

Prophecy Fulfilled

Richard Dawson

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<p>Main Characters</p> <p>Rhumfa – the ship’s pilot Oibo – ship’s AI Aye-yoobay – historical prophet Anya – one of the crew (kinda int. in nativ) Saaed – crew (knows ship well) Kaylan – geology expert Aminu – science expert Oneyda – attached to rules/regulations Shadai – bubbly crewmember Ereeko – craft pilot Manuel – computer specialist for NewMali Huso – crew member goes into village Fatima – very accomplished- gets beat up Ikasha – linguistics expert Kinfe – more unhappy of female crew Kotingre – doctor for the crew Oomkwo – ancestral leader</p> <p>Gelfetia – village healer Lluchra – Gelfetia’s assistant Muatide – villager Ayoprij – villager Regina – local hoomas that drinks Kwandic – local hoomaas (good humored) Aninniyyi – local hoomaas Truenye – local warrior Molayo – traveler Sefin – local recently pregnant Gjintruk – chief of Xenlaria Beljutil – former mate of Imotren Imotren – grandson of the man stolen to Ubuntu Nukremit – general Ubuntu – name of local village Freetlak – Xenlarian not in favor of attack Pretvuukra – healer for Xenlarian people</p>	<p>Dieties</p> <p>Azealla – creator Goddess Adeima – Goddess who relates wisdom Ilhamet – God of travel Pritlaxtl – God of the afterlife Iqjarek – God of the meldabeast Dewos – God of the forst Onatha – God of long life [and healthy crops] Prijnak – God of battle Nejtowil – God of water and rivers Saülé – God that provides light and warmth</p> <p>Local terms</p> <p>Wardbreath – medicine plant annum – year sense-readin – emotional telepathy shimmeri – stars dejeeyr – swift land animal jazabean 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 – animal that glides between trees tilquebalm – medicine credantur – majestic steps leading to the temple plutolatry – noble class wudfell – tree trunk Juantaylib – river separating Ubuntu from others Nneka – name for Oomkwo’s camp ouray – arrow</p>
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Chapter 1

Rhumfa woke to the sound of a horrific blaring alarm. Confusion flooded her being as the noise crescendoed, fell back briefly and grew again with mind-rattling agony. This wasn't the familiar gentle buzzing of her smart-watch, it was something she couldn't at first recognize. The clamor was a giant Batá drum¹ pounding against her skull, shattering the dream she had been relishing of the hot sandy beaches of Ikoyi.²

With her mind finally thrust against the cobweb of harsh consciousness, she was at last able to recognize that the pinging was an alarm activated by the ship's computer. She lost several more critical seconds forcing her groggy mind through the mental goo and toward full control of her body. But the moment her eyes opened and located the blinking red life-support warning they grew to saucers and a flood of adrenaline rampaged through her body. She launched herself from the cryo-bed and snatched a towel before pounding the deck with her bare feet as she raced to the far end of the ship. The slight breeze on her still damp caramel skin barely registered before it quickly turned to sweat in her frantic race against catastrophe.

Sprinting down the corridor, she accosted Oibo for every detail on the situation. The AI followed along easily through the overhead interface, responding with eerie calm to her frantic voice commands. Current oxygen supply, distance to target, velocity and drive status. She took a critical half second to consider the situation before barking orders for the AI to shunt all remaining oxygen to the bridge and then she made a few frantic mental calculations before slamming the door closed and setting the emergency lock mechanism.

Inside the much smaller command room, her first task was to run a brief burn to speed their arrival time. "Oibo, what is the maximum velocity which we can initiate without endangering the ship upon atmospheric entry?" She looked at the readout and frowned. But she set the engines on full power briefly until their velocity showed 0.1% light speed and held that for five minutes before shutting everything down. Watching the clock, she finally noticed how much of the precious

1 Traditional drum used in Nigeria for religious ceremony

2 A peninsula of Lagos Island which was cut into its own island by British colonizers

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resource she was sucking up, and put all of her mental effort into slowing her breathing. It wouldn't do at all for her to consume the last remaining oxygen by panicking and thus leave the entire crew in danger.

When at last the scope showed them entering the star's system, she vented the built up CO₂ from the Boabob's compartments while watching the aqua colored planet grow large in her viewer. Praying for a miracle, she checked the O₂ concentration in the small cabin and actually began trembling. With her free hand she clutched for and finally grasped the emergency oxygen mask stowed beneath the console and fitted it over her head. It might only extend her life another 25 minutes, but if Nne nna³ was still watching over her, then perhaps she'd be able to hold on long enough. Honestly there wasn't any other choice for them. Either she survived and slowed the ship down, or they disintegrated against the unyielding rock of the planet ahead and none of her efforts would do them the slightest good. If the planet wasn't safe enough, they could end up drifting endlessly through space until unconsciousness gave in to asphyxiation for the whole lot of them. She said another brief prayer to some ancient mythical being that her absurd plan would miraculously save the ship from the disaster she was envisioning before she quickly went over landing procedures with the AI.

"Oibo, given our new current velocity what is the estimated time of contact with the planet's atmosphere?"

It continued to respond to her queries in its calm baritone voice which only frustrated her more in the terrified state she was in. "At present velocity the ship will contact the atmosphere in 18.15 minutes."

She looked at the indicator on her oxygen mask. Nineteen minutes?! Things were going to get critical a hell of a lot sooner than she'd hoped, and she wasn't at all confident that her panic could be kept at bay long enough.

In an attempt to distract herself, she checked on the crew and their cryo-bed status. Thank the stars *those* systems appeared to be just functional. Then she examined the thermal scope to see what kind of population density existed on the rapidly approaching planet. At first there was nothing to see, but as she drew closer to the night side, two blobs of orange became visible close to the boundary.

3 Grandpa in Igbo

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One was very large, hopefully just a flock of herbivores, and the other was uncomfortably close to their expected trajectory. She made rapid adjustments to the thrusters and headed for a spot on the opposite side of what looked like a mountain, just in case. Thankfully at least, she would be landing just before dawn which meant that if there *were* any intelligent beings nearby, the ship would reach the ground without drawing any undue attention.

Chapter 2

Waiting until the last second before atmospheric contact, she made an emergency reverse burn to cut their velocity and was thrown violently forward against the safety webbing as the ship became buffeted by high-altitude winds along the thickening envelope. The pain in her chest almost sucked the air from her lungs, but through some unimaginable force of will, she was able to stay conscious. A series of shorter firing sequences helped to slow their descent and she took a microsecond to glance at the oxygen readout on her mask. When it was depleted, she ripped the thing off and immediately began to feel lightheaded. Now it was a critical gamble. If she opened the hatch too early, the negative air pressure might damage Oibo's systems, but if she waited too long, then her depleted mind could be too muddled to keep the ship from crashing.

Waiting as long as she thought her body could handle, she finally jammed her finger on the emergency egress button and the explosive bolts propelled the airlock door away from the ship. Clean air began flooding in and she routed all available oxygen to her compartment while she continued running intermittent burns to slow their fall. Now that she was blessed with a little more time to think, she chose a landing spot on the widest patch of flat ground that was visible near her expected point of contact. That should be safe enough for now. They could always move the ship later on when the immediate threat was taken care of.

