland and I have counted the days for him to return.”

She was sad for the woman, and displayed kindface for her sake. But unfortunately there was nothing that she could think of in that moment to provide closure. All that she could do was to put a hand gently on top of the other woman’s and speak highly of him. “Djentra, I am deeply sorry for your pain. But the seekers were struck with the loss of smarati along their journey. The malady was foretold by the Oracle even before I myself departed. I’m afraid that Breydjut would not remember you even if he could return-”

“But Gelf, that does not answer the question of *why* they cannot be with us again.”

“Great Pelfren, it is likely that our chief will want to know all of this as well. May I request that we delay the rest of this wordsong until he recovers?”

She could clearly sense the disappointment from both of them, but thankfully their admiration influenced them to concede to her request.

Akwukwu Bakwai (book seven)

Chapter 76

Pelfren had made it clear in no uncertain terms that she should remain within Xenlaria until the chief had fully recovered and called upon her. Thus she was still denied a visit with Truini whom she yearned for like the far off eastern horizon seeks for the embrace of the Saülè at the days end. Instead, she spent her time nursing the kinsfolk that were still in the weakstate. It wasn't much work now that there were others to share the labor, but she was still so exhausted that it felt momentous nonetheless. Many of the kinsfolk were left with lingering symptoms which she could offer little relief from. Pelfren had trouble seeing more than a handspan in front of him. Freetlak had great soreness in his limbs, and another named Lutredji spoke of great pain in his head at night. She knew little of how the plutolatriy fared, for she made no attempt to offer help within the great hall, and no assistance was requested. Instead, she made her way to the temple when the time was proper. Even with the Oracle in the hands of Pritlaxtl, she hoped that the space would offer her a timespan of quietude to contemplate her next step. What she found instead was very much the opposite. Little falia was meditating in a perfectly fitted robe, and there was a generous tray of fodiens sitting between two of the great statues.

As soon as she entered, she heard the girl's voice float across to her. “Come and take a seat, the fodiens are yours to eat.”

This was completely unheard of. It was always expected that kinsfolk bring fodiens *for* the Oracle, not the other way around. She bowed low to each of the Gods in turn before reaching the girl. But Falia again ushered her over to the tray of fodiens.

“You selflessly labor to help the kinsfolk, but you will need your strength for the next challenge.”

“Falia. I realize that you have the sense-readin which means that you can be an Oracle. But you must understand that the appointment is not your decision to make.”

“But *I am the Oracle.*” Her tone was so mundane, that it was impossible to doubt the girl's sincerity. She spoke as if she were explaining the need to go to sleep at night to a newborn. It brought a smile to her face to see such innocent strength in the young'in.

“Falia, you should know that a person cannot be considered an Oracle until ordained by the chief-”

“But *they* asked me to stay here, it's out of the... out of Yorn-gad control.” The girl remained steadfast in her rebuttal.

Now her head was filled with confusion. “Asked? By who?” She could think of nobody who would make such a heretical suggestion.

“Well. I would guess it was Adeima. The one you spoke to before.”

It took her a timespan to think back to what the girl might be referring to. When the idea hit her, she began to tremble all throughout at the thought of this tiny girl being exposed to the momentousness of the beings she had experienced. “Were, you in the cave with the small fire and the voices that seemed to come from all around?”

The girl looked pensive for a timespan. “Well, I don't know about a cave. I just heard the voice talk to me when I came here saying that I should stay and serve as the Oracle for the familyland.”

The girl gave a short pause as if deep in thought. “Oh, and Ayube needs to come back here in the disguise so that you two can meet with the chief and the matriarchs.”

If she was awed by the thought of Falia gaining audience with Adeima, this was even more of a shock. She was absolutely certain that she had never mentioned any hue-maan except Dr. Sefi, who Falia had seen. “Who told you about Ayube?”

Now the girl folded her arms and looked at her condescendingly. “Come'on Gelf. It was the voice that I just told you about. They said that you and the two hue-maans had talked to them.”

The girl paused. “They do have funny names, don't they?”

Now she was certain that the girl had been graced to have audience with Adeima. For it was impossible that she could have known about Ayube otherwise.

“Falia, please give me a moment to think.”

But the girl interrupted her. “Take your fill of nourishment while you do.”

Though it was unorthodox, she could not ignore the repeated suggestion. She took a small bowl of what looked like djengourd stew and found it to be at least as delicious as anything provided by the hue-maans. It wasn't until the first mouthful that she realized how little she'd eaten for the past two days. The food was distracting enough that she finished a heavy meal before her attention returned to little Falia. Why would Adeima tell Falia to stay in the temple when she hadn't been ordained? And how was it that the girl knew about the holy voice? Finally she crouched down on her forelimbs in order to face the girl with a straight-eye.

“Falia, what made you come here to the temple in the first place?”

The girl offered a look of indifference, contradicting her earlier assurance. “I don't know. It just felt like the right thing to do.”

The girl looked up suddenly, as if someone had just whispered a surprising wordsong. “Oh, and there was something else for you. ‘Relief will be come upon human prayers to the Holy One.’

The two of them stared at each other, as if the visual connection might somehow explain the vast enigma. Gelf thought long and hard, several times giving in to cowardice before she finally managed to utter the question. “Falia, where did you hear these things... about human prayers?” Here the girl looked more confident in her response. “I heard the voice tell me while I was sitting in meditation.”

Now she very much regretted asking. Falia's response made it sound like she held a memory of the holy prophecy that she received from Adeima. This was unprecedented, in all the history of the familyland there were no stories to suggest that such a thing had *ever* happened.

She left the temple feeling more confused than ever. Rather than provide a respite to sort out the radical changes of the past few days, her conversation with Falia merely exacerbated her earlier disquiet. And now she remembered what Falia said about a new challenge. She wished that she'd thought to ask more about that. Hadn't she endured enough challenges thus far to last a thousand annums? Between chief Journgad, the hue-maans, the seekers, and this great unhealth she felt completely exhausted. Both physically and emotionally. All she wished for was to return to Truini and lay in the beautiful woman's arms for eternity. This was all that she could focus on as she made her way back to the small shelterspace.

It was late in the evening and she was about to end the day when she remembered Falia, and the Oracle's statement about the hue-maans. So she dug around for the far-speaking device and asked to speak with the professor. She made the request as sincere and convincing as she could, but sadly the hue-maan did not sound sympathetic.

“Gelf, you're saying that a three-year old girl told you that we should send Ayube out to your village. To the center of the village *where everyone can see him?! I'm sorry Gelf, but that is far too risky. Up until now we have only allowed him to be seen by the chief alone or by the small group of seekers. The risk of contamination is too great.*”

“But Professor Umquo, this was prophesied by Adeima herself!”

“Yes, a prophesy which you admit was related by a three-year old girl. Shàngbá ò Gelf, our children aren't even speaking full sentences at that age.”

This gave her a clue to the man's resistance. The hue-maan children must develop differently than her own kinfolk. “Professor, Falia is quite mature compared to what you describe. She spoke with full confidence of Adeima's request that she fulfill the role of Oracle, she had a perfectly fitting robe, and she specifically mentioned Ayube by name, *even without ever having met him.*”

In the end, the professor remained unconvinced. And despite her logic if she was honest with herself, she had to admit that it was likely the result of her own lack of conviction. It was still challenging even for *her* to accept little Falia as the Oracle. And without knowing why Ayube had been singled out, she could think of little to offer the professor as a rebuttal. In the end, she expected that she would have to find out when the time came.

Chapter 77

Higsthon had barely lifted the Saülé above the forst when she was roused by a bang on the door. This wasn't the simple knock of a visitor. This was like the force of a boulder and startled her straight up from her sleeping mat.

She opened the door to see three vigrus men along with Pelfren standing outside. Nobody waited for her to speak before announcing that she was to be immediately escorted to the great hall. Her experience on this trip very much mimicked the feeling she'd felt when Pelfren had visited her a lifetime ago. As before, the silence and blank emotions of the men brought the fraidness to her that any good fortune which she might have held, was utterly vanus now. She noticed that the pace was quite slow and saw one of the men holding Pelfren's arm as they traveled back to the familyland.

There was no need to clear a path through the now empty square, yet the men announced the need regardless. Once through, she was roughly led to the main gate and then the smaller gate into the great hall where chief Journgad was, once again, returned to his seat of privilege. On either side of the chief sat the four matriarchs who were the peace keepers of the familyland. The matriarchs, as usual held blank expressions as befitted their role of neutrality. The chief however, was neither jovial nor peaceful. As her gaze slid down his face, she saw only the cold stare of a fierce ruler.

“Gelf, descender of Sigfrend you have been accused of high treachery against the familyland. We will begin arbitration at midday today. Whom would you choose as your mediator?”

The words struck her like the fist of a barbarian. Such accusations had never been held against any kinsfolk since the time of her father's mother. “My liege, may I ask nature of this accusation?”

She needed no sense-readin this time, to perceive the man's feelings now. His expression spoke volumes before a single word was uttered. “You, would dare to ask?! You cannot possibly deny invoking the wrath of Pritlaxtl when last you visited the familyland. You brought sickness and death to every corner of Xenlaria. Now delay no further and state your choice for mediator.”

She knew that whoever her advocate was, they would have to be someone who could be trusted with the hue-maan's magic but also would not cause the contamnayshun. She could not invite a seeker to the tribunal, besides they had little memory with which to assist anyway. The timespan stretched out like ku-rubr as she searched within her for a denisovian, or at least someone who would be able to *present themselves as a denisovian...* That was it! *That* was why Falia had told her to invite the man here.

“I choose as my advocate the hue-maan Ayube.”

Immediately the hall was filled with shocked murmurs, but the chief's powerful voice quickly drowned them out. “Gelf you realize that by choosing an outsider as your mediator you focus even greater suspicion upon yourself.”

In fact she hadn't considered this. Already she could sense the quietwords spreading quickly among the plutolaty. But it was unavoidable. “I must accept that my liege. Any advocate of

mine must have experience regarding the hue-maans, as it was they who played a central role in finding a cure for the horrible unhealth.”

“Very well, that is your right as an accused. We will convene when the Saülè reaches it's peak. In the meantime, escort Gelf to the strong-room.”

Her mouth opened in shock as the full reality sunk in. Never in her life had she ever expected to see the inside of the strong-room, especially as a prisoner. But then she had never thought to be accused of treachery either. For a timespan she merely beat her fists futilely on the vigrus brick wall in fury. It was a great slap upon her face, after all of the hard work which she had done purely for the sake of her people. Plus all the time spent away from Truini for whom she grieved even more now. She wished to the depths of her kaba that she could somehow call out to her beautiful warrior for support.

But then she realized that she *could* ask for support! She had the far-talking device of the hue-maans. Of course she couldn't contact Truini, that had required a special trip back into the morass. But she could at least contact Sefi. The moment that the door slammed shut, she dug within her pocket for the hue-maan device.

“Hello? Hello? Is Doctor Ikpeba there?”

For an agonizing timespan there was no answer and she worried that in this one critical instant the hue-maans' magic would fail. But then finally her blessed voice came on.

“Yes Gelf. Where are you? We were hoping for an update from you yesterday.”

“Sefi.” She struggled not to break down, as she had done so many times with her friend. She so often felt like a fragile young’*in* with all of the struggles recently. “Sefi things went very bad in the familyland. I am accused of treason against my people. They think that I purposefully brought the great unhealth to my kinsfolk.”

“Òjé jé béè!⁴⁰ We really are dealing with stone-age mentalities here.” Sefi said this part under her breath, but the words carried across well enough. And with all that she learned from the doctor, she was beginning to sympathize with the hue-maan's frustration. But her people knew nothing of the immuno-defishunsee problem. All they knew was that she had returned, and a few days later people began getting sick.

“I'll talk to Ayube and see how quickly he can get to you.”

“Sefi I tried that. Professor Umquo thought it was too dangerous.”

“He *what?*!”

She had never heard one of them reach such a high pitch in their voice before. She almost laughed at the way Sefi spoke, but managed to restrain herself.

“After all that you've done for that village, and for your people, and for *us*? He has some nerve. You just tell me when this monkey trial is happening, and I'll get him there.”

She didn't know what Sefi meant by ‘monkey trial,’ but she told Sefi that it would be at midday.

“Do mi.⁴¹ That doesn't give us much time. You're days are only 20 hours long.” There was a pause during which she attempted to comprehend their timekeeping, but Sefi's voice cut off her thoughts. “Alright just give me some time and I'll see what I can do.”

40 [I hope to find a more severe curse to portray the fierce anger of the person]

41[looking for a word like ‘shit,’ a curse that does not invoke god]

That was the last she heard from Sefi for the day. There was nothing for it now but to offer her prayers to Adeima and Ilhammet with everything she had.

Chapter 78

Life was quite boring on the shore of the great morass. Every time one of them asked Ayube when they would move on to a more permanent camp he would say something like 'soon,' or 'not quite yet.' There was plenty of food and water, but she could feel people getting jittery and she shared their frustration. It felt as if they should be doing *something*. Perhaps gathering fodiens for the future, or deciding where to make shelterspaces.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the hue-maan raise his fist toward the lower part of his face and say something quietly. Then he began walking off into the forest.

Yearning for something, anything to break the monotony, she stealthily followed the man until she saw him pause a short distance away. He lifted his hand again towards his face and acted as if he were speaking to the trees. Yet there was clearly another presence communicating with him. This was very confusing, for she couldn't understand who the hue-maan might be talking to. The hue-maans did not believe in the Holy Mother, and it wasn't as if he was standing next to the magic box out in the morass.

She heard his speech became very emotional and she began to sense a nervousness from him. This gave her concern as well, for she thought that someone had mentioned Gelf's name.

"I can't believe this! Are we completely surrounded by incompetents?!"

"All right. Well I'm sure you can get Adewale to take care of transportation. I'll be here in the woods in 20 minutes or so."

The man put his hand down and she hurried behind a tree when she saw him turn around. There was a tense moment when she thought that her steppins might be seen, but an earlier conversation she'd had with the hue-maan showed that he was confused by even the most basic lessons in reading footfalls and so she let go of the fraidness that her trail would be noticed.

In the meantime she waited until he'd passed, and then followed a careful distance behind. When the man eventually reached the group, she faintly heard him ask everyone to gather near.

"-be long and as soon as Truini arrives, I will tell you more."

She quickly traced a path around so as to emerge far from where Ayube stood.

"What's going on Ayube? I heard you say my name."

The man looked innocently in her direction. "Oh great, there you are. Truini, I need to depart for a little while and give the others a hand. I promise that it won't be longer than a day and hopefully there will be some special fodiens for you all when I return back here."

"But Ayube, when can I see my dear Gelf?" As soon as she said the name, she got a feeling of strong fear from the hue-maan and she knew all the way to the depth of her kaba that something was wrong. It was much worse than the man's words were meant to express. Perhaps his people were able to speak the untrue. This would complicate her trust in them very much.

"I honestly don't know Truini. I'm certain that she wants to be here just as much as we all want her here. I'll do the best that I can to help tie up whatever it is that's going on. Until then, I need to ask you to be in charge of the group."

She nodded her head, though there was nothing actually to be in charge of. They had little to do but eat, sleep, and explore the limited stretch of twilight that separated the forest from the mud plain. She pondered the situation for only a moment before once again returning to the forest and following behind the hue-maan. She waited behind a tree, while she watched him standing still a few arm-lengths away. She saw him once again put his hand to his face and say something that sounded like '...dy to head out.'

Her mind seemed to race at high speed. It wasn't clear to her why the hue-maan would just stand there if he was ready to go, but if he knew something about whatever danger threatened Gelf, she aimed to help, no matter what the consequence. She prepared to leap at the hue-maan and force him to take her along. She sprung into the air and saw something strange surround the man. It looked vaguely like the faery-dust that appeared when the Saülé broke through the trees. She collided with the hue-maan and she saw his eyes grow incredibly wide. It would have been comical in any other circumstance, but then she looked beyond the man and saw nothing whatsoever of the forest. All was faery-dust in every direction, and her skin felt like it wanted to separate from her body. It was worse than a million hutz flies crawling over her. Then just as quickly the dust faded and she found herself inside a strange box with perfectly smooth walls. Her own eyes must have grown as large as Ayube's as she saw one wall that was as clear as the sky, but which showed the land stretch out far below.

"Ayube! What on Earth happened?! That woman's bleeding!" It took a moment for her to register the other hue-maan who had just risen from a chair near the clear wall. It took longer than that for her to step away from Ayube who she'd thrown against the wall only to realize now that something was very, very wrong. For some reason her body didn't respond properly and she fell to the underfoot as she was quickly blinded by the most severe agony. Looking down she saw that one of her feet was completely gone! There was nothing but a stump halfway down her leg and a rapidly growing blue puddle began to form beneath her. Time lost all meaning as she screamed in agony and terror, knowing that she would never triumph in battle again. At some point, the speech of the hue-maans finally penetrated the blinding waves of pain and she managed to look up at them.

"Shhhh. Take it easy." Ayube sat beside her and had his hand on her shoulder. She sensed pain from him as well, but he was focused for the moment on her own fear. The other hue-maan said nothing but was digging hurriedly through a smooth box until he found an L-shaped cylinder which he pointed at the stump of her leg. Though she thought it was impossible, her eyes opened even wider as a pale green light spread out from the tool and the moment it touched her, the pain began to fade. He then used a different tool which produced a faint smoke around the wound. Finally he pointed a third tool at her and everything went black.

Chapter 79

"What in the vast universe happened down there?!"

Ayube waited until the pain from his own involuntary amputation was numbed before answering. "For the life of me, I couldn't say. The people down there, including Truini seemed perfectly fine. Sure, people were bored, who wouldn't be. But I assured them that it wouldn't be long. Then

right after I signaled you to pick me up there was this blur and the next thing I know, this reactor-coil of a woman is throwing me against the bulkhead. My best guess is that she leapt at me a few microseconds before the beam of the kefatz finished forming and was pulled up-” He paused to gaze at what was left of his arm “At least most of her was pulled up. I’m afraid we’ll have to pick up her missing foot-”

The man interrupted heatedly. “Listen man! We don’t have time for these games. The trial is slated for high noon and you’ve got to get back in disguise.”

“Do mi!⁴² So I’m guessing there’s no time to grow me a new arm then.”

“No! We’re barely going to have time for Sefi to get you looking like a native.” But then the man’s expression softened and he took a more kindly tone. “I’m sorry Ayube. But you’ll have to get by without the hand until we have time for doctor Ikpeba to grow you a new one.”

“Dammit. Omo we don dey for serious wahala then.”⁴³

“Well I’m afraid that’s going to be your pit of snakes to deal with.” Adewale called over his shoulder as he got back to the control board. They sped briefly over to the camp where doctor Ikpeba was brought aboard. The minute she saw the extra body and the missing limbs she practically leapt to the ceiling herself.

“Chineke me! What in the vast universe have you two been up to?!”

Adewale had to answer for him as the intensity of the pain was beginning to reassert itself. “Our best guess is that Truini was laying in ambush and launched herself at Ayube just as the beam of the kefatz was forming. It was lucky that they only lost a bit of limb. If she’d been a couple of microseconds earlier, he might have been split in half. Then we’d have lost two worthy people.” He saw the doctor’s questioning look and reminded her of the original mission.

She took a split second to process this before managing to return to her normal role. Ayube received a longer-term injection for the pain and she sterilized the wound temporarily. Then he had to sit patiently while she applied the disguise once again.

Thankfully he would only need to be speaking for this role, as he was already struggling with the adjustment to losing his dominant hand. Once they were finished, the doctor crouched next to Truini and they both disappeared.

Chapter 80

Chief Journgad sat once again on his dias, but was now dressed in his ceremonial arbiter’s robe. On either side of him sat the four village matriarchs who formed the tribunal. One of the great tables had been placed across the room and several plutarchs including the man Ilmuhut sat along the far end. On her own side, she was joined by Freetlak, Djentra, and a few of her fellow kinsfolk.

“The time of arbitration is hereby begun!” Gelf, where is your mediator?”

Knowing that she couldn’t use the hue-maans’ talking device here, she could only answer that she did not know where he was. Undoubtedly, this served only to incriminate her further.

“Very well. We will begin without him. Ilmuhut, step forward and share your grievances.”

42 [this would be another place to put an expression like ‘shit’]

43 Yoruba expression roughly translates for being in a difficult situation

Gelf was not at all surprised to see that the man who had demanded arbitration was the same person who had accused her in the same empty hall so many days ago. The man stood up and addressed the assembly. "I am Ilmuhut. You all know me as an honest man in good standing. I have stood by the side of our chief for many annums. I built the dock which allows us to easily use the river and I have fabricated all of the boats which we use to gather kalisjom from the depths. I won great stature for bringing the largest djengoard last year, and have devoted many long days on the repair of the protective walls that surround us now. So I ask you to hear me this day, as one of your own."

He threw her a cold stare which she refused to acknowledge before continuing. "It is known by all of the kinsfolk that you Gelf descender of Sigfrend were sent to discover the seekers and to end the cycle of their disappearance. It is also known that you returned from that trek to announce that the seekers had been found and were safe. However we see no sign of these brave kinsfolk. There is nothing beyond your own word to attest to their gudstrength. For all we know, they may have been swept up by Pritlaxtl on the far side of the forst." The man looked from one matriarch to the other as he spoke with vigrus tone. "It is also known that the first of the kinsfolk began experiencing rashes only two days after you brought us this news. Within another two days several of the plutolatri were unable to leave their bed and Pelfren, who is only now beginning to recover his vision, was sent to find you. And finally, Gelf was spotted sneaking among the rooms of this very hall while the kinsfolk lay helpless. I have brought these charges to the negotiating table not for my own benefit, but on behalf of the-

The man's wordsong was interrupted by the sound of a door opening. In a flash five men were on their feet and after an enormously brief struggle, they returned carrying Ayube between them. Her initial joy upon seeing him was cut short by the sight of his missing left arm. She could not imagine what could have happened to him, and she worried at how much pain he must have endured from the injury.

Journgad was on his feet before the men had even returned and disgust was etched across his face as the hue-maan was presented. "How dare you attempt to enter the great hall like a cowardly huitz-fly. We are a strong and-" The chief halted his speech immediately as he gave Ayube the straight-eye. "You are the hue-maan! You are the one who visited me so long ago." Chief Journgad then turned back to Gelf with a look of surprise. "This, healer, is the one whom you choose to be your mediator?"

Her voice felt very small now as she answered that it was.

There was a moment while he spoke in hushed speech with the matriarchs of the tribunal before continuing. He gave Ayube the straight-eye as he spoke. "Know it well hue-maan, that under normal circumstances an outsider such as yourself would never be permitted to just barge into this hall, much less act as mediator. However since I am intrigued by you, it will be allowed. But, do not consider this leniency as a weakness on the part of myself or of this tribunal."

The man offered a mild 'yes my liege.'

"Gelf, I will provide you a timepause to instruct the hue-maan in the correct protocol." The ruler paused and gave her intense straight-eye. "And know as well healer, that this *highly* improper circumstance will only make your standing at this tribunal more suspicious."

Two of the men who had brought Ayube into the hall now moved towards her and she was sent back to the room along with Ayube. But the door had barely closed when she caught a vision from the man of Truini sitting inside the hue-maans' flying box with her leg cut off.

“Truini, no! What did you do to her! How did this happen?!”

It seemed though, that Ayube was finally prepared this time, for she sensed only calm from him.

“Gelf, I need you to be strong for me, and for yourself as well. Yes, your mate was injured, and so was I. Quite severely in fact. But what you don't know is how powerful the doctor's 'magic' is. By the time you see her again, I am confident that Truini will be completely whole again. Now if this kangaroo court is as serious as it looks, then you're going to need all of your concentration in the here and now. Do you think that you do that?”

Still in shock from the mind-picture, she meekly nodded her head. Though she felt little strength to support the agreement. “Will you be okay too Ayube?”

She sensed uncertainty now, but the hue-maan responded that he would most likely be fine. She suspected that he was being less than honest, but it was clear that he was doing this for the benefit of her kinfolk. The hue-maans really were an amazing people.

“Now, I need you to tell me all about how this thing works. I've never been trained as a lawyer, so I don't know how helpful I will be here.”

She didn't understand the term 'lawyer,' but ignored that for the moment. She felt from the man his impatience to learn all that he could in the limited time they had. So with enormous effort, she put aside the worries and instead did as the hue-maan wished. “When you first address the tribunal do not give them the straight-eye. Keep your gaze down and sit on your forelegs to show humility (she briefly demonstrated for the man). Your position, and mine, is to answer questions, we are *not* to initiate them. We are not to provide extensive wordsong unless it is requested either. And *please*, do not bring up the experience in the temple.”

“Yes, of course Gelf. I know that.”

“Very well. A deliberation begins first off, with a description of all kindnesses done for the familyland. This establishes the person's devotion to the kinsfolk and relates their social standing. After that is a statement of the grievance from that person's perspective. Once this is done, there will be many questions asked by Journgad and the elders of the tribunal. The goal there is to search the heart of each party and discover how to best bring peace. In special situations or when there is a divided court, then one or more of the mediators will meet with the two sides in private. The goal is to find a resolution which avoids shame for both parties.”

“That sounds like a very just system for your people.”

She did the best that she could to provide Ayube with all of the information she could, but when the vigrusman returned, she was saturated with doubt. Had it really been wise to choose an outsider as her mediator? Of course she knew that it wasn't, not really. But there was nobody else who could be allowed here. Only one who understood the hue-maans' role in repairing the great unhealth could be trusted to stand beside her now.

Chapter 81

Her head felt very strange as she slowly came out of a heavy dream. But then she opened her eyes and was awestruck to see that it had been no dream. For gazing down at her was the disfigured face of a hue-maan, but one with no head hair. Next to her was another hue-maan with white hair on his head and another with black hair. All had the same deep brown skin, and all were missing the familiar knobhorns and breathing hole which was the trademark of their people. She felt a sense of calm from them, and a warm kindness much as she had felt from Gelf when they'd first met. She tried speaking, but that brought mostly confusion. After a timespan the one with black hair at last spoke slowly and haltingly.

“You....feel....good-health?”

The experience reminded her of the first days staying with the barbarians and trying to understand their strange language. If it hadn't been for the feeling of their emotions she would have been filled with the fraidness. But instead she slowly replied that she felt no unhealth, except for the grip on her limbs. Then the one without head-hair moved her finger near the wall and she suddenly felt control of her arms and legs return. How could that be?? Were these hue-maans able to control her own body the way she controlled a spear?

She took her time and tested each limb, then when she felt confident enough, she sat up on the table which she found to be more comfortable than anything she had laid on before. When her attention returned to the hue-maans, the one with black head-hair pointed to herself and said the word Anida. This she did not understand until the one without head-hair pointed to herself and said 'Sefi.' That at least she knew. It was the name of the hue-maan healer. The one that Gelf spoke of with much affection.

She pointed to her and made sure again to speak slowly. “You are....healer, yes?”

Sefi looked at Anida and there was some brief talk before them and then the woman said, “yes.” So now she tried to find out where this magical place was. Although she spoke to Sefi, it was Anida who answered. Clearly the female was the most capable of speaking her language. She may also have been the leader of their people. “You are in camp, on Higsthon.” The woman paused and pointed between herself and the doctor. “We, human”

Now she was slowly beginning to understand why Gelf had been so full of the fraidness regarding the hue-maans' and their tools. She hadn't been simply speaking about spears or torches. These hue-maans had tools that could control her very limbs. But yet... She remembered Gelf speaking strongly about them not being gods. How would that be? Such a people as this defied even the most fantastical wordsong from the time of creation. So with more questions than theories, she tried something different. She asked Anida *why* she was in the camp of the Hue-maans.

The woman said something which made no sense to her, but she pointed down towards the warrior's feet. Truini looked down at two perfectly normal feet. It took her a timespan to think back to the experience, but when she did it was impossible for her to deny. She remembered now being in the strange room, which had perfectly straight walls like this one. She had tried taking a step only to find that her foot had been cut off and her leg was wrapped in a blanket of agony. It was one of the hue-maans who'd used the funny tool on her injury. And now as she looked down and tested the limb, it was clear that the missing limb had been completely repaired.

It was amazing! These hue-maans were the most incredible beings in all the land. She got up, but slowly because the others were all much shorter, and gave each one of them a gentle hug in thanks for saving her from that horrible fate.

“You -welcome Truini.” The woman patted the table again and she sat down looking at the three of them. “The harm to leg...now good-health. Soon, you go back with Valtreen and... others.”

This however, reminded her of why she had launched herself at Ayube in the first place. So with some fraidness she asked the man about Gelf. This brought the sensation of worry into the minds of the hue-maans, which only made her own fraidness worse.

Anida wore a somber expression as she responded. “Gelf...in Xenlaria. Wordsong with Journgad. Return soon.”

It took her a moment, but then she remembered Journgad as the chief of Xenlaria. The chief had been with the unhealth and Gelf had wanted to go help him. The woman was so generous, it was one of the many things that she adored about the beautiful healer. But why would Gelf’s healing of the chief make the hue-maans concerned? This she didn’t know, but it made her worry even more for her mate.

Chapter 82

Oddly enough, they were not led back into the great hall, but into a private room which must have been the resting space of one of the plutolaty. There were two vigrus men standing on either side, and in the middle stood chief Journgad giving them the straight-eye. He held a tilted stance and seemed to be leaning heavily on a vigrus staff for support. The moment the two of them entered, the vigrusmen moved outside and the door was shut. At first the chief ignored her and addressed Ayube instead.

“So you are the representative of these hue-maans, are you?”

As instructed, the hue-maan did not give the straight-eye in return. “I am Ayube and yes, I am permitted to speak for the rest of our people.” The man spoke more clearly than before and belied none of the intimidation that she herself felt.

“Then, are you the king of these hue-maans?”

“No. I am... it would be more accurate to describe me as a diplomat, or mediator as you would think of it.”

There was a pause as the chief pondered this. “Very well. Hue-maan you have been called here because I seek the fulltrue regarding all the strange quietwords about your people. First you show up in a most suspicious and unusual manner, then I follow you and watch you go vanus, as if you were Ilhammet himself.” Journgad must have seen Ayube’s eyes grow wide, for he expressed satisfaction. “Yes hue-maan. I spied that.”

“After that we send one seeker after the other with no sign of them at all until Gelf here finally brings back news of their safety. However, as Ilmuhut wisely pointed out, we have nothing more than her own wordsong to validate this. Now you show up at the hidden entrance to the compound unannounced, and with one of your limbs missing as well. So, hue-maan, it would seem that you owe me a long and very detailed wordsong before I allow this tribunal to continue.”

Looking at Ayube she could see his face go damp and the fraidness fill every pore of his being. She wished for herself that she could offer help, but it was not permitted for her to speak and so she could only pray silently for him.

The man took a momentary timespan to choose his words before attempting to honor the chief's wishes. "Chief Journgad, as a diplomat for my people I will make every effort to answer your queries with as much detail as possible. However I must warn you that there are some elements which are forbidden to speak of."

Journgad raised himself to the full extent of his height and she felt her body grow cold with fear. "You would come to our village then and dictate what I shall and shall not hear??!"

Thankfully though, the hue-maan remained calm and with his gaze low. "My liege, I doubt not that you are a wise and powerful ruler. You must yourself see the wisdom of keeping certain news quiet from the population to prevent greater harm. Just as you took care to stifle the quietwords surrounding my own visit in the beforetime and with the issue regarding your holy temple. It is my intention only, to prevent similar harm to your people now."

For a brief moment Gelf worried that the words would not be enough. However the chief soon relaxed. "You speak wisely hue-maan. Very well. Query you this then. Why is it that so many seekers have gone vanus in search of you, yet Gelf here returns to us alone?"

"My liege, Gelf as you know, is a healer. She devoted many long and exhausting hours to bringing gudstrength to this village."

"Yes, and the tribunal will hopefully bring to light the many strange queries surrounding this vast unhealth. However what concerns me is the strange situation that caused her alone to return while the rest remain missing."

The man thought furiously before choosing what he hoped was a plausible response. "Chief Journgad, it was quite by accident that your healer discovered one of our people injured along the slope of the mountain. Normally we take great pains to remain hidden in order to protect other cultures from being exposed to us. However in the case of your healer, the damage was already done."

"This does not answer my question hue-maan. The other seekers were presumably aware of you as well, yet Gelf is returned to us while the rest are not. What distinguishes her from the other seekers?"

"The most that I can offer you is that your other kinfolk became aware of things which prevents them from returning."

"And is not Gelf aware of these hidden things as well?"

"To put it succinctly, Gelf is aware of the need for silence."

"You continue to evade my question."

"My apologies if it appears that way. However I cannot be more forthcoming."

Her own fraidness soon returned as the chief turned then gave her the straight-eye. "Healer, the hue-maans may answer to their own leadership council, but you Gelf, would you deny me an answer?"

She briefly panicked as she searched in vain for a response which might protect all of the disparate peoples. She sped through a great number of possible wordsongs which might be satisfactory, but just as quickly she rejected them each in turn.