It took a minute to search for the landing jets given which she'd only used once before when she had guided the craft to the beautiful world of NewMali.

Unfortunately those seconds were more time than she had available and Oibo's warning again raided her consciousness. "Chineke ekwela ngwere gbaa aji!

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Ooogini di ihea?”⁴ Even at full reverse on the landing thrusters, she wouldn't be able to slow them down enough to avoid major destruction to the ship. Thinking furiously for half a second, she adjusted the landing thrusters to their rearmost setting and took a round circular path to bleed off some of the momentum. Barely 20 seconds later the whole room shuddered as if struck by a tidal wave. In the first microseconds, her attention was too highly focused on velocity settings to let herself get distracted. But that instant was far too short indeed as it was replaced by a sudden lack of air as her chest collapsed and her shoulders exploded in agony. The interface almost went black before her very eyes, but she managed to suck in a few thin shallow breaths while she fought both the controls and her own body for consciousness. The lack of oxygen had already brought her dangerously close to crashing the ship, now that she was out of that snakepit she wasn't going to let a few bruises keep her from getting them down in one piece. She sucked in shallow draughts of air until the floating black spots faded and she could see and think clearly.

Finally, the dial fell to 50 meters per second and she guided the Boabab back to her intended landing spot. This time the violent impact was noticeably lessened, and Oibo confirmed their (mostly) safe landing. She finally allowed herself to let out the massive gasp of air that she hadn't been aware of holding. That was when the pain ripped through her with dizzying force and she finally lost the will to resist the black curtain of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 3

She didn't know what it was at first, but the violent trembling of her hands made it impossible to feel around effectively. Her voice sounded more panicked than she felt even now as the words finally escaped her. “Oibo. Perform a structural scan of my body and look for any puncture wounds.”

“Damage to the internal sensors prohibits performance of human structural scan at this time.”

4 Igbo expression of extreme fury

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“Olódùmarè ò!” The shout brought even more pain to her body and she gritted her teeth until it ratcheted down a few degrees.

For several seconds that felt like hours she was on the verge of panic, but it was kept mostly in check by the agony in her chest which, thankfully, made hyperventilation impossible just now. It forced her to use small and shallow breaths and eventually her hands slowed their trembling which allowed her at last to feel around with her hands. She slowly moved her fingers over the cinnamon skin of her shoulders, her back, her breasts and ribs.

The pain exploded to a high crescendo as she touched the latter and she feared that there might be some internal damage as well. She wouldn't know more until Dr. Kotingre woke from stasis. The question was now, could she hold out long enough for the man to reach her. But the answer of course was that there was no other choice.

Once the ship's systems were shut down and the stabilizers confirmed that they were set firmly in place she finally allowed herself to disconnect the flight harness. But this turned out to be a worse decision than she'd expected. Her body barely had the energy to hold itself up by this point and she had to choose between collapsing to the floor or letting herself fall towards the interface board. She managed to get her harms in front of her face and avoided a concussion, but it still hurt like hell in a body that was already a kaleidoscope of pain.

While the few buttons on the command interface pressed uncomfortably against her, she distracted herself from the pain in her torso by mentally reviewing the status of the mission, and ensuring that all of the immediate responsibilities were taken care of. The fifty-seven light year trip out to NewMali had been so uneventful it had been downright boring. But once the colonists had been woken from cryosleep of course, the hourglass had reversed. There were squabbles aplenty, supplies to be transported, a government to set up, buildings constructed, and then a spaceport. It had been weeks of endless coordination, ipades⁵, errands, and last minute schedule changes. But then, shortly after they had left the colonists behind and achieved orbit, she had picked up the distress signal. It was amazing that such an antiquated beam could have traveled so far, and some on the

5 Yoruba term for meetings

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ship had even argued that she was confusing it with some mundane background radiation. But her own vote had been to alter course and examine what could have caused it. The pattern just seemed too regular for it to be random gamma rays. She had briefly pulled out some coordinates and the names Umqwo and Ikpeba, but those names had been little help as there was nothing in the database to connect with them.

Now the ship was damaged and over sixty light years from Earth, but at least they were safe on the surface of a planet which could likely support human life... or so she hoped. At the very least they were on the ground and the air was breathable. Taking a few more exploratory gulps of the newly acquired air though, she realized that there wasn't any choice in the matter. They were here, and until the systems were repaired, this was where they would stay. The rest of her worries could be handled later, when she was healed enough to be able to comfortably pull in a full solid breath of air.

With greater puissance than she thought possible, Rhumfa dragged herself slowly off the command interface and reconnected the harness. She punched in her pass code then, and ordered Oibo to bring the rest of the crew out from their cryosleep. She was going to need the doctor's help, not to mention a lot more expertise in troubleshooting whatever problems were happening with the ship. In the meantime she did her best to remain still while checking the general properties of the planet, both to get a sense of their situation and to distract herself from the pain.

It didn't take long for her to see that things were not much better now than they had been half an hour before. The most troubling issue was that the planet's gravity was roughly 1.7x Earth-standard. That meant any trips beyond the ship would have to be short and carefully planned. The air density was higher as well, but not catastrophically so. What did trouble her were the levels of ammonia in the atmosphere. From what she could tell, the chances of any higher life forms here were not likely, and the signal she received would have been useless to the original crew.

Good god, what had she gotten them into? The slightly fowl smell in the air was already saturating the bridge and it wouldn't be long until they were unable to avoid the smell anywhere on the ship. What she had thought was going to be a

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casual search and recovery was starting to look decidedly more sinister, perhaps even life-threatening if one of them got stuck outside for long.

Until they managed to get the air cycling unit repaired, the lot of them were trapped on a planet not much less hostile than Titan back in her own system. And, she couldn't keep from reminding herself, *it was her fault*.

Even simple troubleshooting work might become impossible if the repairs had to be done out in that gravity. Ayee, just the thought of going out there brought her hands to shaking again.

A few more shallow breaths did help her to calm down by very slow degrees. At least the ship was in one piece. They had the gravity plates to hold back the pressure for the time being, and the air coming in was at least breathable if not exactly pleasant.

For the sake of the crew, she lowered the timer to give them a prolonged transition to full consciousness. No reason to rush things at this point. In the meantime she adjusted the gravity plates to 1.15 standard. It would bring protests for sure, but at the same time it would help for them all to be prepared for the very real possibility that they might have spend time without the aid of that wonderful technology. Though she prayed that her hunch this time was mistaken.

Once Oibo announced that the crew was awake, she sent a general announcement of their situation and braced herself for the attack. And she didn't have to wait long for it.

“What did we do to justify this horrible punishment Rhumfa. You said we were just going to pass here and quickly recover an old research vessel on our way back to Sol. And why do I feel so incredibly heavy?”

“Rhumfa. What's going on here. The air smells like a waste plant.”

“I'm sorry Saaed, there was no time to check the atmosphere properly before landing. I promise that I'll give you plenty of time to adjust before we get together for ipade. Take all the time you need to get yourselves in order and adjust to the gravity.

“Rhumfa, if this planet has such a punishing gravity you should have just kept us in orbit. Or is this some kind of revenge for my mistake with the jirgun-sama back on NewMali?”

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There were several more terse comments from the crew, but she was too exhausted from the panic and the agony in her chest to focus on the rest of them in that moment. All she wanted to do was lie back and dose for a dozen hours, but she forced herself to do at least some peripheral scans of the immediate area before closing her eyes.

Planetary diameter was over 21,000km or roughly 2x earth standard. Average air pressure was 119.8 hPa or just slightly higher than the pressure at the Dead Sea. “Well, we won't have anyone suffering from altitude sickness here.” Two moons circled the planet, one at slightly less than standard lunar orbit, and another somewhat farther out. Temperature was already plunging toward 265 Kelvin... and they still had a gaping hole where the airlock used to be. That stopped her analysis and returned her focus back to survival mode.

With her body crying in pain and bright spots occasionally floating in front of her, Rhumfa hauled herself once again out of the harness and headed over to the airlock where she tapped in the code for an emergency forcefield. That would at least keep the wind and any local critters from getting in during the night. The rest could wait until everyone recovered.

CHAPTER 4

The trip down the corridor had been downright eerie. Now that Kotingre had given her something for the pain, she found herself able to notice their environment in slightly more detail. The amber light streaming through the portholes gave the whole ship a somewhat dingy feel as it splashed across the walkways. Wherever there was a porthole to the outside, the ship felt transformed, with the eerie luminance shifting all the familiar color patterns to a distinctly alien hue. It was as if each surface had been blasted with a thin brownish yellow powdercoat.

She mentally reviewed all of the scraps of information that she'd been able to tease from Oibo in the short time between her appointment with Kotingre and the first ipade. The AI had informed her that there was record of a scientific mission which had gone missing in a system not far from here. There was little which had

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survived the centuries, but it was assumed that their ship had failed in some way that prevented their communication through FTL.

The air in the common room was a hurricane of arguments and not a single face had the slightest hint of kindness as they stared at her. She knew the decision to explore the faint signal had been unpopular, but that was before any of them knew the conditions they would be forced to work under.

The first to take the ball was Manuel, who'd been training the AI specialists at NewMali. He was barely taller than her own 160 centimeters but with the added bulk of a proud stomach. "Rhumfa, I think we deserve better answers than this. Our mission was finished and the colonists were all set up back there. Why do we have to stick by this antiquated exploration code anyway? The people who were down here must be dead at least five hundred years now."

Despite the expected attack, she took a deep breath and kept her voice calm to avoid escalating a situation that could easily get out of hand. The young computer tech had no greater experience in the humanities than she did. They were just going to have to keep things here as cordial as possible. "Manuel, those people were anthropologists. They would have known more than any of us how critical it was to keep from intruding on a burgeoning native population. If there *are* any intelligent beings down there, then it's crucial for us to help minimize any harm to their development."

"Intelligent beings?! Rhumfa you've got to be kidding. It smells like a damn sewer in here already. The ammonia levels in this atmosphere have got to be high enough to preclude any higher life from developing. Geezleweez."

Kinfe's outburst was interrupted by Anya sitting next to her who took a brief pause from staring at her pad. "Don't you remember Oibo's readings about the clusters of light on the thermal scanner? The analysis shows concentrated areas of more intense hot spots, which might be fire or some other sign of technology. Just think what would happen if indigenous people on this planet discovered the Nneka, or worse if they found their way inside?"

Rhumfa sighed gratefully that someone at least would be backing her up in this, and she gave the woman's leg a slight squeeze in gratitude. The last thing she needed right now was a mutiny. She slapped the table gently before speaking to

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the group. “Ladies and gentlemen Anya is right. It was made very clear to every group when we departed Earth that we must take all necessary precautions, no matter how slight” she glanced at Kinfe “to ensure that we don’t interfere with any possible native population and that we must come to the aid of any troubled ships if it was ever found to be needed. Now despite the panicked situation dominating our arrival, the limited information does suggest the possibility of some concentrated civilization. At the very least there are two areas of dense population within a few dozen kilometers. One of them may be the descendants of our lost ship, but we won’t know until the drone-”

“Descendants? Rhumfa you can’t be serious.” Kinfe’s face descended quickly into a scowl “How in the world would they survive in this gravity? How could they have children? How would they even know what plants are safe to eat?”

There was a great deal of discussion about the situation on the surface, what had gone wrong with the ship, how the first few days should play out, and what they might find among the settlements if there were any. The constant barrage of comments was beginning to feel like a tree branch smacking against her skull. Tiny lights seemed to float around her and it was becoming impossible to concentrate on any of the crew.

“Rhumfa? Are you alright?”

She barely heard the question as her head began to sink into her hands and a slight moan escaped.

“Everyone, why don’t we give our beleaguered pilot some more time to recover. You can all list out your comments with Oibo and I’ll check to be sure that Rhumfa looks through it soon.”

She wanted to give Huso a smile, or at least a wink in gratitude, but everything in her head was just a blanket of darkness now.

CHAPTER 5

Rhumfa looked over the signal again. It had the telltale degradation of a ship using the last fragments of energy from their power crystal. There was nothing more than a basic tracking wave, some minimal information such as time relative

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to Earth standard which would put them roughly 5-600 years back, a barely legible crew manifest, and an even more garbled description of a local native population. Clearly there had been some kind of native culture, though how such a thing was possible was beyond her understanding. Looking over the data, she thought for a moment of how fascinating it must have been. A few rugged souls enduring harsh gravity and incredible risk to their safety for the chance to learn about a completely alien culture on a rock which humanity would never inhabit, not voluntarily anyway.

But anthropology had never been her specialty. All of the politics that tended to dominate science excursions these days were too much for her patience. She knew only about about running a ship, seeding a colony, and keeping the life support systems functional. So the lot of them were going to have to muddle through whatever mess had been left and figure out a way to retrieve all human-built equipment so the people could develop here without any damaging human influence. She wasn't sure what they would do with the Nneka once it was found, but one thing she did know, it couldn't be allowed to remain on the surface.

CHAPTER 6

Her skin felt horribly itchy inside the bandages tucked under her breasts. The doctor had sadly informed her that three of her ribs had been broken and another suffered a hairline fracture. One of the broken pieces had grazed her lung and there was some minor internal bleeding. And that was after he'd repaired the bruising all over her abdomen, shoulders, and hips as well as the hairline fracture in her skull. She tried to remind herself that it was all in the line of duty, but the soreness each time she took a deep breath screamed otherwise. It was better than being pulverized to atoms against the mountain, of course but that was little comfort now that she had to swallow a painkiller every 6-8 hours.

She had invited the people who she trusted most for ipade so that they could explore what steps should be taken with the crew in the short term. Looking around the room, she was hard pressed to believe that even the most brilliant and talented of the crew could make full repairs to the landing thrusters, the O₂

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scrubbers, and also rebuild the airlock in less than a week. Maybe not even two. Kotingre and Shadai could help with the crew's transition, but Huso was the most trustworthy of the people in the room. She had to constantly remind herself that his tall and muscular frame wasn't causing her to show favoritism. After all, the review committee before they'd launched had been equally impressed by him. Along with Huso, Anya, Kotingre, and Fatima, she'd also brought in Saaed to discuss preliminary ship repairs.