Finally she attempted a minimal confession and prayed that it would not bring the contamnayshun. “My liege, please understand that these hue-maans have experienced horrific destruction and loss where they come from. Their only goal in remaining silent is to prevent us from experiencing similar harm. Their oath is intended to prevent interference with our culture, no matter what the cost. It is not that they wish to disobey your demands, it is that they care so much for our people that they would do anything to prevent interference.”

The chief thought over her response for a timespan, “And I as your own protector am not entitled to the fulltrue? Does that not interfere with our culture as well?”

Thankfully, Ayube provided a response here. “Chief Journgad, it is agreed upon by all of us that the less harmful path is for us to remain silent, my presence here may indeed interfere somewhat. However, please understand that I come here only in the hopes of supporting your healer and proving her innocence. It is our belief that this is the less harmful option for your people. I promise you that all of our actions are done with the utmost caring for you and your kinsfolk.”

“Well, I already witnessed you disappear within a curtain of faery dust, therefore you are either the privileged messenger of Adeima or a God yourself.”

“I am most sorry to hear this. However it would be greatly more harmful for me to expound any further. I must ask that you please trust that we have only your best interests at heart.

The chief then turned back to her and she prayed for strength. “And you healer? Do you think that these hue-maans possess the power of Ilhamet or Azealla?”

“My liege I am certain that they can in no way be compared to the Great Ones.”

“Then can you explain how their people can simply go vanus before my eyes?”

“I cannot fathom how such a thing is possible, no.”

“Hue-maan, you cannot deny what I witnessed. How can you possess such power if you are not connected to the holy Mother?”

“I am sorry, but I must remain silent in this matter.”

Now she perceived more frightening emotions from the chief. Despite the injury, chief Journgad pulled out a bone dagger as he replied. “You would stand here in my presence and defy me thus?!”

“Please my liege!”

She received a hard look from the chief as reward. “Healer, you will hold your speech.”

Now the fraidness pervaded all through her kaba. What would happen if the chief ordered the unthinkable? Could she, would she interfere and protect the hue-maan? Or would she stay shamefully silent? For a timespan her thoughts were a great whirlpool, until she detected a tempering of the chief’s anger as he stared at the stone-faced hue-maan.

“You show great courage hue-maan, more then I would have expected from a person of your stature. Most of the kinsfolk would beg for mercy from my anger. Very well, I will allow you to return to the hall while I speak with the healer privately.”

She watched with enormous relief as Ayube, with no small amount of effort, made his way through the vigrus door. When he was gone, Gelf wondered to herself how the chief would react after such a strange interplay. She found that she didn't have to wait long for an answer.

“These hue-maan people are quite strange.”

“Yes, it is true my liege.”

“Their people appear to have great power and ability and yet they make no grand wordsong proclaiming such. It was quite astonishing I admit, for the man to remain so adamantly silent, even as he would defy the most powerful ruler in the land.”

“They have sworn not to interfere-”

“Yes of course, this 'oath' of theirs. And the man mentioned nothing this time of the tool which he sought. It is most puzzling, almost as if they are afraid.”

“They *are* afraid my liege. But it is not of us.”

“No, strangely not. Still, they must have some kind of powerful magic.” The man remained lost in thought for so long that she began to wonder at the direction of his contemplation.

“It must be a strange position for them to be in. On one hand they wish for the return of some very important tool, but yet they cannot use whatever magic they have to fulfill this desire.” For a timespan it seemed that Journgad was merely thinking out loud to himself. But then he turned to her directly. “You, healer. You know the nature of this oath, don't you?”

His question caught her by surprise. She hadn't considered that the king would be so perceptive. Should she answer truthfully, or try a deception? There was no question that any hiding of the fulltrue would only lead to more inquiries, *and* further wrath from Adeima. The deceptions and half-truths were already weighing heavily on her kaba, and her standing with the great Mother was now as tenuous as the reeds in the morass. She could discern no honorable means to rectify the situation. So she grudgingly allowed herself to share as much as her promise allowed. “Yes my liege. I do know the nature of their oath.”

The chief briefly grinned with satisfaction. “I thought so. And yet you will not reveal it to me.” Not having any practical response, her silence nonetheless spoke volumes instead.

“What could they have done to you that would convince you to turn your back on your own people?”

At this she could not remain silent. “My liege, please understand that I do this FOR our people. All of them.”

“A pitiful excuse indeed, healer. You know, and yet you disobey my command for the answer. It is that simple.”

“My liege, it is-” searching for the right thing to say felt more difficult than her experience traversing the raging water. “It is the very nature of their power that commands me to not tell.” She grasped blindly for anything that might avoid risking greater harm. “The best way that I can put it, is that I am bound in the same way as the hue-maans are to honor their oath.”

Now the king threw her a look of surprise. “Well, now this is intriguing. Have you pledged allegiance to their own king instead of to this leadership council?”

Panic now held her in its clutches. No matter how much she grasped for the right words, each response seemed to merely bring about more agitation in the man. “No no, sire. My allegiance is always to you and my fellow kinfolk.”

“And yet you will not reveal the fulltrue.” The king's response was the final stone on her funeral pyre.

“I, I cannot.” She wished now that she could simply turn away from the king and bury herself in the underfoot. She wondered if her failings would spell death sentences for both herself *and*

Ayube. She even considered, not for the first time now, if such an end might even be the less painful one. But it wasn't long before she was thrown back to the present.

"Healer, I find your stubborn silence to be highly disgraceful. I need not remind you that your hubris will show very poorly in the face of the tribunal. I cannot know what, in all the land, would incite you to hide the fulltrue from me. However I am bound by the will of the tribunal to delay judgment until receiving input from the matriarchs. Then I will consult the Oracle.

However you should not expect any support on my part without a great deal more cooperation."

"My liege, you should be warned that a visit to the Oracle will be, most unusual."

Now the chief gave her the straighteye for a long timespan, as if he was using some sense-readin of his own to discover her feelings. "And what do you know of the situation with the Oracle?

You *will* provide the fulltrue!"

With only some relief, she knew that at least she could honor this question. She related as much as she could about the former Oracle's final words, the visit with Falia, and the strange experience of seeing her in the temple. Not surprisingly, her wordsong induced great consternation for the chief.

"And this, young'n was able to fully recall the prophecy of Adeima? But, this is unprecedented!"

"I swear to you, on the crown of the holy Mother that it is the fulltrue. One of the prophecies which was foretold by Adiema was 'See'er will preserve wisdom that is heard.'"

"But, how could the girl be permitted to usurp the role of the Oracle without being consecrated? Such a thing has never happened in the entire history of our people!"

Not knowing if the chief was merely expressing his thoughts, or directing the statement at her, she bravely offered a reply nonetheless. "None but the holy Mother Herself can comprehend the ways of the eternal."

"Yes, it is true." Now she could sense the chief entangled in his own thoughts and waited patiently for him to return to the present. Finally he turned his gaze back in her direction.

"Healer, I cannot know what, in all the land, would incite such stubborn deedins from you. I can assure you however, that all of this will weigh heavily against you at the tribunal." He paused and guided her back to the door. "Return to the hall and we will continue with the proceedings."

Chapter 83

"The mediation shall now resume." Journgad gave Ayube the straight-eye, "and hue-maan, there will be no further interruptions."

Ayube bowed his head and responded 'yes my liege.'

"Now, healer you are welcome to begin with your own demands."

The fraidness now returned to her as she faced not only the chief, but the elder matriarchs as well. Even were she to have the greatest sense-readin in the land, she doubted it would be possible to predict the fate which this tribunal might choose. She glanced at Ayube and he gave her kindface to reassure her. This helped give her the strength that she needed to find the words.

"Chief Journgad, honored matriarchs, and loyal kinsfolk. I come to you today with no demands of my own. All of you have known me, many since Ilhamet first brought my kaba into this body. From the time of the discovery age, I have devoted myself to removing unhealth and healing

wounds for you. With guidance from the Oracle and Adeima I have created medicines and poultices for every one of you here at some time or other. I do not ask now for any special consideration on behalf of myself. I ask only that you consider my lifetime devotion to you as proof that I would not take any action with the intention of bringing sorrow to the kinfolk or to Xenlaria.”

When she sat down, she got the strong sense that Ayube was impressed.

The matriarch Kridnep was first to take the speaking staff and addressed Ilmuhut. “Boatmaker, since you are the one bringing a grievance, what steps have you taken to resolve this conflict with Gelf?”

Looking over, she sensed the first sign of nervousness from the man, though she did not yet know why.

“Matriarch, I have not attempted to resolve the grievance because Gelf was away from the familyland throughout the time of my recovery.”

The moment he made this admission, she detected quiet words flowing through the hall. It was, after all, unprecedented for someone to bring an accusation to tribunal without first attempting a personal negotiation.

Matriarch Kridnep gave immediate expression to the concerns of the assembled. “What? You bring an accusation to the council of elders without first attempting restitution on your own? Have you forgotten that we are all of one tribe, with the same kneffet of Azeala flowing through us all?”

Now she experienced the man's uncertainty even more strongly. However it was not long before chief Journgad came to his rescue. “Matriarch, know that Ilmuhut discussed the matter with me at length and we both agreed that given the severe nature of the situation and the fact that Gelf has been away for such long periods, that we must resolve this issue speedily.”

The support of Journgad must have gone a long way towards improving the situation because the woman's face quickly relaxed and she fell silent.”

“Boatmaker, do you have anything to add beyond what you have stated thus far?”

She had to give the man credit for not backing down. He hesitated only a moment before answering.

“Matriarch. I brought this issue to the tribunal because I considered the issue to be of highest importance. If Gelf had the audacity to use this very hall without invitation and with no vigrus kinfolk to stand up to her, then I feel there is no time to lose in bringing the case against her.”

Vocjeyp now took over the speaking staff. “It does appear that the incident in which Ilmuhut confronted Gelf in this hall is at the center of the debate. Healer, you will share with the tribunal what occurred from your own perspective.”

She did the best that she could to recount the events with all the full truth that her memory retained, but she feared that her wordsong would offer little to aid in her defense.

The matriarch Kridnep then addressed Ilmuhut. “Boatmaker, you say that Gelf was caught in this great hall while we all lay helpless. Query-you what did you see which convinced you of her malicious intentions?”

The man stood straight up as he answered. “That much is clear to anyone with vision. She was sneaking through here in order to take control of the familyland. But our people are strong and Adeim-”

“Boatmaker, all of us here pay homage to Adeima's majesty. The kindness which She has shown our people is not in question. Now, query-you what did you **see** that proved harmful intent?”

Now the man answered with slightly less confidence. “My apologies matriarch. The unhealth was too powerful for me to discern what she was doing at that specific time.”

“Boatmaker. Nobody would blame you for the weakness of the unhealth. However we must first establish what we can see directly before we delve into suspicion.” The woman then looked to the others and saw that Vocjeyp had words to say.

The other matriarch took the speaking staff and directed her query to Ayube. “Hue-maan. Query-you what knowledge do *you* have of this unhealth which tore through Xenlaria like a massive herd of meldabeasts?”

She could sense Ayube's fear of saying too much as he rose to respond.

“Matriarch. I myself know little of this unhealth. It was our healer who created the medicine which helped to remove it.”

“And query-you, why is your healer not with us to provide a more complete wordsong?”

“Honored members of the tribunal. Know that our people live far from here and I am the only one who has been able to speak your language. That is why I was considered the most appropriate one to speak here today.”

As Ayube finished, Kridnep now addressed him. “Hue-maan. Is it possible that *you* were the one who brought the unhealth to the familyland?”

“No matriarch. That is impossible.”

“Hue-maan, if you are not yourself a healer, query-you explain to us how you can be so certain?”

Now the man looked over at her, but all she could do was give a light squeeze to his waist in support.

“Matriarch, our people are somewhat different from yours. For example we are shorter in height and less physically strong. However our knowledge of healing is quite advanced. Therefore I can say with assurance that our people could not transmit unhealth to any of your people.”

The matriarch Lirfen now stood up to speak. She was advanced in years and commanded great respect for her experience. The woman looked most displeased as she threw the straight-eye.

“Healer. Would you swear an oath, in the name of Adeima ruler of all, that your intention when you traveled here was simply to bring healing to the kinsfolk?”

“Matriarch, I already did but I would be happy to do so again. I swear on the holy name of Adeima and on the throne of Azealla that I have never and would never take any action which might bring sorrow to the familyland.”

Vocjeyp now reached for the speaking staff, she showed a very serious expression as she spoke.

“Healer, it is well known among the kinfolk that you are among the most devoted servants of Adeima and Azealla. Your statement goes a long way towards clearing your name.” The woman then directed a similar inquiry to Ilmuhut. “Boatmaker, would you similarly speak an oath on behalf of this woman's guilt?”

“Matriarch, I cannot and would not swear an oath on behalf of her guilt because I do not have the sense-readin to know her inner feelings. However I would swear in the name of Adeima that I witnessed her sneaking through the great hall specifically when our familyland was weakest and we all know of course that the sickness coincided with her visit.”

“And you hue-maan. Gelf has told us that your people are not followers of Adeima, as strange as that may seem. Therefore query-you tell us how we can be certain that you give us the fulltrue yourself?”

“Honored matriarch. It is true that my tribe was not introduced to the great power of Adeima in the beforetime. However I have come to recognize Her preeminence and would honor her with the same respect as I would honor any of your traditions.”

Kridnep now responded. “Query-you, what has caused you to change your view so radically?”

“Matriarch. Among your traditions is the belief in always providing the fulltrue. I wish to abide by this tradition out of respect. However there are some queries about which I am not permitted to offer wordsong.”

This brought even more quietwords to flow among the assembled in the hall.

The matriarch did nothing to hide the displeasure in her tone. “Query-you why are you not permitted to reveal this and who has ordered you to defy this tribunal over which Adeima presides?”

“Matriarch, all that I can reveal to you is that I have come to recognize the relationship which the great Adeima has with your people. Revealing any more could have detrimental affects on the culture of your people.”

At this, Kridnep physically stood up from her cushion and walked deliberately towards Ayube. She gave him the straight-eye and was about to speak, but her expression instantly changed as she drew close.

“That is very strange hue-maan. I can somehow, sense from you the absence of deception. How is that possible?”

Now she saw Ayube actually start 'swet-ting' as they called it. He had the strong fraidness, as did she, that this matriarch could see the mind-pictures. “Matriarch, there are some among you who can sense emotions from my people. Gelf has this ability, and so does your kinswoman Truini-”
“Truini?”

She didn't know who inquired but she offered to clarify, partly to deflect attention away from Ayube. “Truini is one of the seekers who was discovered near Higthon. She is the sister of the former oracle.”

“Former oracle?!” The woman's face quickly contorted into fury and spun in her direction.

“What have you done to our holy seer?”

By the spear of Prinjak! Even her attempts to *help* the tribunal were bringing only great catastrophe. Now the fraidness became a thick blanket which threatened to smother her. “Great matriarch. I would swear to you again that it is not through any intent on my part. The holy oracle succumbed to the unhealth before I was able to provide healing to her. She was in the realm of Pritlaxtl before I even reached the temple.”

“And why was this not announced to the familyland so that her replacement can be chosen?”

“Honoured assembly, her replacement has already been chosen. Falia, descender of Fronin is the new Oracle.”

Now the quietwords were not at all quiet. They were a great torrent of water rushing furiously through the hall. It was a timespan further before the regular beat of the speaking staff caught her attention as Journgad repeatedly slammed it against the floor till she thought it would shatter while calling for quiet.

“Kinsfolk! We are not here to discuss matters related to the Oracle. I promise you that I will deal with that matter *personally* at the earliest opportunity.” He threw her a very severe look as he said this. “We are here however, to determine the intentions of our healer related to this crisis.” It took a long timespan for the great flow of quietwords to diffuse enough that the tribunal was able to continue. When it finally did, Feyrjut turned towards Ilmuhut and tactfully brought the questioning back on subject. “Boatmaker, please relate your own experience when you saw Gelf in this hall. And I would remind you to provide us with what you actually saw, and not supposition.”

“Honored assembly. I should first begin by stating that I spotted Gelf in my own personal space of respite while I was weak with the unhealth. I struggled to warn her that her presence was not welcome. However the weakstate prevented me from making effective protest. When I was with gudstrength again, I spotted Gelf a second time here in this very hall. I will remind this assembly that there was nobody except for me who was strong enough to leave a bed at the time.” He paused before continuing. “There was a conversation here in the hall which I thought unusual given what I have just related. I sought to examine the disturbance and I discovered Gelf speaking with a person whom I could not see. Instantly I reminded her that she was not permitted to enter the great hall without permission. The healer at first attempted to make excuses, however I quickly made it clear that I would not stand by while she took control of the village even were it necessary to give defense solely by myself. However that proved unnecessary. The fraidness took control of her and she shouted about having stolen away our chief Journgad to the camp of the hue-maans before departing.”