"Alright, we have a satellite in orbit which will help us map the planet, examine any threats from indigenous life forms, and hopefully give us a location on the Nneka. So far all we've got are pieces of data from the readings that I rushed through on the way in, and Oibo is cataloging the 5% of the planet that we've scanned with the satellite so far." We don't yet have an idea of where the Nneka is located, but Saaed is working with Manuel in going over the data and you will all be given access to it in hopes that a team effort will help get us off this rock more quickly.

She tapped on the display to allow the rest of them to see the results before continuing. "Over here we have a large village of some kind. It looks to be close to 1000 beings and it's situated near a decent-sized river. It's far enough away that there should be no reason to interact with them. Out near the ocean is a smaller village which shouldn't pose any threat, and just on the other side of this mountain is the closest group and we're waiting on more data before we can gauge it's size. There's little to go on in terms of what the native beings are like, but it looks as if they have basic skills like manipulating fire. We don't have any indication of technology yet, which is about what we would expect. So unless there's a strong vote to the contrary, I suggest that we avoid the native people at all costs." She gave the lot of them her most intense gaze. "Are there any dissenting opinions?" "Oh I'm sure that we won't have to worry about such a thing happening. In this gravity just falling down could give one of us a broken bone... or worse. There's not a single thing on this planet that would convince me to set foot out there."

All heads turned towards Kotingre with varying levels of fear. Kinfe looked particularly troubled and Rhumfa noticed that even her own hands were shaking slightly. She had to help them find a balance between legitimate caution and

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abject panic. She chose the most calming tone that she was able to manage before addressing this particular issue. “My friends, let’s not get too caught up in the situation outside. Every single one of us has trained for ship repairs in vacuum, so we’ll just treat this situation the same way. We can at least breathe the air and as long as your excursions are brief you should be just fine. But then her attention shifted to Ikasha, who was always the most curious one.

“Rhumfa, as long as we’re here I would like permission to send a couple of drones to get more information about these villages.” The shorter woman looked up hopefully and used her most disarming smile which gave her an almost cherubic look. “We may not be equipped for scientific exploration, but I think that if we can get something about their language it may be helpful.”

However the pretty face wasn’t enough to sway her this time. “Ikasha, I’m sorry to disappoint you. We really don’t have the resources to spare for extraneous research. This isn’t a scientific mis-”

“But Rhumfa, what if there are people over there who know something about the Nneka, maybe some local legends?”

The mere thought sent the blood draining away from her face. If some civilization down there knew about the ship’s existence, then this entire detour, and the risk she’d imposed on their group might be in vain. The woman was right about one thing, it was worth finding out for sure one way or another.

“Alright Ikasha. Why don’t you work with Anya and learn what you can while I help Kinfé figure out what caused us to lose the O₂ scrubbers back there.”

“Captain, I don’t think you noticed this, but I found some good news.” Fatima held up her portable display. The taller woman’s eyes were shining with confidence and Rhumfa joyfully encouraged the woman to continue. Fatima was among the most accomplished people she’d picked up from NewMali. The woman had specialized in terraforming equipment, which of course was no longer needed on that planet.

She’d been looking forward to returning to the Mars colony to receive a new post. Rhumfa found her suggestions were always clever and worth listening to.

“I was looking over the satellite feed as well and found this large area beyond the mountain. There seems to be no significant life there at all. The region is roughly

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the size of the Kainji,⁶ and given the forested area surrounding it, there must be something there which inhibits plant life.”

She was momentarily confused. “All right, and what makes you bring this up?”

“Well captain, if there’s nothing growing there then it’s unlikely that the locals would be crossing it which means that we shouldn’t have to worry about anyone from the larger village seeing our ship.”

“But there’s no guarantee that the Nneka isn’t located closer to that settlement, is there?”

Several of the others paled noticeably on hearing Saaed’s comment. What if the malfunction which caused the Nneka to lose power also prevented them from moving the ship away from a populated area? That was enough to send her own thoughts into a nosedive, and she took several deep breaths to help calm her fears. “People, I’ll allow one of you to examine their language, especially if it gets us any information on the Nneka’s location, but I need as many eyes as possible looking over satellite data. So aside from Ikasha, Anya and myself the rest of you need to focus on the old anthropology ship or troubleshooting the damaged systems on our precious Boabob.”

CHAPTER 7

Lluchra gently asked permission to enter Gelfetia’s shelterspace, watching the healer from her respectful place just outside the doorway. The healing woman was tall with gentle features, but with sturdy knobhorns, gleaming teal colored skin and, most importantly, a deep reverence for the Holy Mother. If it weren’t for a kind and relaxed serenity, the woman’s confidence and beauty might have incited envy among some of the kinfolk. But as it was, Lluchra had no doubt that their healer was adored and respected by every one of the kinfolk. She watched as the woman took a few moments to finish her medytayshun. She then gave a gentle bow to the votive statue before addressing her visitor.

“Ah, pleasin to be see’n you Lluchra. Have you found any of the wardbreath leaves for Sefin this day?”

6 Lake Kainji is a reservoir along the Niger river which is about 1240 square km in area

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“I am sorry Gelfetia.” The woman looked down shamefully. “I traveled all the way to the great river without catching sight of them. I gave the straight-eye most intensely-”

“Lluchra I welcome you to feel calm. You be no-need’n to show sadface. The plant does not grow well in these parts and only a few people have managed to get across the river to the place where it grows more abundantly. We have plenty of time before she gives birth. Why don’t you travel with Truenye tomorrow and see if there is any to be found farther to the east.”

The words of the healer did very much ease her self-doubt. It was always a blessing to be in the presence of Gelfetia and to bask in her loving serenity.

“Now what else has you excited?”

She had not wanted to interrupt the healer’s medytayshun with talk of personal matters, but since the woman asked, she might as well share the wordsong.

“Gelfetia, I was watching the shimmeri this morning and I saw one which fell from the overhead towards the height of Higsthon! It must be a positive omen is it not?”

The moment was long and torturous, an eternity of watching the healer quietly.

But it would be most inappropriate to interrupt Gelfetia when discussing matters of the Gods. Such things were, for her, still hallowed knowledge which she had yet to master.

Finally though, her mentor looked up and relieved her suffering.

“If as you say the shimmeri fell towards the height of Higsthon then it is likely that we can look forward to a momentous pilgrimage this year. It’s pleasin to me that you were blessed to witness such an event and I thank you for sharing the news.”

Her kaba swelled with joy at having brought such a positive wordsong to her mentor and she gave respectful wishes before leaving the woman to her practice.

CHAPTER 8

Rhumfa sat for another half-hour looking over the distress signal before switching tasks. She found that checking the satellite offered her no small relief from the tedium of examining the ravaged ship. By the looks of things, it seemed that the area where they had come down was quite a bit colder than Lagos, but thankfully

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not as cold as some of the northern regions on Earth. It appeared that much of the planet was otherwise warm, so the cold weather here might be due to elevation. In her frantic approach, she had set them down near the top of a mountain which was among the tallest in this region. The peak was about 4,200 meters above the median for this planet's ocean, making it just slightly taller than Mongo ma Ndemi⁷, but this one thankfully had a gentle slope giving her crew easy visibility in almost every direction. She rotated the camera viewer and widened the lens to take in the spectacle above. The view here was dominated by a tall peak of brilliant vermilion which held a captivating beauty when it caught the light of this system's oddly colored star. The pattern of crevasses alternating with glaciers and rockfalls were not unusual but the indescribable hues held her attention nevertheless.

A few dozen meters below that lay an ice field bordering a beautiful lake which spilled towards a vast stretch of stunted trees. It reminded her of the few images that survived of what Yorup must have looked like before the war. Even for someone as averse to the cold as she was, the thought of snowshoeing up the mountain held a strange appeal. But then she realized that none of them were likely get half a kilometer in this horrible gravity, not without a very serious exercise regimen.

Finally, the rumbling in her stomach brought her back to more pressing matters. She wandered absentmindedly towards the oúnjẹ station with one eye glancing at her pad. There was far too much work for her and not nearly enough hours in the day for eating. Especially since the days here were only 20 hours long and they were needing to search across more than *95 billion* hectares of land surface. She took a small bite of fufu before tapping absentmindedly on her pad.

Report: Summery from drone-1 – exploration of the larger settlement

Author: Ikasha Dakey

The people here do not seem to be dramatically different from us. They have two arms, two legs, binocular vision, and an elaborate oral tradition which I haven't

⁷ Also known as Mt. Camaroon, located in...

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learned much of yet. The larger village appears to be reasonably advanced. There are closely built shelters averaging 13 square meters and often with common walls. They have limited use of copper and bronze for decorations and religious ceremonies. A central pavilion seems to be the political center of the place, with a large market adjoining it to the south. There is a zigurat and temple for religious purposes built out of carved stone and some nicer woven branches of various colored wood creating an ambulatorium.

There were depictions on the walls of the city center which showed a group of people hunting something that loosely resembled an extinct large tusked animal, I think it was called a boar.”

She paused and shivered at the thought of such slaughter. In retrospect, barbaric customs like these should have been expected in primitive societies. It was just one more reason she was thankful to never have gotten involved in ancient cultures. She took another mouthful of Fufu, but the taste was somewhat more hollow after the thought of hunting animals.

The people worship a number of gods and I heard something that sounds like ‘Adayama’ and another that sounds like ‘Azealla.’ There is a priestess who resides in the temple who is visited by only one other individual so far. The woman enters the temple only when the sun is at the highest point in the sky. This makes me think that midday has some aspect of holiness for them. The ‘priestess’ for lack of a better term, wears a ceremonial headress with bronze decorations intertwined, but aside from this I have seen no evidence of metal for decoration. There was brief mention of other figures in the temple such as Pritlaxtl and Prijnak, but I have not discerned what they mean yet.

On the opposite side of the village is a dock stretching into the river with several boats coming and going each day. It’s difficult to tell if they go out to harvest food, or for some other purpose.

Rhumfa took a few more mouthfulls of food while she mulled over the information. It looked like the larger and more advanced city would not be a problem. Unless, the ship was nearby to it. She shivered anew at such a thought.

Summery from drone-2

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There happened to be much more information from the closer village. As luck would have it, I was able to locate a shelter where some children were being taught. This provided a window into the history and culture of the place. There were stories with frequent mention of a group called 'hoomaas' and some kind of relationship to Higsthon (I assume this is the mountain which we landed on). The 'hoomaas' seem to be an essential element, though whether they might be a single entity or a group, or even a natural feature, I'm not sure. There was talk in relation to the hoomaas of something called 'condemnays' which I haven't figured out either.

The woman who I believe was teaching the young ones excused herself. It seems that she went somewhere to keep watch over the blessed ones. I don't know what that means yet, but it sounds intriguing enough to merit some follow-up exploration.

Summery from drone-3

This drone needed some software re-installation and so I wasn't able to launch it until nighttime. There were a few shelters which were shorter than the others and so I brought the drone to one of these in hopes of understanding what the difference was.

Somehow during the night a predator must have confused the drone for food because the device was attacked somehow. The visual camera was destroyed and the audio was fragmentary.

We still had access to the infrared, and from this it was clear that there were some differences with these people. Their mass was smaller, the top of their heads gave off less heat, and the body temperature was slightly higher. The best estimate I can give is about 310 Kelvin while the other natives were 304.

Rhumfa wondered to herself if these people were somehow sick or had a fever. But she kept reading in hopes of getting through the report quickly.

It seems that there is some kind of class differentiation here. One of the people spoke with a pleading tone regarding another 'dennysovan.' But someone else spoke in a decidedly negative tone. I don't know if dennysovan is the name for a class of people or if it's a term for the class difference itself. The one person, who might be an elder or a parent, seemed to be scolding the other.

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But the most interesting part of all was a small bit of jumbled recording (you're going to want to sit down for this). We think it sounds like-

Ukwu nkwu juru eju.

Owa nj.....

Anu elu bia ob...

Instantly her spork fell to the plate and her mouth opened wide. No. No it couldn't be! Not in the entirety of the vast universe. They were at least sixty light-years from Lagos on a planet where Yorigbausa⁸ couldn't even be the faintest spark in the minds of these people. Her knuckles turned white as her grip on the pad suddenly tripled in force.

And yet... it was too eerie for mere coincidence. Her thoughts spun back wistfully to the nursery rhyme that [momma] had sung to her so many years ago.

Ukwu nkwu juru eju.

Owa nje nje.

Anu elu bia obelu ta,

Anu ala bia obelu ta.

E rue ka mbe biara ibe,

Ijiji kee ya okpo na isi,

I-kopololo I-kopololo

Mbe dalu dalu dalu

Dajie Nwa mgbada ukwu,

Nwa mgbada tiri tiri tiri tiga na ulo Ikpe,

Ndi ocha no na ya,

Ha asi ya "get away"

Nwa mgbada asi ha "umu otondo"⁹

A single tear carved itself a track upon her cheek as she thought of obi¹⁰ and the vast gulf of space and time that separated her from Nigerland.

This just *had* to be a coincidence. At least she prayed into the depths of her soul that it was. Feeling as if she were personifying Ikasha, she battled with herself as

8 Conglomeration of Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. Language dominant in the Niger valley as fragmentation among tribes vanished at the end of the great war.

9 <http://www.nairaland.com/986853/igbo-poetry#11405168> Ifyalways

10 Igbo for 'home'

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to whether there would be merit in sending a person into the village disguised as a native. The risk was terribly great. Not only the risk of being discovered, but the risk of traveling unaided in such high gravity. But this new insight definitely merited a more thorough examination. She mulled the issue over in her mind until she felt sick from worry. She just couldn't do it. Not on her own. Asking a crew member to risk their safety, possibly their life and take the chance of exposing themselves... it simply wasn't fair to ask that of any other person. She didn't want a repeat of the tragic mistake which had caused the whole lot of them to be stuck here in the first place.

CHAPTER 9

"You're certain that the audio caught their language correctly?" Rhumfa looked down at her pad doubtfully.

The woman's eyes shifted down to the pad and she folded her arms across her chest. "Well it's impossible to be *completely* sure. But I checked over the signal that we got three times with three different algorithms. Either the original data is garbled in the most incredible way, or we've just come across the most phenomenal coincidence in the known galaxy." Ikasha's face was developing the kind of youthful excitement that she wished she could enjoy herself. It pained her inside to share the thought echoing in her mind, but the chance was too likely to be glossed over.

"Or... these people learned about Yorigbausa from the crew of the Nneka."