Now Feyrjut gave her the straight-eye. “Gelf is it true what you told Ilmuhut? That you stole away the body of our chief during his time of unhealth?”

“Yes matriarch. With the help of the hue-maans we brought him to their healing place.”

This again caused another wave of quietwords to reverberate through the hall.

“If you do indeed profess innocence, query-you why was our chief singled out while others, such as Ilmuhut here, were left in the familyland?”

Thankfully, Ayube jumped in to provide an answer to this. “Matriarch, some of your kinsfolk were more severely affected by the unhealth than others. We feared for the safety of Chief Journgad and wanted to ensure that he received the very best care. I assure you that it was not due to a person's stature. Freetlack here was also brought to our place of healing as was Fronin the roofmaker.”

“I have a question for you hue-maan.” Journgad took the speaking stick now. “While I was in your place of healing, it felt as if I was unable to move my arms or legs. Was this your doing, or was it a symptom of this unhealth?”

She could again sense the fraidness surfacing again in the man. “My liege, I am not a healer, and therefore I cannot answer that.”

Things got worse when Journgad leaned forward and gave him the straight-eye. “You cannot? Or you do not know?”

“The result is the same, is it not?”

Now Journgad leapt to his feet (as much as possible given his injury) while he gave them both the straight-eye. “Hue-maan, you have been chosen to be the mediator at this tribunal. It was expected that Gelf would inform you of the responsibilities here, *including*, that you provide direct and fulltrue answers to all queries.”

She was not at all surprised to feel the man's emotions become greatly confused. He had the fraidness, sure. But he also fought to suppress anger as well as uncertainty. It was becoming more and more clear to her how much of a strain it was on these beings to keep their personal feelings separate from their oath. Just as with the decision in helping heal her people, there were many pitfalls with walking the line between helping her and with preventing the contamnayshun. It made her wish that there was something, anything that she could do to make this interrogation less difficult for the man.

However, the hue-maan bravely did not back down. “Chief Journgad. I am here to provide assistance regarding the inquiry into Gelf’s role in the unhealth. In this, I will endeavor to provide for you the fulltrue as much as possible. However there are some areas in which the danger of revealing an answer is much larger then the danger in remaining silent. Therefore instead of speaking an untrue, I must choose silence. All that I can tell you is that my people have sworn an oath to not interfere with your culture or to cause any harm to your people.”

“Ah. But hue-maan you must recognize as well that we have more smart-knowin then you suspect. Even your silence provides us with information. I see that you refuse to answer questions when they relate to powers that we could only attribute to Adeima and Higsthon. If I were to strike you down in this very hall, hue-maan, would you use your magic to defend yourself?”

“No!” Though it was forbidden to speak out without being addressed, the fraidness took control of her before she could hold back the exclamation.”

The chief gave her a look as cold as the stones of Higsthon itself. “Gelf, I will not be interrupted by you again. You will know your place.” He then turned to address Ayube. “What would you say hue-maan?”

“Chief Journgad, my own oath remains in effect even if it were to cost me my life.”

Now Feyrjut spoke out without accepting the speaking stick, a most unusual event. “Ahh, perhaps these hue-maans are indeed beyond mortality if they do not fear Pritlaxtl.”

Chapter 84

Things were looking terribly bad now. Instead of the hue-maan merely defending her, she had in fact put his very life in jeopardy. There had to be something she could do. She searched through many possible ideas, just as Ayube had done before.

“Honoured matriarchs. I would swear to you, on the throne of Adeima and the spear of Prijnak, that everything which Ayube has said is the complete fulltrue. Their people are as mortal as we are and Ayube's injury here should prove that unquestionably.”

Her words clearly had an impact, as there was a brief moment of utter silence from the matriarchs as they turned to one another with varying amounts of confusion. Until finally Lirfen took the speaking stick. “Healer. Query-you how can you possibly make such a statement about another being. You cannot possibly see inside this man's head as the great Onatha would.”

Now she was clearly treading on dangerous territory. Obviously she could not reveal the extent of the mind-pictures that she had seen. But she had to do everything she could to protect the hue-maan. “Honoured matriarch I know this because I discovered a hue-maan who was injured and I tended his wounds while he was in the sleep of sickness. It was only after many repetitions of the healing prayer that the man became awake. Even then, the hue-maan required some assistance in order to travel again. That hue-maan's chief related to me that if I had not interfered, then he might have succumbed to Pritlaxtl.”

“And, healer, are you privy to the strange magic which the hue-maan refuses to acknowledge?” Now she experienced a fraidness just as powerful as she had felt before.

“Honoured matriarch, I must choose silence in this matter as well.”

“It is true though!” Now Journgad slowly rose to his feet with an expression of great confidence. “You know of this strange magic which causes a man to go vanus. Yet you *refuse* to provide the fulltrue.”

“My liege, I spoke no untrue in the beforetime. Any power that would cause a person to go vanus is far beyond my understanding.”

The chief however, was not finished. He was clearly retaining one final, and very potent spear, to send her way. “And regarding the seekers who have clearly been kept from returning to the familyland, would you offer similar laconism as to why this is so?”

“My liege. It would be difficult to answer your questions without also breaking another vow. I wish most fervently to evade the wrath of Azealla and to break my vow would risk destroying that chance.”

She barely finished her statement before chief Journgad shouted in retort. “You made a vow?! One that forbids you to answer this tribunal, to answer me, your protector?”

“Please my-”

“No not a word. You are sworn to obey this tribunal first and foremost. Am I to believe now that you have become an ally to these hue-maans over and above your alliance to the familyland? The familyland which has protected and provided for you since your kaba first joined with this body?”

The quietwords throughout the assembly flared up again bringing the blanket of fraidness to envelop her once more. Things were clearly going from bad to worse. Where earlier she had believed that everything would be resolved and her people could be saved, now she wondered again if everything would collapse into destruction. Overcome with fear, she collapsed to her knees on the underfoot.

“Please...*please* my liege. I do everything only for the purpose of protecting our people from great danger.” She poured all of her emotion into this one sentence. “I beg of you to accept our

wordsong. The Oracle herself had spoken prophecy warning me of the great danger which can stem from curiosity and I pass to you the same warning.”

It was a long timespan before the quietwords faded into silence and Vocjeyp accepted the speaking staff. “Now this is intriguing.” The matriarch threw her a direct look. “What, *exactly* was the oracle’s prophecy?”

“Matriarch, the prophecy was ‘as curiosity burns, danger unturns.’”

“Ah, wise prophecy indeed. And you assert that Her prophecy applies to this tribunal?”

“Yes, oh yes matriarch. With all my kaba.”

The matriarch then focused on Ayube with a fresh offensive. “And you hue-maan. Would you make the same assertion?”

She sensed some discomfort from the hue-maan, but soon it passed. “Matriarch, as you yourself have stated, I did not grow up in the beforetime with awareness of Adeima’s greatness. However since being introduced to Gelf the healer, I have come to be impressed and humbled by the prophecy of the oracle. I would absolutely agree with Gelf in this instance.

Chief Journgad turned to the other matriarchs briefly. “I have already related to the accused that I will restrain my own judgment until having consulted with the oracle, assuming that her wordsong about the oracle is the fulltrue. Do the other matriarchs have further queries for either party?”

Gelf was beginning to feel some faerydust speck of hope seeing the chief’s expression. However the fraidness returned when Feyrjut claimed the speaking staff and threw yet another verbal spear.

“I have one final inquiry for the hue-maan.” The matriarch turned an intense straight-eye to them both. “Aye-yu-bay, as you are called. Query-you this. If you’re people are in fact staunchly eremite as Gelf has said, then what would have convinced you to share the skills of your healer with this village?”

“Matriarch, our presence may have set in motion events which brought the unhealth. Because of this, and with Gelf’s entreaties, we have offered the skills of our village healer. However beyond this we cannot and would not help nor harm-”

“So you admit it!” Lirfen was instantly on her feet now. “You admit that your people brought the unhealth. You have been caught directly sharing an untrue.”

For a timespan Ayube felt nothing but confusion, as did she. But soon enough she sensed an understanding from the hue-maan of where the misunderstanding originated. “With respect matriarch. The earlier question was of whether I *personally* brought the unhealth to your people and I replied that this was not possible. What I stated a moment ago was that it is possible that the unhealth came about as a result of our presence in this land.”

Now Feyrjut took the speaking staff and showed a severe look. “You hue-maan must think us a puny and ignorant people. It is clear to anyone in this hall that the two are the same.”

Though he was frustrated, Ayube kept his tone relaxed and calm to avoid escalating the dialogue.

“Matriarch, my people were not anywhere near this village during the time that the unhealth began to spread. This should prove with certainty that my people could not have brought the unhealth here. Our healer believes that it was the barbarians who originally suffered the unhealth which was then caught by the seekers.”

Kridnep now took hold of the speaking staff. “I query you now, how many seekers interacted both with the barbarians *and* our own village? And I do not need to remind you that we expect the fulltrue.”

The shaking must have been visible to the entire hall. She could not raise her straight-eye to anything above the table, yet it felt like the straight-eyes of every other kinsfolk in the room was focused on her and nothing else. However what she could not have expected, was the voice of Ayube.

“Matriarch it is true that Gelf was among both groups of people. However she had no idea that the unhealth would have reached this place. We, all of us, believed that it was only limited to the seekers who had dwelled among the barbarians.”

Chief Journgad spoke quietwords to Kridnep who then moved from her position and sat next to Ayube at the table. Her sense-readin told her that the matriarch retained some misgivings about the hue-maan’s wordsong.

The chief now chose a very serious face and spoke slowly and deliberately. “Is it your opinion hue-maan, that Gelf could have brought the unhealth to our village with the intention of gaining power?”

“My liege, I am absolutely certain that Gelf would have known nothing of such a possibility.”

Now Kridnep spoke in a voice that was soft and yet reverberated throughout the room.

“Journgad, the hue-maan is not being entirely forthright.”

Once again the quietwords flew throughout the room and she was filled with abject terror for where the inquiry was headed. She watched the chief strike the underfoot with the speaking staff until the room was quiet. Then he gave her direct straight-eye. “Gelf, descender of Sigfrend. Have you ever held the intention of gaining the power of myself or anyone else in this hall? And I do not need to remind you that you remain bound by the oath of Adeima.”

With a sigh of relief, she said a brief prayer of gratitude to Azealla at the phrasing of the question. “By the crown of Adeima, I would swear to you that I have never desired to usurp the position of any matriarch or plutarch and I never will.”

The staff now passed to Lirfen who spoke briefly. “And what of these hue-maans? Would you make the same assertion of their people based on your association with them?”

It took her a short timespan to recover from the shock of the statement before she could respond.

“Without question! I would absolutely swear that the hue-maans want nothing but to avoid all interference. They would refuse a position among the plutoltry even if it were freely offered to them.”

Chapter 85

There was a short intermission during which she was led, along with Ayube, back to the strongroom to wait for the proceedings to continue. During this time, Ayube carefully used his far-talking device to update the hue-maan camp of their situation. Thanks to Sefi, she was also allowed to speak with Truini who, it seems, was also given permission to experience their wondrous place of healing.

“My love, I can understand now why you were so reluctant to talk about the magic of these people. By the crown of Azealla, it’s more incredible than any wordsong you shared with us about the Gods. Can you believe, their healer.. um Sefi was able to give me a whole new foot?” Even after seeing the great magic of the hue-maans, the idea of replacing a lost limb was still beyond anything that she could imagine. She repeated to the beautiful woman how much she longed to see her again and how happy she was that Truini was safe. With the help of Ayube, she was also given the full wordsong on what had happened between Truini and Ayube. It brought her greater fear and respect for the momentous danger inherent in the magic of the hue-maans and the necessity of keeping it hidden from her people.

Chapter 86

The conversation was cut short by the sound of footsteps approaching the door. She hurriedly shoved the hue-maan far-talking device in her pocket as the door opened and the matriarch Kridnep appeared in the doorway. She dismissed the strong men and entered without any hint of fraidness in her gaze.

“Both of you hear me well. I have chosen to meet with you because I do believe your vow regarding the great unhealth. However I am the only matriarch to hold this belief. Even if chief Journgad chooses to join with Vocjeyp and Feyrjut, the likely result will be extradition or execution for you.”

“No!”

The woman's gaze spun towards her and the matriarch’s calm demeanor showed the brief unhappy. “Healer, your brazen interruption was tolerated once. However you test my patience most unashamedly by continuing with it.”

“Now, you can help me to help the two of you by giving me more of the fulltrue regarding this vast unhealth. When did you first find out about it? What spells and herbs did you use to counteract it? Which of the Gods did you pray to?”

Once again, she thought furiously for a response which would avert the the great pitfall in her path. After considering the many different ways to safely answer, she finally described the story of the seekers in the camp of the barbarians. She was careful to leave out the nature of the seekers memory loss or of the means by which Adewale helped her. But she was sure to emphasize Truini's heroic victory over their camp.”

“So it was these barbarians who were the actual cause of the unhealth?” The matriarch now radiated great awe at such a fantastic wordsong.

“Yes Matriarch. I believe that the unhealth was originally a punishment from Adeima for causing harm to Her creations.” As she finished the wordsong, she got a strange mind-picture from Ayube.

Ayube, what is 'carrier'?”

She sensed the fraidness within him and he gave a subtle head shake which their people used for 'no' but sadly it was too late. For the matriarch Kridnep was a brilliant leader with a keen eye for deception.

“What just happened between the two of you??” The woman looked at Ayube, then at her and back at Ayube. “The moment you said the word 'carrier,' you hue-maan, experienced fraidness. Ayube, you claim to honour Adeima and to speak the fulltrue but you attempt to hide things instead. Know well hue-maan that your attempt at deception will not be tolerated, and your only hope of continued existence lies in my opinion of your wordsong.” The woman now gave Ayube the straight-eye. “If you do not become more forthright then I will do nothing to counteract whatever fate which the tribunal agrees to.”

She sensed something from the hue-maan about a 'fine-line' which made no sense to her. But she did understand ever more clearly the delicate balance which the hue-maans straddled, between helping her people and protecting from the contamnayshun. She watched the man's face and through the 'dis-gize' was able to match it's movements with the churning of emotions beneath. When Ayube finally spoke, she grew even more awestruck when Ayube explained a limited amount of their magic for the matriarch.

“Matriarch Kridnep. Our people believe that disease is not caused by evil spirits. But instead by tiny living things that find their way into the body, kind of like a burrowing fretgik-bug. It causes harm to the inside of the body which then grows until the person is no longer with gudstrength. We think it is possible for a person to have the small bit of damage and to carry the unhealth but not be aware of it.”

“And you think that this happened to my own kinfolk? But that is an absurd idea. Only Azeala can strike one with the unhealth. Why would you offer such ridiculous wordsong?” The elder paused and gave Ayube the straight-eye. “Unless you have yourself been struck with some unhealth of the senses.”

For Gelf, the thought that she might in fact have been a bringer of such tragedy returned to her the great shaking. In that moment she almost wished that she *could* be struck with the ignorance that her people had, if only so as to be so dismissive of the hue-maans' ideas. But unlike the matriarch, she had viewed the healing first hand through their mikro-tool. It brought her mind back to the wisdom she had received in the hue-maans camp, 'Seeker who travels last, brings sickness fast.'

Would there be no end to the punishment from Azealla for her past hubris? That she actually *could* have been the one to bring the unhealth to all of the kinsfolk was too much to bear. She didn't so much see herself fall, but she felt the outside world grow fuzzy and she collapsed to the underfoot despite Ayube's attempt to help her.

“Gelf, please.” The words of the hue-maan felt like they were coming from the far end of a great field. Her whole existence was a desolate morass, isolated from anyone, kinsfolk OR hue-maan. But after a timespan, the shaking of her shoulder brought her back to the presence of Ayube and the matriarch.

“Gelf, I beg you to listen. The unhealth itself was *not your fault*. The disease was brought on by the barbarians and the animals which they enslaved.”

“But Ayube! I saw the mind-picture! I saw wh-” Instantly she clamped shut, again remembering the matriarch. Terror pervaded every tiny part of her being as their situation

clearly went from bad to much much worse, and once again she was the cause. How could she be so foolish?! Her life was transforming into a tragedy as boundless as the hue-maans' travels. She at last now came to understand why Sefi had excluded her from the meeting in their healing place. She simply couldn't help blurting out her reaction to the mind-pictures. Now her impetuosity could spell utter disaster for both of them.

The matriarch held nothing back now and her words were now dripping with fury. "Exactly *what* did you see healer? What did you see that *I* did not. Tell me the fulltrue!"

She wanted nothing more than to crawl into a deep hole at that moment even if it sent her into the arms of Pritlaxtl. But as was so common these days, no means of escape were visible to her. Even by her silence she was certain to create further suspicion.

"I am deeply sorry matriarch. But I would cause greater harm by telling you anything further."

"The anger now radiated in waves from the matriarch's face. "It is not a matter of making excuses, healer. You know, and yet you will not tell me. What, in all the land, could these strangers have done to you to cause you to disobey a direct command from your matriarch?" She seemed to utter the next to herself, 'They must have some strange power over you.' She favored Ayube with a glance. "Hue-maan, what have your people done to her??"

As deeply as she wished that the hue-maan could rescue her from this punishment, she knew that Ayube lacked enough understanding of the subtleties of their leadership to be capable of assistance. She had to search deep within her kaba and find the strength to face this on her own. Very slowly, she forced herself to raise her head and return the matriarch's gaze. "It is, it is the very nature of their power that commands me to not say more. The best way to put it is that I am bound to protect them in the same way as I am bound to help those with the unhealth."

"Matriarch, may I intercede on behalf of the healer?"

The woman's gaze spun swiftly as the path of a wingsqureel. "Yes hue-maan. You may speak and hopefully offer more than this peculiar wordsong of riddles."

"Matriarch, Gelf came upon us quite by accident and not in choosing by either of us. The moment that we met her, it was clear that she could sense things from us. It is similar to what you experience with me, but not exactly the same. Unlike with you and the tribunal, my tribe cannot speak an untrue to her even were the desire to exist. I'm afraid that this is the genesis of her refusal. If we did not consider her utterly trustworthy of maintaining silence, then we would have kept her with the other seekers and prevented her from returning here."

Now she saw a new fire burn in the eyes of the matriarch and the woman seemed, impossibly, to pull herself even taller. "Yes, hue-maan. *Let us discuss the other seekers.* Were you responsible for what happened to them?"

Ayube now gained some of the fraidnes again as he carefully considered his answer. She wasn't surprised to sense the great hesitation from him. "Well, yes and no-"

"And what *exactly* does that mean? Recognize clearly hue-maan, that my patience with your silence is running *enormously* thin."

"What I mean is... the harm to them was a result of our efforts to protect our camp. I assure you that we used no lethal force and we intended only to steer them away from us. However we

assumed that they had traveled only a short way, and so we brought them at the nearest village. What we did not know was that the barbarians took advantage of their weakness and used them as slave labor.” The man lowered his voice which made him slightly difficult now to understand. “You have my deepest sympathies for the damage that was done. We have been doing all that we can since that time to repair the harm.”

Wanting to reassure her chief, Gelf quickly blurted out. “Matriarch their healer was able to save the lives of all but two of the seekers from the same unhealth!”

The matriarch breathed fire at her, and yet her voice was as cold as the morning at dawn.

“Healer, you will speak only when addressed! Do not make me repeat myself!!”

Her gaze again returned to Ayube. “So hue-maan, you fully admit to causing this harm to the seekers which allowed them to be conquered by the barbarians?”

“Yes matriarch. It was a result of my peoples’ actions. However I will say that the decision was made by the leadership of my tribe, and it was absolutely not unanimous. I personally voted against it.”

The woman now paused for a timespan as she thought over the comment. “I see. And where are these brave people now?”

“They have remained as a group beyond the forst, matriarch.”

“And what will become of them from here on out?” She looked briefly at Gelf before returning her gaze. “Both the living, and those who have passed to Pritlaxtl?”

At this, the hue-maan answered with more confidence. “The surviving seekers have chosen to stay with us matriarch. I promise you, that my people in no way influenced their deci-”

“And why, in all the land, would these seekers choose to remain with you strangers rather than return to their own kinfolk?”

“Matriarch, may I remind you, the seekers do not remember the kinsfolk, and we have no knowledge of their names or their lives in the beforetime. We only know about those whom Gelf has identified. And regarding those who have passed into the realm of Pritlaxtl, their remains shall be returned to you in whatever manner that you specify.

The discussion went on like this for awhile and as the hue-maan and the matriarch talked, she experienced the sense of continued caution from the matriarch. Kridnep was not fully trusting yet, and she still displayed unhappy in her expression. There was much discussion regarding what steps the hue-maans would take now. But soon it came to a close as the matriarch turned once again to look at her.

“Healer, it seems that like the hue-maans I am also in a difficult predicament. You are the only seeker to return to us, and to solve the mystery of the others who went vanus. You have sworn in the name of the Holy Mother that your intent was solely to remove the unhealth” She paused and her countenance fell. “Yet you disobey my direct inquiries most stubbornly. For this alone, you could easily be banished from the familyland. Even if you had my full support, which *you do not have*, there would still be the matter of the other matriarchs and Journgad.” The woman sighed, but it was difficult to read what emotion prompted it. “I truly don’t know what to do about you healer.”

“Matriarch, what would happen to Gelf if the tribunal comes to believe that she intentionally caused the unhealth?”

The woman turned again back to Ayube and gave him the straighteye for a timespan. “Well, to speak the fulltrue, we've never had someone accused of such a monumental atrocity before. Healer, I do believe that you did not cause this plague intentionally. However the hue-maan admits the likelihood that you have caused the unhealth to be brought here. This could easily result in either banishment or death for you.”

She sunk her gaze to the underfoot, finally realizing that she could never give another kinsfolk the straighteye again. She would never be seen as anything but a traitor, and at that moment she would have happily chosen death were it up to her.

“Hue-maan. You said that the seekers had chosen to dwell with you, correct?”

looking down still, she sensed Ayube's acknowledgement rather than saw it.

“Very well, then if Gelf here were banished, she could easily travel to the camp of the seekers and join with them. It would allow both sides to save face.”

“Yes matriarch.

Bia ba be'eran wi K'a si tun beran wi”⁴⁴

“What does that mean hue-maan?”

“My apologies matriarch. It is an expression from my culture. It means 'no one is victorious and no one is vanquished.'

“Wisely stated hue-maan.” She then turned back to Gelf. “Healer, I believe that banishing you into the company of these people would be fortuitous for all of those involved.”

Chapter 87

It was a long timespan further before the vigrusmen opened the door and they were ordered back to the hall. She made her way slowly, with the same fraidness that she had felt the day Pelfren had first brought her to the courtyard. She could not imagine what ruling the tribunal would reach, but given her luck recently, she could expect not a fragment of sympathy. When she entered the hallway on legs which threatened to betray her, every fibre of her kaba shrunk when she gazed on the unhappy showing on the faces of each one of the matriarchs.

While Ayube merely sat down, she felt more of a collapse into the seat as the bitterness, antagonism, and disdain flowed towards her from all directions. The only person in the whole room who showed any emotions of kindness was Freetlak, and she knew that his voice would hold little weight among the highly respected plutolatry.

Chief Journgad rose from the seat and leaned heavily on his staff as he threw the straight-eye her way. “The tribunal is now returned from deliberation, the matriarchs have met with both parties and they will announce their conclusions.

Though she could not give chief Journgad the straight-eye in return, she did sense unusual emotions from him. She attributed the confusion to her own emotional turmoil. Not for the first time, she wished that she had been able to absorb more of her father's teachings in the

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beforetime for recognizing emotions. But such concerns were trivial at this moment when her very life might be decided by the elders gazing down at her in the here and now.

“Matriarchs, please announce your conclusions.” With this request, the chief gratefully sat back in his chair and Vocjeyp held the speaking staff.

“Members of the tribunal, be advised that I have listened carefully to the wordsong of Ilmuhut that I may understand his perspective. While I do not personally believe that his observations alone support incrimination, there has been no denying what he witnessed. It is well known by all, that the healer arrived here only two days before the first of our people showed the unhealth. The boatmaker has sworn on the great throne of Azealla that he spied Gelf speaking to the empty air within this very hall. We know also that the hue-maan admitted the possibility that our healer was in some way connected to the tragedy. It is my conclusion that both of these people are guilty of treachery against the familyland and should be banished to the realm of Pritlaxtl.” She collapsed into her arms then, unable to bear any more. Perhaps it was for the best, as her kaba was obviously in great disfavor with Adeama. In death at least, she could be at long last bereft of the endless sorrow thrust upon her.

The speaking staff must have passed to the next matriarch, as Feyrjut’s voice now drifted to her hearin. “The situation here is most puzzling. On one side we have the healer invoke the name of our holy Mother in proclamation of her innocence. Yet the evidence most clearly stands for her guilt. And what of the other seekers? Ilmuhut’s question is most valid, we have no evidence directly that our lost people are safe. We only have-”

There was an interruption as Kridnep spoke quietwords with Feyrjut for a timespan. For herself the interruption barely registered. It was becoming ever more certain that despite the great hardship for her people, despite the endless worry and struggle, that it would be her very own kinsfolk who should send her to the aftertime as recompense.

“So it seems that the outsiders are involved in the sequestering of our kinsfolk. These insolent ‘hue-maans’ are stubbornly holding the missing seekers, perhaps as captives or ‘slaves’ in the way those barbarians did. It is impossible to tell whether they withhold their location to hide evidence of our kinsfolk’s destruction or for some other hidden agenda. We know only that the accused remain stubbornly silent. It is my conclusion therefore, that the healer be forever excluded from the familyland, but that the hue-maan representative be delivered to Pritlaxtl. She heard little else from the matriarchs. Her own sorrow was now a thick blanket, numbing her to any outside conversation as she sunk into melancholy so vast that even the punishment of the hue-maan seemed petty in comparison. The thought that not only her own life might be destroyed, but that of Ayube as well brought an endless wailing to saturate every fibre of her kaba.

It was in these endless depths, as the depression and pity gave way at last to a numbing apathy, that she felt a strange mind-picture from the hue-maan. He was praying to Adiemma! The very man who once dismissed her culture as ‘prim-eet-iv’ was now imagining himself on his ‘knees’ with his hands together in beseeching the holy Mother for assistance.

Chapter 88

The vigrus doors to the hall flew open as if they were mere kraboo stalks. The great noise brought her attention swiftly to the scene of the commotion. However her gaze was too slow to see the actual unfolding. What she did see was a vigrusman slowly pulling himself up from the underfoot, and little Falia standing in the center of the open doorway.

“Brikvut Journgad!” The quietwords flared up briefly as the diminutive girl spoke in a voice which held far more power, as it echoed throughout the hall, then her diminutive form could manifest.

Chief Journgad’s stared frozen in shock at the seemingly frail being staring back defiantly. He almost resembled the hue-maans when their eyes grew very large as the shock radiated off of his kaba. The man threw an accusatory finger at her and attempted twice more to speak. His mouth opened, then closed, then opened once again while the assembled grew mystified by his reaction. “As the Holy Mother relates, you are unworthy of judging the healer’s fate.”

However despite the great power displayed, there was clearly some disbelief remaining for the chief. When he at last found his voice, it was riddled with cynicism. “Little Falia? So it is true that you have taken on the role of the Oracle, even with no consecration? You must understand that this is not appropriate-”

“It is the will of Adeima! Kinfolk who withholds knowledge that is hidden – is counterpart to the Oracle, acquittal is given.”

For Gelf, she could hardly understand what was happening. Was this Falia speaking as herself, offering defense? Or was she relating the words of the Holy Mother? If so, how was it possible for her to offer prophecy outside of the temple? Even at the camp of the hue-maans she herself had only relayed prophecy when standing in front of their strange power crystal. Not only that, how could the Holy Mother be offering assistance after the many improprieties which she had committed in her time with the hue-maans.

From the edge of her vision, she caught sight of matriarch Lirfen rising slowly to her feet. She had the fraidness then, that it might indeed be only Falia speaking as herself. The matriarch displayed similar unhappy and addressed Falia as she would any other young’in. “Perhaps you are the present Oracle, and perhaps not young one. In either case, the suggestion that these interlopers, *especially the outsider*, be held without judgment for the great attack on the familyland-”

Delyer Lirfen the outsiders are just. Their presence here is for a specific purpose.

“Now this little distraction has been tolerated long enough!” Chief Journgad no longer sought the speaking staff now, so overcome with displeasure was he. “Falia your own standing is yet to be determined, but as for the accused-”

“Any who maintain present accusation, suffer a life in profound desolation.”

“Falia, your intransigence is unacceptable, we do not permit such interrup-”

“Brikvut Journgad your council position is granted only by the will of Adiamia! Be cautious lest you instill Her wrath and suffer the same consequences as Ilmuhut.”

Immediately she saw the boatmaker rush to his feet and throw a questioning stare at the highly unorthodox prophecy. However Falia offered no further comment to the assembly. She instead provided one final proclamation, more to Ayube than to the tribunal overseeing the proceedings.

“Traveler from Earth and denisovian healer, must depart quickly and return to the seekers.”

Falia then spun quickly around and returned back through the entranceway. The vigrus doors slamming closed immediately thereafter with the same fury as they had upon opening. All through the room, an utterly silent confusion pervaded the thoughts of the kinfolk. Questioning glances passed between the matriarchs and among the plutolaty in audience, however no single person seemed possessed of the will to put words to their feelings. The very air felt possessed of a power which even hue-maan words could not describe. Several times one of the matriarchs would stare from one to another, or to Ayube. But none possessed the courage to give voice to the thoughts swimming within them. From the edge of her vision, she spied one of the vigrusmen who had been knocked over being assisted to a spot at the table next to Freetlak.

It was an extensive timespan before at last matriarch Kridnep found the strength to raise her voice at last. "We are witness this day to a great exposition of Adiamas power. There should be no question for us that the healer commands specific attention from the Holy Mother. What this relationship is, we can only speculate in wonder." The matriarch then gave her the straight-eye, "Healer, have you any comprehension as to why the Oracle might speak out on your behalf?" For once, there was no deliberation for her, she simply responded in the negative as the experience made no amount of sense to her.

The matriarch then continued, "Be it known. I have spoken with both the stranger and the healer. And while it remains clear to me that the unhealth as well as the recovery are linked with them, the support of the Oracle Herself leads me to believe that the most practical ruling is that they both should return to the camp of these 'hue-maans.'" The matriarch now gave her the most intense straight-eye that she had ever experienced. "And Healer, it would be wise for you to not ever return."

One by one, she watched the other matriarchs nod their head in approval and offer similar conclusions. Journgad looked from one to the other of them and the unhappy grew like an afternoon shadow down his face.

"You would release this traitor into the very limbs of the people who have turned her against us?!" His voice was low, but the sound carried widely in the still silent hall.

"Journgad, know that all of us here are merely denisovian and even yourself are not above rebuke by the Holy Mother. It would be most unwise to test Her patience, or that of the council." In all the many annums, she had never caught wordsong of public challenge to the chief's position by a matriarch. Therefore it was even more surprising to witness the chief lower his gaze and call for the two of them to depart. It felt as if she was watching one of the hue-maan's 'ree-kord-ing' pictures instead of a real event.

Amid the still silent room she was at last moved to her feet by the grip of Ayube pulling her with as much force as he could manage.

She didn't know how, but by some effort inside of her, she managed to discover her feet and followed behind Ayube towards the great doors. They moved quickly towards the outside while the tribunal and the vigrusmen surrounding it maintained a confused uncertainty. The whole room was flooded with the emotions of fear, bewilderment, and for some, a sense of veneration.

Chapter 89

The ruling felt to be nothing short of miraculous, and they both could agree on that wholeheartedly. At the very least, Ayube was saved from the fate of visiting Pritlaxtl and she herself would live to see the lovely Truini again. Once safely beyond the hall, she gave the hue-maan a hug in gratitude for his enormous risk and support, she could never have expected that his people could be so selfless as to endure the utmost risk for the sake of the familyland.

When they finally cleared the last shelterspace and entered the forst, she paused and took the hue-maan's hand. "Ayube may I query you about a mind-picture that I witnessed?"

Ayube stopped as well and looked back at her. "Of course Gelf. What is it?"

When she had stopped, the query had been certain. But now she fumbled briefly to find suitable words. "Back in the hall, I felt the mind-picture of you sitting on your... 'knees' with your hands in front of you and giving prayer to Adiama... I, just want to understand that more."

Before he answered, she sensed a guilty acceptance from the man. "Well, I guess you caught me." The man paused as he searched for the best way to convey his thoughts. "Gelf, can you imagine what would happen if your people had chosen to 'send me to Pritlaxtl' and my strange red blood was spilled in front of their eyes? It would cause no less contamination then the sight of us undisguised."