Not surprisingly, the woman's expression came crashing down as if suddenly exposed to the full outside gravity. "No! They wouldn't. They wouldn't *dare*. It would go against the very core principal of the UPC council! Violating their vow would have destroyed any merit they might ever have with the scientific community."

"Well of course *we* know that ikasha. I can't think of *any* justification that would bring them to cause such damage. But here we sit, with a group of people dozens of light years from Lagos, and with a recording that sounds far too much like

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Yorigbausa to be mere coincidence.” She looked intensely at the other woman now. “If you can think of any other possible explanation, believe me I’m all ears.”

The woman folded her arms again as if she were being personally attacked. “Well of course I can’t think of one *right now*.” She paused as her eyes grew wider.

“You’re going to send someone out there, aren’t you?”

The woman’s intuition was sometimes frightening in its precision.

“If you send anyone, it should be me. I’m the one who’s learned the most about their language so far. I’ve entered it all into Oibo’s database and I’m working on a data analysis of the few non-verbal hand signals which the drones have discerned.”

“Thank you Ikasha. You’re instinct has been flawless and I can’t tell you enough how valuable this is.” She tapped at her pad for emphasis. But then her eyes fell to the floor as she looked into the heart of her own struggle. “I just... I feel so scared about sending a living person out into that environment. It really would be much safer to use the drones.”

The woman’s demeanor collapsed to the polar opposite of its earlier shine. “I guess you’re right. The gravity out there is gonna wreak havoc on our anatomy.”

“Not to mention the risk that these natives might pose. It looks from your data like they outweigh us by 30 kilograms.” She trembled at the mere thought of such beings becoming upset or even just insulted.

CHAPTER 10

She spent the rest of the day arguing back and forth with herself. The risks of sending untrained people into a hostile environment to make contact with a group of natives who could knock them into next week without a second thought was a horrible prospect. It frightened her at least as much as the failed O₂ scrubber. On the other hand, their most advanced drone had become nothing but a piece of scrap electronics simply due to the unfortunate encounter with some animal that looked like a large squirrel with peculiar arms.

“Huso, please come to my quarters when you have a moment.” She tapped it into her pad and waited tensely for the man to arrive, which thankfully didn’t take long. Soon enough the tallest member of the crew strode in wearing a particularly

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flamboyant kaftan.¹¹ His face wasn't the most handsome of the crew, but he was a man who exuded strength not only in his limbs, but in character as well. He was both intelligent and highly dependable in even the most difficult situations. Even now, years after their breakup, she still found her eyes soften when she gazed at him.

The man remained strangely calm through her long dialogue and he showed more patience than she could imagine herself showing had their roles been reversed. Finally she went into her fears about the gravity again before being interrupted. "Rhumfa, please. We all know the risks here." He then turned to the wall and addressed the AI.

"Oibo, could you replay the last segment from drone #3 please?"

The sound now filled her quarters with the static voice of some unknown being reciting those strangely familiar lines. When the recording ended, she saw the man staring off into nothing as wistfully as she herself must have done. It took several minutes but he seemed, finally to absorb the depth of their dilemma.

"Rhumfa, I think you're right. We definitely need to investigate this further. Not only is it an incredible mystery, but it speaks of possible treason by the original crew. I for one would like to know for sure if that was the case."

"You know, I could just send another drone Huso." She knew that she was lying both to him and to herself. There was no way that a drone could manage the complex intelligence gathering that this situation clearly required. She was just trying to convince herself that there was some means to avoid doing the unthinkable.

Huso however, being the brilliant man that he was, saw clearly through her excuses. The man moved to drape a huge arm on her shoulder and gave her a level gaze. "After what happened to the last drone, I would feel better if a live person were sent out there. At least if something happens, we can deal with it in real time."

"You're worried that we won't be able to replace the one which was damaged?"

He glanced aside at the interface which was still up on the screen. "Not particularly. Those things are designed to have replaceable parts, but I also think

11 A long, loose-fitting tunic worn in many African countries

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we can learn more from a two-way conversation. Think about how little we still know about the people who were reciting that rhyme? There was no real visual, only sporadic audio, and the feed cut out after just 21 minutes.”

Much as she hated the idea, there was no valid argument that would stand up to scrutiny. “Alright, I’ll put all of my free time into learning the language and talk with Kotingre about developing a passable disguise-”

He stepped back and the room briefly reverberated with his shout. “Like ‘ell you will!” The force of the words were almost a physical blow. He actually looked furious for the briefest moment before the fire went out of his eyes. “If anyone is going out there then it should be me or Ikasha.”

She watched the man take a deep breath before laying his hand gently on her arm. “Rhumfa, not a single one of us knows how to run this ship like you do. If anything were to happen to you, the chances of us getting off this rock safely would plummet almost to zero.” The man struggled to calm his tone, apparently noticing the scowl which had grown on her face. “If you want my support, then you’re going to have to let me be the one who takes the risk.”

A panicked ‘No!’ escaped her lips before she managed to clamp the rest down.

Huso was easily the most intelligent person on the ship (not to mention the most beloved to her). She couldn’t bear the idea of allowing him to put himself in such danger. But then again, if she were honest with herself, there wasn’t a single one of them who she *would* feel comfortable sending outside. What kind of pilot could stand idly by while one of the crew volunteered to risk their lives for the sake of the rest? Not a single person that she had read about in all of her historical studies. She mentally skimmed through a dozen counter-arguments in hopes of finding something, anything, that might convince him to reconsider. “Huso, it’s far too cold out there, and with this gravity even the slightest misstep could get you into a serious fall. And that’s not even taking into account how little we know of the native beings. What if you indiscriminately made a hand gesture that they found offensive? Really my friend, it’s too dangerous.”

But clearly the man wasn’t convinced. His expression might almost be mistaken for anger, but she knew the man better than that. “So? Would you just wait here where it’s safe and hope that we’re not sitting on a planet with a bunch of natives

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who might be reciting Yorigbausa songs to their offspring? You wouldn't want to know just how such a thing might have come about? What if some of their people had managed to get inside the Nneka? What if they had stolen some artifacts. Think of how such a thing could upset the balance of technology among those people.”

She felt trapped. Obviously the man was right. But she would feel so much better if they could just take the risk herself. Maybe with a little more time- But then again, time was one thing that they didn't have. As Huso pointed out, she knew the ship better than any of them, and she also knew that the gravity plating was designed to function in zero gravity. Using it to compensate for a high-gravity world could eventually cause it to fail catastrophically (a fact that she kept very carefully to herself). Then of course there was the risk that some wandering native might accidentally come across the ship sitting helplessly out in the open. At last, she realized that there was just no way to avoid taking some kind of action. She got up and wrapped her arms around the man mournfully, as if he was going to disappear for good that very evening. It was impossible to imagine life on the ship without his supportive presence and she wanted to weep for him even while he remained standing there.

“Rhumfa, I promise that I will be extremely careful. I'm not looking forward to getting hurt out there any more than you would be.”

She looked at him with her heart in her stomach. Everything about this just felt so, wrong. The words spilled from her lips so slowly but with a force that she'd never used with him before. “I'm not happy about this Huso, you know that.” She moved to hug him tightly, not wanting to ever back off. “But, I guess you're right. Something needs to be done. Alright dammit. Go spend all of your spare time studying with Oibo and let me know when you feel confident enough with their language to attempt a first contact.”