"Oh! Oh yes, that would be so very tragic." The thought of such a consequence had not entered her thoughts in the beforetime. "But Ayube, do you not also have fraidness for the release of your kaba to Pritlaxtl?"

The man's countenance fell and she experienced a deeper sadness then. "Gelf, we have done our best to hide this from you, but all of us, every human within our ship, has been faced with the inevitable and melancholy understanding that our very forshortened lives will end here on this planet. Whether that death comes soon or later, is of a minor consequence next to that."

"Ooooh." This time the words left her more slowly and more thoughtfully. The emotions from the hue-maan struck her almost like a physical blow. "Ayube, I am so deeply sorry for the fate of your people."

"Thank you for your sympathy Gelf. It is the friendships that we have built with you and the seekers which helps relieve some of the sorrow for me."

Chapter 90

Though they both felt emotionally exhausted from the proceedings, Ayube gave no argument for making quicksteppins at least until they reached her own humble shelterspace among the trees. After a trip dominated by a powerful maelstrom of emotions, her kaba sighed with a relief as vast as the forst around them when she finally caught a glimpse of her small abode and she slipped joyously into the peace of the hut. They entered and she gave the hue-maan a cushion to sit on (she remembered that their people had greater challenge from the strong ground-force then her own people did). At long last, she could collapse to the sleeping mat without the least concern for what needed to be done or who required attention in the tomorrow.

It must have been at least two 'ouwers' that she lay there unmoving and with no thoughts of anything or anyone, not even Truini. Not until she heard a strange sound coming from the hue-

maan did she finally look over and catch a sense of embarrassment from him. Quickly she was shamed with her own embarrassment and her tone quickly saturated with it. “Oh Ayube. You require fodiens! I am a terrible host, how could-”

But almost before the man could even lift up his remaining limb in protest, she felt his refusal. “Gelf please. You’ve been through more than enough turmoil these past few days for a whole lifetime. A little hunger won’t be the end of me.” But she soon began thinking of Truini and the seekers as well. She wanted, no, she needed to be with them all again. A quick meal and some rest was all they should spare time for in the present.

Digging through the pack which Pelfren had brought to her ages ago, she found two kul-melons which were still in good enough shape to eat. With the expert skill of many annums, she carved them both and shared the fodiens with her hue-maan guest.

While putting the knife away, she gave a surreptitious look at the full extent of her tellurian possessions. As she did so, her distress for the loss of everything she had worked for, rose to the surface of her thoughts. For this would be the last time that she ever gazed upon her home of twenty full annums. “Ayube, I-” Once again, she found herself confused over the words, as if the hue-maans were somehow amplifying the vast turmoil predominating her kaba. “I don’t know how I can let all of this go. I mean, I’ve spent the full extent my life here in this shelterspace building up whole stores of plants that are good for the many types of unhealth. How can I choose among all of them, how can I decide which few to carry with us and which to abandon?”

Thankfully the man remained calm and relaxed. “Gelf. You don’t have to choose right now. I have no doubt that the other seekers will have continued need of your services in the future. We can just swing by here in the Saro-Wiwa before the ‘Suale’ rises and transport them up in the kefatz.” The man offered a sly grin now. “After all, your tribunal only said that none of our *people* should visit the village. But they said nothing about hovering overhead.”

“Oooooohhhh.” Then immediately, the blanket of worry became greatly reduced for her. There was still some of the sorrow in giving up the shelterspace itself, but then she remembered what Truini said about their love being worth the sacrifice and she had to agree that the loss of a shelterspace was a small price to pay for the deep connection that she had with the warrior and with the hue-maans. So instead of giving in to a selfish depression, she allowed herself finally to relax with the man while they shared fodiens and discussed a new shared future.

Akwukwu Takwas book eight

Chapter 91

Something felt vaguely odd about their travel. The feeling was too subtle, and danced at the edge of her thinkin many times along the way. She felt certain that the unusual crooked tree that they passed was new to her despite coming this way twice before. The timespan to reach the morass felt different as well, but there was no way to verify her hunch and so they just kept on towards the clearing.

Finally the vast forst became thinner as the trees gradually surrendered to the inhospitable morass and she rushed towards it now in anticipation of seeing Truini. The moment she broke into the open though, it became clear what had caused her disquiet in the beforetime. For the

whole expanse was deserted as far as she could see. There were no people, or supplies, or even an abandoned fire pit to be seen. She soon realized that the two of them must have taken the wrong dejeeyr path from before, because clearly there had never been a living denisovian along any part that either of them could see. She called out for a long timespan in hopes of hearing some clue as to where her beloved might be, but even with both of them giving the sharp eye along the vast perimeter, there was not a single glimpse of the seekers. They looked at each other briefly and she experienced the other's frustration. Ayube gave one of their peoples' heavy sighs and pulled out the far-talking device.

Chapter 92

At first she did not notice the commotion, as she was absorbed with her exercises. But when the shouting finally reached to her hearin, it became clear that there were immediate matters that required attention. She made quick-steppins towards the sound and saw a stranger engaged in an intense quarrel with Valtreen. As she came close, Valtreen's voice became distinguishable as did that of the stranger.

"Truini?! It is you! By the sp--"

The man's comment was cut off by a severe chop to the soft spot below his arms and his face twisted with the intense pain of the blow.

"Valtreen! What, in all the land has gotten into you?!" The emphasis of her voice must have broken through the man's fury, because the next blow never came. Instead the man turned towards her mournfully.

"My apologies Truini. I became overcome with unhappy when I heard what this man said about our blessed Gelf."

"My beloved mate? But how does he know about h--"

"Beloved??" The stranger gave an offensive snort of air through his blowhole. "Gelf is a traitor of the lowest sort and she has brought nothing but suffering and hardship since she has returned!"

The intensity and harshness struck her almost physically and she was momentarily unable to respond, until she saw two other seekers attack the stranger. Then her own fury took hold and she moved to join the onslaught. But something strange happened as she began to swing her arm up. The voice of Gelf manifested within her smarati. She clearly remembered the words, 'Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love; that is the eternal rule.'

Her arm froze momentarily and the shame of what she was about to do saturated her being, but the others experienced none of this and she watched in fresh horror as many arms became raised in the attack.

"Stop!! Everyone please!"

Her intensity halted the seekers briefly enough for the moment. But clearly the situation was still very contentious and she held no great confidence in her own ability to hold the peace very long. She was after all, a warrior and not a mediator.

"My friends please. Before we use violence, let me first get the hue-maan and find out what is the situation with this stranger."

One of the men whom they had called Critlef for lack of a name, looked back at her sternly. “Truini we are not young’ins who must depend on the hue-maans for every need. We are a strong and vigrus tribe.”

“Critlef I am not disputing our ability. All that I’m saying is that something about this feels wrong and I would like to have the advice of an outsider. Would you all please just hold off on further attack until we both return?”

“I can not guarantee the stranger’s safety while he brings insult to the blessed healer Truini.” How could she resolve this? How could she leave to bring the hue-maan, but also ensure that the stranger wasn’t attacked further in her absence? But then an idea occurred to her. “Valtreen, I ask you as a personal favor. To swear on the throne of Adeima that this stranger will not be harmed.”

For the first time since they had all woken up near Higsthon she saw a look of pure coldness from the man. “You ask the impossible Truini. How can we merely stand aside as this grishneevit hurls slander at our savior?”

The insult spurred her to glance at the stranger, but the man had been injured too severely to respond. “Valtreen please. I am certain after what she experienced with Adeima that our blessed Gelf would want this.”

That seemed to sway the man slightly. “Remember Valtreen, how deeply she always strove to prevent harm, even to the barbarians.”

It was an interminable timespan, but finally the man agreed. “But do not make further request of me warrior.”

She made fast-steppins into the forst, hoping all the while that Valtreen at least would hold to his agreement until she could bring the hue-maan back. She searched around and finally spied Anida deep in the trees. The woman was using their magic far-talking device and she briefly heard the woman say ‘don’t know how we can find you without-’ before she hurriedly interrupted the exchange and urged the hue-maan to return with her to the stranger.

“Alright Truini.” The woman turned back to the object in her hand and spoke once more. “I’m sorry Ayube but there’s apparently some urgent business her-”

“Is that Ayube? Is he with Gelf?” She raised her voice briefly, “Gelf my beloved. I so look forward to seeing you very soon.”

Anida put the device away and let her know that Gelf had heard. Then they both made fast-steppins back to the group. The sight she saw when they reached the spot was nearly as bad as the attack itself. The stranger was tied fast to a vigrus tree and a piece of cloth was bundled into his mouth while he stared at them all furiously.

The hue-maan stopped short and she did the strange thing where her eyes became large. “Chi moo, what on Earth is going on here?!!”

For a moment Truini felt the desire from the hue-maan to strike at one of the seekers, her astonishment and fury melding into a tangled chaos. But the intensity of emotions quickly faded as the shock dissipated and the woman registered the situation. Anida looked around and must have realized that none of the people understood her. Quickly the hue-maan spoke again more slowly. It sounded something like ‘Give wordsong...what- this be??’

She thought briefly of Critlef's earlier comment about the hue-maans and thought it worthwhile to show comradeship with the hue-maan to build their trust.

"Yes. Valtreen, what is the meaning of this? I only left you a short timespan and now, a man is tied to a tree."

Critlef expressed not a hint of guilt in his voice as he answered. "It was the only option Truini. Not one of us has the willingness to hear his cruel and hateful wordsong about Gelf. It was either silence him temporarily or... silence him permanently."

"Alright, alright." The hue-maan put up her hands in the gesture of peace. "It, clear you unhealth from stranger's wordsong. I offer- hear him and you be far off."

Though Anida was difficult to understand, she felt able to grasp enough of it to repeat the meaning and the others agreed that it was a fair suggestion. Still, she wished that the hue-maan Ayube was present, or better yet Gelf. But this only brought the longing back and she needed to be available for the other seekers in the now. So with her kaba still heavy from being separated from the healer, she guided the others away from the cruel stranger.

Chapter 93

It was the most disgusting conclusion. As if being shown the unhappy by all the kinsfolk wasn't ridiculous enough. Now... now that he had *finally* come upon the secret of what happened to the missing kinfolk, he had the injustice of being treated like a prisoner. It made him wonder if they might turn him into a slave, as the traitor had related from her time with the barbarians. By Prijnak's spear, these fools seemed to practically worship the woman. He couldn't imagine how, in all the land, anyone could see Gelf as other than a messenger of Pritlaxtl.

But nothing, nothing he had ever witnessed was preparation for the sight of the strange being that Truini brought. She (he suspected it was a she) looked like no person he had ever seen before and was absolutely not denisovian. Where could she have come from? How was she able to breathe through all that hair on top? What strange birth defect could cause the funny-looking horn in the middle of her face?

These things he did not know, but the challenge of her wordsong made questions nearly impossible. So despite her efforts, he focused on getting her to bring the hue-maan Ayube. He remembered now the man said that he was the only one of his people who could speak their language properly.

The disfigured one, 'Aa-nee-da' was clearly frustrated with trying to understand, but he finally got it out of her that Ayube and the traitor were along some other part of this morass and they didn't know which direction. He couldn't believe it. Did these fools not know how to build a signal fire? And so, slowly, as if he were teaching a young'n about boatmaking, he made it clear that a fire's smoke would tell Ayube where to go.

The disfigured person then ran off, ostensibly to tell the others. She then came back and made more attempts to learn things from him. But his patience with her funny speech was quite short and he decided that it would be easier to talk to someone more normal-looking.

Chapter 94

“There it is!”

Ayube looked over and she could sense his disappointment when he realized that the smoke was half a day’s walk along the edge of the morass. But as far as she was concerned, the only thing that was important was that they would soon be reunited with Truini at last.

She did her best to show kindness to uplift the man and they made fast-steps toward the source of the smoke.

Long before the individual forms of the seekers could be distinguished, she called out excitedly for her mate and was joyously greeted by a small form approaching with tremendous speed. When at last the warrior reached her, she gratefully wrapped herself around Truini offering many kisses and the promise that they would not be separated like that again.

It was a timespan further before they pulled apart and approached the seekers, who by now were accompanied by another hue-maan. The wordsong of the many happenings flew like wings back and forth between them. But soon enough, the subject of the hateful stranger surfaced, and she felt the responsibility to give aid to Anida in dealing with whoever it was. Despite the hue-maan’s advice to stay away from the figure tied to a tree, she cautiously approached until she could distinguish his face.

It was Ilmuhut!

What could have brought the boatmaker all the way out here? And more importantly, how would they repair the contamination of what he might see? She did not know, but the issue became secondary once he caught sight of her.

“You! Grishneevit! Bringer of Pritlaxtl! Stay away and leave me to my fate!”

She was in fact horrified, and flinched slightly at the insult, but she did her best to remain diplomatic.

As expected, Ilmuhut showed the deepest unhappiness as she approached. He fought against the restraining ropes with utmost passion. But the seekers had used some type of hue-maan ‘metul’ which held the man fast.

“You. My life is destroyed because of you! What curse have I wrought to be forced into seeing you again? I would hurl digestion at you if these people had given thought to provide any food.

She had expected hostility from the man. But the sheer scale of his unhappiness reached beyond what she could have imagined. She was briefly moved to offer an angry retort of her own. But the wise prophecy of Adeima returned to her memory. ‘all things when seen in their truth are not independent but interdependent’ she reminded herself.

She forced herself to let go of the unhappiness and put a hand on Ilmuhut’s shoulder, which he made a valiant effort to shrug off. The moment that her hand touched him, she experienced the deep pain and anger filling the man’s entire being. Now she felt, rather than just hearing through voice, that this connection would be filled with enormous challenge.

“Ilmuhut. I am so sorry for the pain which you have experienced.” She gave him the straight-eye, but with a face that showed as little unhappiness as she could manage. “Would you be willing to

share the wordsong of your experience? Perhaps we can come up with a solution which could restore your honor and good-standing?”

“That, healer, is beyond the willingness and ability of even Adeima Herself.”

Though she could in no way imagine the Holy Mother turning Her back upon any kinsfolk, she nevertheless sat on the underfoot beside Ilmuhut and the hue-maans in hopes that he would eventually concede. When at last after a timespan he did, the wordsong was beyond anything which she could imagine possible.

Chapter 95

“With the tribunal completed in a most strange and unsatisfactory manner, I made it my purpose to make faststeppins to the temple upon the next peak of the Saülé. Perhaps it was some impropriety on my part which brought Her displeasure, but I somehow believed that it was more than that.

In any case, I hurried toward the grand credantur in hopes of discovering what kind of strange magic was behind the unique appearance of an unknown Oracle. However an unimaginable experience happened as I made my way upward. With each step that I traversed, the effort to move became more difficult. I became more and more fatigued, as if I were pushing against the current of the river instead. Nevertheless, I was not deterred in the effort to find some manner of explanation. With my limbs aching and my breath-hole a great pulsation, I strained forward with all the force that I could provide.. I was barely an arms-length from the top step when at last my limbs could be strained no more. I collapsed to the underfoot without even coming within reach of the pronaos.⁴⁵ My mood was one of utter despondency and there was no other explanation but that Adeima had withdrawn the full extent of Her kindness for this humble servant. It was at the moment of deepest despair that the young voice of the one who claimed to be an Oracle drifted down from within the temple. Only one sentence could I discern, ‘kindface no longer for boatmaker to see, valuable apprentice to the far off Sodangi.’”

The moment she heard this, Gelf moved her hands to her face in shock. How could the man have learned about the hue-maan ‘enjenyeer’ except through Adeima? She looked at Ayube and sensed the surprise from him as well. It then occurred to her that these were clues. Just as the prophecy in the beforetime had helped her to provide for the seekers, the Holy Mother was sharing information which Ilmuhut could not have known, in order to tell her something. But what was She saying? For Ilmuhut to be part of the hue-maan camp? That was absurd! Not only was he intolerable, but she was certain that he would refuse even if the hue-maans *did* have the willingness to make the offer.

Chapter 96

“No matter how much rest I allowed myself, the strain of moving closer was clearly impossible. But strangely, any movement that I made *away* from the temple was effortless. This removed all

⁴⁵ Architectural term from Greek culture. The Pronaos is the space between the outer columns and the temple proper.

doubt from my being that I was cursed forever. I do not know what connection exists between you and the Holy Mother, but there is no doubt for me that you are part of this great castigation which I suffer.

If I believed that this isolation from the Oracle was the full extent of my sorrow, it might perhaps be tolerable. However the trip back into the familyland proved no less mortifying. I went immediately to the marketplace intending to share the peculiar wordsong of my experience with others of the plutolaty. However not a single person would speak to me or address me in any way. All of the kinsfolk, friends, neighbors, even Pelfren himself held their backs to me. The only way which I was able to discern the reason was by chance overhearing the wordsong of another. It was Djentra, brother of Sreehulm, who I have known for many annums. She spoke with curses and the most profound unhappy of my attack on one who was blessed by Adeima. I made further attempts to defend myself, but not a single one of the kinsfolk would even turn an eye to me. It was only then that I understood the full impact of the prophecy. I am forever estranged from not only the wisdom of Adeima, but the kinsfolk for whom I have labored these many annums.

I felt the temptation then, to hurl myself into the brook and pray for reunion with the next plane. I stood there on the dock, which I had myself built so many annums before, and stared into the water a great timespan. The current flowed by most swiftly and I contemplated that it was perhaps a reflection of my own experience. Whether an annum is peaceful or contentious, it will eventually flow past like the water of the brook.

It was in this deep state of confusion, that I thought to search within the forst for a means to repair my connection with the Holy Mother. All throughout, the memories of how much was gone vanus remained to dominate my thoughts and I hold you responsible, traitor.”

“Hatred does not cease by hatred, but only by love; this is the eternal rule.” She quoted the Oracle for Ilmuhut’s sake.

Ilmuhut paused for a timespan before answering. “Wisely said.”

“It is not my own wisdom boatmaker, it is the prophecy of Adeima.”

There was a much longer pause before the man commented, more it seemed, to himself. “Then perhaps, the wisdom of Adeima is not completely withheld from me.”

Chapter 97

His voice now softened somewhat, Ilmuhut made query about the strange appearance of the hue-maans. Though he would obviously not address her, the man seemed to retain enough respect for Ayube to speak kindly to him.

“Hue-maan, I am curious how such a distorted person can exist. That strange horn in the middle of the face.” He then turned to Anida, “How is it even possible to see properly. And no breathing hole at all-”

Ayube quickly but kindly interrupted him on the chance that the female might understand. “Yes Ilmuhut. This is we look like in our natural state.”

“What?! How can that be? Hue-maan, how is it that you yourself do not look so disfigured.”

“Boatmaker, you must realize that I am disguised so that I did not bring great shock to the

familyland when I visited your people in the beforetime. Without the disguise, I look very much like Anida. All of us humans do.”

The man remained silent for a timespan as he contemplated what the man said.

“Is this why all of the seekers are forbidden to return to their families? To their friends who miss them so?”

She looked quickly at Ayube. She did not know how much they could share with Ilmuhut.

Would he choose to go back to the familyland? More importantly, *could* he return? She did not know and so she waited in hopes that the hue-maans would have more smartknowin.

The man thought deeply for a timespan and she experienced strong worry from him. But finally he looked calmly at their captive guest. “Ilmuhut, there is certain forbidden knowledge regarding my people. The seekers, and Gelf as well, have accidentally discovered it by no fault of their own. However because of this, we cannot allow them to return. I assure you that it is a most sorrowful decision and as you can see they are in no way mistreated. You on the other hand have not been exposed to that knowledge and so you would be welcome to return to Xenlaria if you wish. Provided we can ensure that you would protect the secret of the way my people truly look.”

“Hue-maan, it would be my only wish to return to the familyland and to never speak to the traitor ever again.” The man paused, and she felt a sorrow wider then the morass contained in that pause. “However it is the will of Adeima that I be an outcast among my people. So if Her prophecy is to be accepted and I am to become the apprentice of this ‘Sodangi’ then-”

Ilmuhut paused when he saw the reaction on Ayube’s face. “What is it about that name, hue-maan? The traitor showed the same reaction earlier.”

Ayube took a timespan to compose himself before he was once more able to speak. “Forgive me Ilmuhut please, but this is a very strange situation. You realize that my people did not have the experience of receiving wisdom from Adeima in ‘the beforetime’ and so it still takes some getting used to for us.”

Ilmuhut showed most unhappy at this and for once, she was forced to concur.

“You have to understand that Sodangi is the person among my people who... fixes things. She, she looks like Anida and the rest of my people. The idea that Adeima would suggest your inclusion among our camp means that she approves of your exposure to our, most unusual tools.”

“Pfft. Hue-maan you may not have lived among my people and so you have not seen the extent of my skill. But I created not only the dock which allows the kinsfolk to access the brook, but I also developed the boats and I have also built many advanced tools for the plutolatry. I have no doubt that your tools will be as the toys of a young’n for me.”

Before she could even think about it, the thought escaped from her, “oh if only you knew the half of it.”

“And just what do you mean by that, *traitor*.”

She wondered if it would ever be possible for the man to forgive, and she reminded herself that she would have to remain most vigilant regarding him. But the Blessed Mother had provided great wisdom regarding the value of kindness, and so she fought against her initial temptation and responded simply that there was a great deal of complexity to the hue-maans that only herself and Truini had experienced so far.

Chapter 98

“Ayube,” she switched to the hue-maan language for privacy sake, “do you think that it’s even possible for him to become part of this community? I do not think that he would be well liked among our people.”

The hue-maan gave her a knowing look. “Not only would I myself vote against it, but there’s no question that the professor would refuse as well. I mean look at him, the man despises you. And your followers why-”

“Please Ayube, do not call them my followers. It is by no choice of my own that they feel this way.”

The hue-maan sighed again and put a hand on her shoulder. “Be that as it may, they still would follow you to the peak of Higsthon were you to ask.”

“Hang on a minute you two. Gelf, you said this man was a builder right?”

Briefly she nodded her head to Anida before the woman continued. “Think about it this way. None of us, humans I mean, have the knowledge or experience to build with Neolithic tools. The people in our camp have never even *seen* a handmade thing in our lives. That’s what made Anuli so terrified. And as for these seekers, none of them remember any of the skills that they once had. So perhaps this man is here to help fill that gap. I mean, he was the only one who thought of the signal fire, right?”

This gave her pause. The hue-maan had a point, but even if it were possible, how could she convince people to listen to a man with so much bitterness? By Prijnak’s spear they nearly killed him merely for calling her a traitor.

“Anida, even if we both thought it was a good idea I am certain that we would be outvoted back at the ship. We just can’t let any denisovian who wanders by become aware of our technology.”

“Well, Ayu-

“I will not be ignored by you! What is this strange language that you speak which is hidden from me? You speak quietwords to each other as if I were not imprisoned right next to you!”

She was quickly reminded of how the situation must look to the boatmaker, who could not possibly understand the funny hue-maan language. If they ever wished to heal the rift with them, it would be necessary to show the level of compassion that Sefi had showed to her in the beforetime. The task was not one that she looked forward to, but there was no benefit in allowing the unhappy to continue, and it might even bring danger. So with the help from the hue-maan mind-picture, she figured out the strange metal piece that was holding the rope in place.

“Gelf, I don’t believe that is wise just yet.”

Looking briefly at Ayube, she gave him the straight-eye. “Please speak in our language so that the boatmaker does not feel left out.” She then switched to her own speech, “If we ever wish to build trust, we must first display trust ourselves.”

“Gelf, it is not a lack of trust with the boatmaker, it is the concern we have for the man’s safety.”

“Hue-maan you must think me utterly incapable of protecting myself. I was merely distracted by the sight of so many lost kinsfolk, otherwise their puny attack would have been no more powerful than a wingsqerl.”

He paused, to look from one hue-maan to the other. “All of these valuable members of the familyland. You have continued in every instance to evade the question of *why they are not allowed to return*. What crime have these kinsfolk been found guilty of?”

Ayube carefully used soft-voice now in his dealings with the man. “Ilmuhut, if it is agreed that you should join our community, then the full wordsong will be shared with you. In the meantime I can only repeat for you that your people are healthy and have chosen to remain here of their own volition.”

It was Ayube’s suggestion that further discussion with professor Umquo would be needed before Ilmuhut could be allowed to learn of the hue-maan’s tools and so the matter was set aside until then. In the meantime it was carefully pointed out that Ilmuhut be kept from the wordsong of the hue-maan’s magic box and the far-talking device. Truini agreed to keep an eye on the community while she joined the hue-maans in discussing the matter with the professor.

Chapter 99

“No! Absolutely not! Both of you, we’ve been over this several times. Sefi can wipe the man’s memory and we can find another tribe to leave the man with. Ayube, you have sworn an oath to protect these people from contamination and I expect you to uphold that promise, as difficult as it may be sometimes.”

“But professor Umquo, isn’t the harm to the smarati what caused the other seekers to be enslaved in the first place? Adeima has already decreed that Ilmuhut will be a part of your camp.”

There was a brief silence before the hue-maan leader continued, and the sense that she got from the man’s tone was of him again seeing her as a naive young’n which caused her to form fists unknowingly. “Gelf I’m sorry but your deity does not dictate procedure for us, we simply cannot offer instruction in advanced technology to any denisovian who wanders into that place. Ayube, I would like you to begin preparations for the removal of the seekers to a more permanent location, one that is far enough from their village to prevent further accidental discovery. In the meantime I will speak to Sefi about working on that man’s memory.”

“Professor, I will also need Adewale to give me a lift back to the ship to get my arm repaired.”

There was a pregnant pause as the man processed this. “Oh my word, right. How long has it been? It must be well over 22 hours. We can only pray that it hasn’t been too long to repair the damage. I’ll give your injury the highest priority Ayube.”

“Thank you professor.”

She waited there with the hue-maans in the forst a short walk from the camp until the magic flying box arrived. It was half an hour by the hue-maans’ time before Adewale contacted them to say that he was ready to bring Ayube back.

“There you are! Exacty what is the reason for-”

Instantly Gelf foresaw the incredible tragedy that was about to unfold. She shouted at Ayube to

hold off on the faery-column, but it was too late. Ayube was still surrounded by the magic faery column when Ilmuhut broke through the trees and gave them both the straight-eye.

“Traitor! What was that magic which you did? I saw it and you cannot deny this time! It is exactly as chief Journgad described. Someone went vanus surrounded by faery dust. It is certain now that you have received the gift of magic from Pritlaxtl. He moved to grab at her and she was filled with the fraidness. For it would go against her oath to hurt the man even to protect her safety. She did her best to hold off the blows, but the skill of defense had never been necessary in the beforetime and she was poorly trained.

The first blow caught her in the same soft place below the arms where Valtreen had struck him in the beforetime. Pain exploded through her as he struck again and she was soon overcome by the blur of limbs and the pain throughout her body.

“Grishneevit!”

That was the last thing she heard before she succumbed to the darkness.

Chapter 100

“You want me to what??”

“Anida, our energy reserves aren’t going to last long at this rate.”

“Well of course she deserves it but-”

“Alright. If you really think it’s that important.”

He had been dozing and so only paid scant attention to the communication, but curiosity about Adewale’s tone piqued his interest.

“What’s going on Adewale?”

Without turning around, the man responded heavily. “Anida and the natives are begging me to turn back and pick up Gelf. Apparently that interloper saw you disappear and he must have blamed Gelf because he quickly attacked her.”

“Chineke mee! This situation just keeps going from bad to worse. What in the world are we going to do with that olòshì.”

“Ayube, really.”

“What? You should have heard the way that native spoke about Gelf. I mean the woman gives up everything she’s had for her the sake of her people and look what it gets her.”

“It sounds like she’s gotten to you as well.”

“Gotten to- No. But I tell you, if our own people had been as selfless as she is, perhaps we’d still have Europe and North America intact back home.”

The man gave a nostalgic sigh then. “Don’t remind me.”

Chapter 101

For a long while it felt as if she was floating in a brook. There was no feeling and she had no memory of the beforetime. It wasn’t until the face of Sefi appeared over her that she knew something was wrong.

“Sefi? What are you doing out in the forst?” But then she saw the strange hue-maan light that did not come from the Saülé and she realized that they were in the place of healing. Suddenly her smarati was refreshed and the whole attack came flooding back to her.

“Ilmuhut. Where is he? You didn’t hurt him did you?”

The hue-maan smiled as she looked down. “Oh Gelf. I can see why your people admire you so. Even in the condition that you’re in, the first thing that you are concerned about is your kinsfolk.”

She barely had the energy to process that statement, as she felt something that was both strange and very wrong. Somehow she could not feel the table that was supporting her, but that quickly became secondary. She also realized that she no longer felt the mind-pictures from Sefi. It was like when she opened her eyes underwater and everything was blurry, but she felt this way for all of her senses together.

“Sefi. What is wrong? Why can I not feel anything? Why can I not see the mind-pictures? Sefi please, help me.”

From the corner of her see’in, Sefi put her hand on her shoulder but still she felt nothing. “Gelf it’s okay. Don’t worry. I gave you some medicine to numb the pain. Your body was damaged by the attack and it will take time to heal.”

“Is it bad Sefi?” Despite the skill of the hue-maan healer, she was filled with the fraidness that she might have some kind of permanent injury.

The woman’s frown did nothing to dispel her concern. “To be honest Gelf. We really don’t know your biology well enough to say. The organ that you use to breathe seems fine. Digestion appears okay. But there’s heavy damage to some of the structure near your arms and heavy bruising to your skeleton.”

“But Sefi, why can I not sense the mind-pictures?”

“I don’t know Gelf. There doesn’t appear to be any damage to your cerebrum, um, your brain. Perhaps it’s a result of the pain medication.”

“Will it get better?”

“I truly don’t know yet my friend. We’ll just have to give it time and see.”

Chapter 102

Once again he found himself unable to move his limbs. But this time there was another force which he could not place. There was some kind of invisible pressure on the front of his body that seemed to slowly ease. Very carefully, he opened his eyes in fraidness of what he might see. If he lived for a thousand annums, he would never manage to fully describe the sight. There were two hue-maans staring at the scene ahead of him. One of them had the missing limb emblematic of Aye-u-bay and the other one had the strange hair covering his head. But the sight that they were looking at was the great mount of Higsthon, and somehow it was *below them*. It was as if he were in the aftertime and Pritlaxtl was carrying them all to join with the Saülé. But there had never been a wordsong or legend to describe anything like this.

He wanted to cry out, to demand an explanation. For a brief timespan he almost did. However Ay-u-bay seemed not to show the fraidness and neither did the other being. Thus he held his

words and merely watched carefully as they descended towards the slope of the mountain and a great wall suddenly moved aside to admit them within.

Chapter 103

He struggled very much with the fraidness. Everything was changing so quickly and it made not the slightest sense. He had carefully opened his eyes and looked around when there was no sound of anyone nearby and he spied one of the deformed hue-maans gathering up some tools. She had the more familiar bald head, but without a breathing hole and with the strange horn in the middle of her face. She looked down at him and frowned.

“No need pretend Ilmuhut. I..read you ..con-shus. No matter soon.” Then the being said something that sounded like ‘injek-shun’ and memory.

His observations were quickly interrupted by a piercing sound. It was like nothing he had ever experienced. It was high-pitched and created an impossible on/off pattern. But somehow the being recognized it because she turned away and quickly moved to a long flat table on the other side. When he turned his head, he saw that it was Aye-u-bay. The man was asleep and he had a fully grown arm once again. He knew that it was the left arm because of the way the man was facing.

But if that wasn’t strange enough, he watched in horror as the woman made some kind of angry sound, and after picking up a different tool she cut the arm off once again. As he watched, she put the limb aside and held a tool up against the man’s stump which was leaking a strange red fluid. The tool emanated an eerie light and soon the leak was halted.

Now he very much became filled with the fraidness. Would this monster do such a thing to him as well? Would they remove his limbs as punishment of some kind? He struggled to move or escape and found that he was held down as surely as if he were still tied to the tree. He prayed with his whole kaba that Prijnak or Azealla would wake him from this nightmare. But instead, his movements must have caught the attention of the monster because she turned towards him with that strangely deformed face and put something against his skin. Instantly then, everything went dark.

Chapter 104

It was still challenging to get used to the prosthetic, but he managed to carefully lay the native man down and did his physical therapy exercises while he waited for the man to regain consciousness. He thought sadly back to how close he had come to being whole once again. But the doctor had told him there were complications with the cloning and his body had rejected the limb. Thus he was using his other arm to absentmindedly scratch at the disguise which he had hoped was finally relegated to the past.

The gentle stirring of the ground turned his attention back to the native man and he waited patiently for him to open his eyes. When he did, it was a profoundly disappointing moment.

“‘Aye-u-bay?’ It is you, is it not?”

The moment he realized that the native recognized him, it was clear that the attempt had failed. Though he couldn't understand why. He saw the man hesitantly reach out to touch his arm and realized only too late the implications of what was happening.

"Could it be? Your arm is whole again? But this is impossible. I watched that monster remove your limb as easily as I would remove the skin of a djengourd."