When the man left, she sent a message asking Kotingre to study all of the images they had of the native people and develop a means of disguising Huso to look like one of them. Hiding their noses of course would be the most difficult part. The rest could be accomplished with a few layers of silicone sheeting.

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It was a terrible risk, and she was almost as angry with Huso as with herself for letting him get stuck in this situation. If he got hurt, or heaven-forbid killed, she knew that it would be impossible to live with herself.

CHAPTER 11

She sent the news out to the whole crew and requested everyone to support Huso and to share any ideas that would keep this excursion as uneventful as possible. In the meantime she sent another silent prayer to nna nna¹² that the information Huso managed to discover would be worth the risk and that her friend would get back to the ship safely when it was all over.

It was barely ten minutes later that the door chime rang and she opened it only to see Ikasha standing there with her hands on her hips and her eyes shooting fire. ‘Here it comes.’ She thought to herself.

“*Pilot* Rhumfa.” The woman’s voice was colder than the glacier up the mountain. “Just why in the hell does Huso get to visit with these people, when *I* am the linguist? *I* am the one who’s figured out their language.” She frowned for a moment “or most of it anyway. But regardless, what does he have that I don’t? It’s not like we’re living back in the colonial days where the men get to take all the glory. how could you show me such insult?!”

As predictable as the situation was, that didn’t make it any easier to cope with in the here and now. This would have to be addressed delicately, and she wished all the more now that she’d spent more time honing her diplomatic skills during the months they’d spent transferring the colonists and their equipment. She slowly moved towards the woman and put a hand on her diminutive shoulder while offering a somber expression. “I’m so sorry Ikasha. It has nothing to do with your ability. You’re absolutely right that there is nobody equal to you when it comes to language. It’s just a matter of mass I’m afraid. Huso is the tallest one among us and if we want to blend in with a group of people who are no less than 2 meters tall, then we can’t have a 1.6 meter human wandering into their village. I so wish

12 Igbo term for grandfather

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for your sake that it could be different my friend. You absolutely don't deserve this."

The woman seemed unsure of whether she should keep her hands on her waist or folded across her chest, for she switched back and forth between the two periodically. This was only secondary, for the scowl on her face said far more than anything the rest of her body language might communicate. "Rhumfa, we have the most technically advanced medical tools within a dozen light years. How can you look me in the eye and tell me that there isn't a *single* means to allow me to function among those people."

This wasn't going well, and she wished all the more now for Huso's relaxed kindness rather than her own rather mediocre tact. "Ikasha. You're right. Kotingre *is* highly skilled and we *do* have a wonderful medical room. Could we cut off your legs and grow you longer ones? Sure. Could we design a bio-suit that would resemble what their own people look like? Quite possibly. But those options would take a week or more. It just wouldn't be fair to the rest of the crew for us to delay our analysis for that long. Please believe me, if there were any other solution I would be more than happy to explore it."

"So. Couldn't I wear stilts or something? I mean, the opportunity-"

It was a desperate move, and she knew it. Just the thought of the woman trying to navigate on elevator shoes in this gravity almost made her smile. But she managed to suppress it. "Ikasha. You know that this gravity is dangerous enough as it is. Anyone who goes out there is going to be far too involved in just walking straight and keeping balanced. Not to mention that the trip will be along the slope of a mountain. Please know that I support you in all of your research and I recognize that you were absolutely right to investigate their culture. We just need someone who is tall enough to at least come close to resembling them while still navigating the high gravity. Ikasha I would swear to you, from the bottom of my heart that I am truly, deeply sorry."

Finally! The woman's eyebrows returned to normal and her frown reduced itself to just a thin slit. "Yes, well you can be sure that I'll be hovering like my little brother next to the mission recorder. I want to find out what this 'condemnays' is, and what if there's some kind of hierarchy with this 'hoomaas.'"

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“My friend, I will absolutely make sure that you are the first to know what we find out, and if we can manage to create an exoskeleton or some other means of functioning out there, you have my full support to interact with the population.”

CHAPTER 12

Huso carefully entered the common room where Ikasha had summoned him. Rhumfa had already warned him of her feelings and he felt bad for the unfair advantage his size gave him. But obviously that wasn't something that he could change at all. The best that he could do was be as delicate as possible in his dealings with the woman. He gave her his warmest smile and kept an even tone in all of their discussions.

They spent at least an hour going through the many words and phrases which each drone had picked up and he was able to see similarities between the far village and the closer one.

“It's so interesting that this ‘Gelf’ figure is revered by the one group of villagers and despised by the other.”

“I don't find that so surprising Huso. There were some people in Lagos who felt remorse for the Europeans and others who felt that they got exactly what they deserved in the great war. It's all in the way stories get passed down within a culture.

“Yes, like the stories of their gods. A few of them remind me of myths I've heard from the pale ones. Except these people at least seem to respect the feminine element.”

“I noticed that too. It's refreshing after having researched cultures like the krischins and the mooslims to know that there are at least some enlightened ones in the universe.”

“Alright Ikasha. I get the point. Hopefully you wont let this go to your head.” He gave the woman his most disarming smile then and a light squeeze on the shoulder in hopes of dissipating her envy toward him.

“So Ikasha. What about this word right here. Jinlayra?”

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The woman took a minute to stare at the screen. “Hmm, I thought of it in my mind like Zinlarya. But we don’t know pronunciations for many of them yet. From what I can gather, it represents a type of people. Could be another village, or a band of nomads, or even a lower class. There is talk about banding together, but the details are vague. I’ve only heard it used in the farther village, so you shouldn’t have to worry about that one.

“We also don’t yet know what this sense-readin. But it seems to be related in some way to another term - ‘condemnays.’”

“Yes, that one seems pretty confusing. It doesn’t match with the word patterns I’ve seen among any other groups of natives.”

“That’s true. I’ve been checking the recordings dozens of times. Given what the pilot said, it looks like it’ll be up to you to give us an answer to that.” She punched his arm lightly. “And you better deliver.”

“Yes ma’am!” He gave her an old-fashioned military salute and smiled widely again.

“Okay, what about stones of remembrance?”

“Nobody has an idea for what it means. So that’s another big gap in our knowledge. One of the people mentions getting a stock of food prepared for something that sounds like pilgrimage. Unfortunately we just seem to have too many questions and not enough answers.”

CHAPTER 13

“Son of Gelf! That’s what you are!”

He smacked the boy hard for the insult. “Don’t you ever call me that, grishneevit!” The boy tried to fight back, but he was still too young to be a threat and so after a few smacks to the young’ns knobhorns, he stomped off to the forst. He needed time to think.

Chief Gjintruk had given another speech yesterday drumming up support for an attack on the cursed village of the mountain. He was entreating everyone to prepare for a long journey to avenge the meager kul-melon crop which he insisted

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was the work of those evil magician people. Not everyone was in favor of the idea, but Imotren made regular speeches in support of any action which would avenge his grandfather's murder.