Finally the truth set in and he slapped his forehead in despair. Not only did the native remember everything, but he himself had forgotten how a prosthetic limb would appear to a neolithic culture. What could they possibly do to find a place for the native man? The seekers would have torn him apart when they found out what happened to Gelf, the Xenlarians had ostracized him, and a different tribe might subject him to slavery.

"You must have experienced a nightmare Ilmuhut." He was grasping at straws, but he could think of nothing else at the moment.

"A nightmare? You mean that I imagined looking down at great Higsthon from above? That I imagined the strange being who looked like Anee-duh cut into your limb and release a peculiar red fluid? That is a most exceptional dream indeed."

"It is not so unusual. I myself have had very strange dreams. Why just the other night I dreamed that a man was flying towards me through the forest and swinging a deyjeer around by its tail."

"That is a most peculiar dream."

"Yes. I was happy to return to the waketime." He paused briefly and gathered up the sack of supplies. "Now if you feel ready, there is a group of people who I believe might be willing to include you in their village. They should be only half a day's walk from here.

"Very well hue-maan. I trust that you are an honorable one and so mayhaps this will be a practical solution for me."

The sun was reaching its zenith when he led the native through a grove of trees which their survey had shown to be a shortcut to the next village. All through their trip he prayed that nothing further would threaten the fragile trust that he had built with the boatmaker. If he could convince this new village to treat the man as an equal then they could safely contain the problem to just the fourteen seekers who had been exposed to the technology so far and finally move on. The distant sound of hammering reinforced his hope that they could finally get to putting a lid on the whole mess. A slight crack was all that he heard before the trunk of a tree appeared out of nowhere and suddenly all was blackness.

Chapter 105

The constant jostling was impossible to sleep through, but the pain throughout his chest quickly overshadowed such mild discomfort. He slowly opened his eyes wondering why Sefi wasn't there to give him anesthetic for whatever was causing the agony. To his horror, he found that he was being carried backwards and there was some kind of stick poking out of his chest.

"You have to put me down! Quick, I'm injured." He had intended the words to be more forceful, but his breath felt ragged and the statement came out barely louder than a whisper.

It took another few seconds before he remembered who he'd been traveling with and he quickly switched to the language of the natives.

"Hue-maan I have absolutely no intention of leaving you to those animals. We must get farther away before I will feel safe to stop." There was a pregnant pause before the man continued. "And know this well Aye-yu-bay, the only reason that you remain alive is for the purpose of clarifying the many untrues which I believe you have told me."

This last comment gave him such foreboding that he nearly forgot the pain. Until that is, the man leaped over some obstruction and the landing sent waves of agony through him.

He was laying on the ground now, a thin shaft of wood sticking straight in front of his vision. The peculiar chanting which had woken him up led his eye to the face of the native boatmaker. But the man stopped as soon as he saw the movement.

"It is good to see that Pritlaxtl has not chosen to carry you off so soon my strange companion. Now, since you are awake, I expect from you the fulltrue regarding this 'dream' as you call it. If it was only a dream, then why is there red?"

Whatever words the man was going to say were soon muffled within thick cotton and plunged beneath an ocean as the image of the native slowly faded from his vision. There were random sounds occasionally and at one point some excited conversation, but somehow he just couldn't find the strength to focus on them. Even his eyelids felt like they were weighed down by the otherworldly gravity here.

Chapter 106

The sight of Dr. Ikpeba brought him even more confusion. Her expression told him that something exceptionally worrisome had happened. The frown on her face seemed permanently etched into the surface as she looked from the medical readout back to the tool in her hand.

"Doctor. Please tell me. Whatever it is, I'm sure that we can get through it."

Finally she managed to notice his presence because she stopped focusing on the tool and instead looked him in the eye.

"To be honest Ayube, I'm not sure we *can* just get through it." She took a deep breath before trying again to speak. "Ayube, whatever poison there was on that blowdart, it's been suppressing your heart rate to frightening levels. It's not anything that I can isolate at the moment, but please be sure that I am doing everything I can. For now the electrical pulses seem to be helping keep you alive but... I don't know for how long."

He was grateful to at least have gotten that much information before passing out again. But soon there was just the swirling grays and blacks chasing themselves across the curtain of his eyelids.

Chapter 107

There was so much that he did not understand, it felt as if thirty annums would be insufficient to grasp it all. He believed now that the hue-maan had spoken many untrues, despite his promise to the contrary. This meant that he really had seen the man's arm become removed and then re-

attached. But none of this could explain the strange device which he had found that spoke to him with a female voice. It wasn't until he had heard the name 'Sodangi' that he knew the he was finally uncovering some hint of the great mystery surrounding this tribe. He had told the strange voice of Adeima's prophecy, but was quick to point out that this should be secondary to the red fluid leaking out of Ay-you-bay's chest. As soon as he had mentioned that, the voice had changed and what sounded like a different person who asked him to carefully place the device on top of the hue-maan. He could not understand what good it would do, but with no healing skills of his own there was little alternative but to do as the voice requested.

The next thing he knew, he was waking up from an odd dream and when he looked around he found himself on the same table again and his fraidness quickly took over. It was impossible to understand how these strange disfigured people who were much smaller then him could somehow overpower him without any struggle at all.

Soon one of the disfigured people came next to him and the man put a hand gently on his shoulder. The man spoke some kind of gibberish and held out an incredibly flat device which projected words that he could easily understand.

'Hello, my name is professor Umquo and I am the leader of this human camp. If you are able to read this, please nod your head.'

For the moment he had to dismiss the 'how' of what he was seeing and managed instead to focus on the 'what.' Somehow he was in the camp of the hue-maans and he was at last given an audience with their leader. Finally, there was the chance to experience the fulltrue regarding the many nonsensical experiences with these people. He gratefully nodded his head and first demanded to know why he was unable to move.

The man looked at the device briefly before speaking again in their nonsense language. By some amazing magic, the words on the device changed in the span of a single eyeblink.

'You have been restrained both to prevent you from getting hurt and to protect our own people from being hurt.'

This did not make sense to him and he could not figure out a way to get the being to understand his confusion. So instead he asked about the many strange visions he had seen and the voice of Sodangi that he had heard coming from the impossibly small tool.

When the flat device was held again for him, it told a story more unbelievable then any wordsong of Adeima. If the words were to be believed, these beings had the ability to create artificial limbs, to fly above the mount of Higsthon, and even to make people go vanus. For a timespan he was ready to dismiss the whole thing as an untrue. How could these hue-maans, who vehemently swore to being in no way equal of Adeima, possibly perform such miracles? But then he began to think about chief Journgad's statement of seeing Aye-you-bay go vanus surrounded by faery-dust. The traitor had been nowhere around at that time. He thought as well of the traitor's comment about the hue-maan tools, and the great danger they posed. He then looked more closely at the device in front of him which was perfectly flat and displayed new words as soon as they were spoken. All of it reflected a magic more powerful then any of the legends from the familyland. As impossible as it seemed, there was no way for him to deny what

was literally staring him in the face. Either he was in the realm of the Gods, or... Pritlaxtl had delivered his kaba to a strange and otherworldly realm.

There was only one way to find out, and that was to query the being which stood next to him. However when he did ask, the leader denied both suggestions. The being insisted that his people were not Gods. But how could such a thing be?

He looked once again at the strange tablet and saw the wordsong, repeated exactly as he had heard it, of Gelf's description of the hue-maan whom she had found injured. Below that was another wordsong describing how the fuel for the hue-maan devices was going to run out within the span of one annum.

None of this made sense to him. How could beings who could travel beyond the height of Higsthon also be so vulnerable? It was as if they straddled a strange twilight between the omnipotent and the mortal. However he barely had the time to fully incorporate this before the strange device reflected new words.

'The doctor is hoping that you may have an idea as to what poison was on that dart which struck Ayube. We are not able to stabilize his...' The last words made no sense at all.

He thought about it deeply for the hue-maan had shown himself to be honorable, even if he might have told the untrue sometimes. But there was little to relate to his people. He did not know the village and he had not spoken to their people. Shortly after the hue-maan had been struck by the booby-trap, there had been many blowdarts projected towards them and he had quickly dragged Aye-yu-bay behind a fallen tree. Thus it was impossible for him to imagine what kind of poison might have been used.

Chapter 108

He woke to the sound of intense arguing. It was in the strange language which he had come to attribute to the hue-maans and so he was tempted to ignore it. However his interest was piqued by the sound of the traitor complaining in a voice full of unhappiness toward the hue-maans. At least that told him that she was similarly exasperated by the peculiar strangers. The argument gave him a great deal to mull over. The strange hue-maans had seemed, for the most part, to be honorable people. And now that the great mystery surrounding them was gaining clarity, he was curious as to what would cause the traitor to show such hostility. Unless it was true in fact, that she was the messenger of Pritlaxtl and their great power was somehow preventing her from an attack. The logic of this thought was difficult to ignore as he considered all of the experiences in the beforetime, and he resolved himself to consult with the hue-maans when one of them provided the strange translation device.

Chapter 109

It was a long timespan before the opportunity presented itself. But at last the hue-maan with white hair on his head returned and brought the communication device. Whenever he looked at their strange faces, he struggled with the utter freakishness of their appearance. But the moment

he was presented with the magic translating device, he found his initial questions thrown aside. The display presented only one single sentence on its flat face.

‘It has been requested that you accompany me to see something important. We believe that you will benefit greatly from the experience.’

Though he was initially doubtful that anything in the camp of the hue-maans would be of greater interest than his experience so far, his curiosity was piqued nonetheless and he found that he was finally able to raise himself from the bed without the force holding him down. The two traveled along some highly peculiar passageways made of perfectly smooth walls and with holes set in them for hands and feet. Looking briefly at the surfaces (for the hue-maan was urging him along), he could not imagine what tools had been used to create them.

But if he thought this alone to be intriguing, the sight he witnessed after following the other through a doorway took his breath away. It was a gigantic room, at least as large as Journgad’s great hall but with the same smooth walls as he had seen earlier. In the center was a massive column three times as large as the grandest tree and with strange bulges in different parts of it. As he began walking around it he was soon witness to the traitor, much to his surprise. She was standing in front of a square panel that soon slid upward and an eerie light filled the room. He wanted to go toward it, but the hue-maan gently had a hand on his chest. The device earlier had told him of the enormous danger, and given the incredible surroundings, he could not doubt their word.

His thoughts were quickly scattered by the sound of a strange incoherent speech coming from the traitor. But then his mouth dropped to the underfoot when she began speaking prophecy. It was the prophecy of Adeima! But spoken by the traitor! How could such a thing be??

“Branch of tree catawba grey, healing for the heart of human Ayube.”

“Kul-melon flesh weaken severe, strength of the strangers who come to live here.”

“Boatmaker rescue humans who dwell, brings water for djengourd with aid of the well.”

He saw her collapse and instinctively he pushed past the hue-maan in the attempt to offer help. But before he could even crouch next to the healer, his skin exploded in fire and he screamed out from the agony. Every part of his body was instantly burning in horrific torture and moving at all quickly became completely impossible. He barely noticed the panel close, but he was quickly engulfed with a wondrous relief when the pain gradually drifted away and all was blackness.

Chapter 110

He found himself in another room with perfectly straight walls and what looked like a comfortable sleeping mat but one of unusual thickness was underneath him. Only a few handsbreaths away was the now-familiar device with a single phrase written on it. ‘You are welcome to rest here while the others recover. There are many akwukwo⁴⁶ to help you with Yorigbausa.’

He understood some of the words, but much of it was lost to him. Instead he turned his attention to the strange room. Aside from the sleeping mat, there was a flat shelf holding many rectangular things. Out of curiosity he pulled one out and found that it was a series of thin sheets

held together along one side. However it was too difficult to concentrate on whatever it contained. There were too many strange thoughts fluttering like huetz-flys within his head. First there was the strange deformed people. He had witnessed at least two of them, so it was difficult to believe that features were some kind of birth defect. Then the impossible rooms with the perfectly straight walls and the light which did not cause any flicker or smoke. But most strange of all was the sight of Gelf standing in that strange room. He would swear on the throne of Azealla that she had been relating prophecy from the Holy Mother. But how such a thing was possible he could not fathom. This thought led him to the device with the strange words. He remembered that most of them were incomprehensible and it became clear that the answers must lay within them.

He quickly returned to the rectangular things, as he remembered seeing words on the face of one. The words were strange, but one of the objects showed a series of pictures both in his own language and in a different language that he did not recognize. He guessed (and hoped) that this was a clue to the language of these strange deformed people.

Chapter 111

The process of recovering from the power device never became easier for her. It was a great struggle to pull herself, with boulders for limbs, towards the one shimmerer that seemed to represent the hue-maans. For a timespan she wasn't sure that she could manage. The peace of the darkness was so relaxing and comfortable. There was much time to think, or to recite the prayers in her mind for kindface from Azealla.

Intermittently, she found herself experiencing muddled feelings. They were like the mind-pictures, but so distant and blurry that little of it made sense to her. But the feelings would not allow her to be at peace. Most often they were filled with worry, and a deep horrible fear. Other times she would experience what felt like imploring to Adeima, but this made no sense as the hue-maans had no devotion to the Holy Mother.

After a timespan, something different began to be felt in the darkness. At first she could not understand what the thing was, as the change was very subtle. But soon it became more pronounced and louder. It was a voice, no, many voices. But what were they saying? The words could not be understood. It was as if the words were written in water which quickly flowed away from her.

Eventually the words at last coalesced into a form that she could understand and focus on. It was the prayer of healing! But where was she and who was chanting the prayer? This was not something that made sense. It did seem though, that if she pushed against the darkness a certain way, that the voices became louder. And so, driven by little more than curiosity, she pushed just a bit harder and soon became able to distinguish some of the voices. She heard Truini, and Valtreen, and even Sefi. This only confused her more however, as she had thought up until now that she must be in the time of waiting for Pritlaxtl. If she was hearing the voices of her friends who were in the world of gudstrength then it must be something different than what she had believed.

At last she began to get the sense-reading from many people around her. There was very strong worry, much as she had felt from Sefi in the beforetime. The feeling now felt somehow amplified though as if a great number of voices were rising together. But the greatest shock of all came when she managed to open her eyes.

It was not merely a few people, or even the whole of the assembled seekers. It was a great sea of people crowding out everything else in the room. There was Truini and Valtreen, there was Meyrhut, Adewale, Sodangi, Regina, the professor, Critlep, and many hue-maans who she did not know. But the greatest shock of all was when she managed to turn her head and saw Ilmuhut as well adding his voice to the great thunder of healing prayer which echoed throughout the room.

It was only when Sefi spoke loudly to everyone that she was 'stable' and that the chanting was no longer necessary that the great echo of words at last faded into the wallsides. She gratefully received many kisses from Truini, and many questions were directed towards her before Sefi urged the group to give her 'pay-shent' some space in order to fully recover. Then the woman squeezed her hand before ushering the group out of the healing room.

Truini however was given permission to stay, and it was through her that the extensive wordsong of what had happened became clear. She learned of Ayube's injury and the great risk that the hue-maans had taken in attempting to bring Ilmuhut to another village. She learned also of the great stubbornness that the boatmaker had shown in learning where to find the one kind of foreverleaf tree that could bring healing to Ayube. It seems that her insistence on facing the energy crystal once more had done more than merely provide an answer to the hue-maan's injury. The experience had been witnessed by Ilmuhut, who saw her take on the role of the Oracle and to provide prophecy. This at last gave the man understanding that she was not a threat to himself or the familyland.

The enormous relief of this gave her the hope that she might, at long last, be able to put the great conflict with her kinsfolk to rest and celebrate a new beginning together with the seekers and the hue-maans collectively.

Epilogue

As part of her privilege at knowing about the hue-maans' magic, she was also burdened with the responsibility of helping them to hide it. The white-haired hue-maan leader had shared with the group an extensive wordsong about their people's upcoming loss of their power source. She remembered how humbling it was, once she understood their peoples' approaching fate to realize that all of their magic would soon be as useless as the boulder she was carrying. With little of the fuel left for their magic, it was up to her, Truini, and the other seekers to aid the strangers in covering their magical camp and the strange 'glass' wall with dirt and rocks to ensure that the contamnyshun did not occur again. She heard from Ayube that the hue-maan chief was going to use the last of their energy to send a message to their home, which was so far away that none of them would live long enough to receive an answer. This puzzled her as to why they would do such a thing. But then there was so much about the strangers which she could not imagine ever

fully understanding. For now she was grateful only to have the lovely warrior to spend her life with and to enjoy the fascinating wordsongs of the strangers and their long lost plan-et. The surviving kinfolk would sit patiently each night listening to the 'stor-rees' that the hue-maans told of a place where the sky was blue, the downward force was mild, and a vast ocean gently lapped at the shore of an island called 'Oko.'

The End

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