None of it made sense to him, despite the two leaders' grandiose wordsongs. It all sounded like so much bluster and politics. In hopes of finding some peace of mind, he traveled into the forst to see Pretvuukra in hopes that she had gained some wisdom from the Oracle. What he really hoped for was that the healer would admit that an attack on such a distant place was absurd. But of course he had little hope of such a thing. In all of his experience visiting the healer, she and the Oracle whom they all relied upon, had never contradicted Gjintruk, and the opposite was also true. The alliance was further reinforced by wordsong that the chief was personally chosen by Azealla to rule with wisdom and honor. If nothing else however, the journey out to the remote shelterspace would at least give him time to think and this was just what he needed after so much frustrating unhappy with the annoying boy living next to him.

As expected, his frustrations grew less severe while traveling through the forst and by the time he reached the shelterspace of the healer he felt that he could share his concerns without the fire of the unhappy confusing his smarati.

He barely put his hand to the door before it opened upon the face of a younger woman of vigrus strength and calm demeanor. She was shorter than most of the kinfolk, but her knobhorns were unusually large, as if to compensate for her diminutive size. Her voice was always calm and everyone that she spoke with got the sense that she cared deeply for them.

Despite her eremite lifestyle, the woman commanded great respect among them all due to her sense-readin and close connection to the holy Oracle. She sat outside the door with him and spent time listening to the concerns that plagued his think'n. That their people would not be able to cross the great morass, or if they finally did that the people of the mountain would put some kind of awful curse on those who threatened them.

"Freetlak it is not for you to concern yourself with higher matters of politics. Our dear leader is a wise man and he is blessed by Adeima. The Holy Mother supports his intention to bring defeat and I can not offer council which contrasts with the

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wise words of the Oracle. Your concerns are appreciated, and I understand the fraidness lives in all of us in some degree or another. I welcome you to meditate on all of the fodiens that we have enjoyed during the time that Gjintruk has been leading the kinfolk. Consider where we would all be without his guiding counsel.” He thanked the healer for her guidance and returned to his shelterspace feeling at least some amount better. If anyone were to ask, he would have said that the matter was resolved. But if he were really honest with himself, there remained a seed of doubt still germinating within the center of his kaba. Something about this just didn’t feel right, and yet the words of the Oracle were beyond question. It was known throughout Xenlaria that the holy woman was the only person among the whole village who’s power could supersede chief Gjintruk. If the three of them all agreed that an attack was warranted, who was he to believe otherwise?

CHAPTER 14

The winds strained forcefully against his outer tunic as he mournfully watched the Gbowee¹³ lift slowly into the air and accelerate back to the ship. His confidence plummeted as he immediately threw a foot out to keep from losing his balance and felt the shock of pain race up through his leg. Despite four days spent under 1.4G, his body was already feeling the strain from just a few minutes out here. There was just no preparing for all the complexities this kind of environment created. Huso wondered for the hundredth time how the crew of the Nneka could have possibly managed it. They must have been incredible people to survive out here all those many years. That thought caused him to look at his own seemingly puny muscles peaking beneath the rough woven cloak. He honestly felt scared now that his body wouldn’t be able to manage the three kilometer journey before his legs gave out. But there was little choice in that. Ereeko wasn’t willing to take the risk of bringing him any closer in the jirgin-sama. At this point it was just him, his under-utilized muscles, and the dispassionate mountain touching the strange faintly magenta sky.

13 Gbowee – named after Leymah Gbowee, a Liberian Nobel Peace Prize recipient

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At first he just stared at the rocks beneath him, struggling to stay focused on keeping each step firm and holding his balance against the winds that grabbed at his cloak voraciously whenever he didn't keep it tight against his body. But finally he began taking short breaks to breathe in the wondrous views of the great carpeted forest stretching below.

The land was vastly different from anything that he had seen in video from other colonies. The sky here was closer to lavender than the normal blue of Earth or the Papaya colored sky of Malabo. The planet did have great forests of trees, but those also were an odd appearance. The leaves looked somewhat like conifers, but with wider flat needles and a color that was more aqua than forest green. It reminded him of his last views of the Atlantic as they left the surface for low earth orbit.

Despite the alien feel to the place, the great expanse of land was still an incredible sight to behold and he was reminded of just how much richer the experience of such a grand vista felt without the a computer screen to limit his perception.

Focusing on the ground and on the scenery around him had one other benefit. It helped also to distract him from the fake blowhole which was as bad as a dozen wasp stings along the peak of his scalp. He had to constantly resist scratching at it to keep from compromising the fragile disguise which Kotingre had spent two hours carefully applying.

The exertion was taking its toll now and it was beginning to dominate his concentration. He felt like a marathon runner with his breath coming in great pulsing gasps, when finally, he caught sight of a change in the rocky terrain below and he slowly adjusted his path to one that would lose elevation and put him in line to reach the village of the natives ahead. He still did his best to keep a close watch on where he was stepping, but paused much more often to appreciate the incredible texture along this section of the mountain. The enormous mass of stone was lit up in various hues of magenta, umber, and a brilliant patch of turquoise where the sun struck a single stubborn patch of ice. The ever more frequent pauses brought a wealth of images on the microprocessor-camera tucked within the silicone around his blowhole. He tried to convince himself that it wasn't due to exhaustion, but the lie wasn't at all convincing.

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CHAPTER 15

The village was beginning to get more detailed as the distance closed. There was little yet to make it stand out any more than the ruins often found south of the Sahara. But very gradually, he began to see doorways which were not rectangular but closer to a trapezoid in shape. The walls were more difficult to distinguish, as they seemed to blend in with the surrounding terrain save for a few accents of wood above the entrances. The roofs were sloped into a shallow dome rather than flat, like the ancient ruins south of Mafara.

Finally the natural vegetation began giving way to footprints and trails leading towards the distant huts and he soon spotted people milling about. He did his best to walk casually as he approached the first shelters, hoping that his disguise looked appropriate enough and that he wouldn't do something to raise the ire of the intimidatingly muscular natives. Soon he would be surrounded by beings who towered over even his large height and who had never even seen anything like a human before. Even despite his efforts though, it felt like his very skin was shouting out his 'otherness' for everyone to see.

Glancing around at the people he had to struggle to avoid staring. They had strangely circular eye sockets over a blank space that should have sprouted a nose. There were blunted horns above the eyes that reminded him of some extinct Kenyan animal, and their skin color was some strange shade of teal. Some of them had what looked like a pouch on the front of their abdomen and all of them had the musculature of a rhino, probably to deal with the heavy gravity.

This, he realized was the do or die moment, and he prayed that their preparations were *actually* going to be worth the trouble he'd put into them. On top of the physical training in heavier gravity, he'd spent over a week nonstop with Ikasha drilling on what little they understood about the language and hand gestures, but he still had the fear that he would find himself unable to understand some mundane expression. After all, there were limits to how much of their speech patterns Oibo could mimic with such little data to go on.

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He had barely passed a single row of huts when he encountered one young woman mixing food just outside the entrance to a hut. She was busy scraping something that looked like a large yellow melon with a slender wooden blade.

She looked quite average given what little he had seen of the people on this planet. Except of course that when seated he could gaze at the subtly vibrating blowhole growing just behind the knobhorns.

The moment she saw him though, she sprang to her feet, knocking the bowl into the dirt as she grabbed for what looked like a spear. The moment it was in her hands, the business end swung in his direction and she said something which sounded like ‘speak wordsong... stranger forbidden.’

He immediately came to a halt and told her in simple words that he was a traveler and he asked what the name of this place was.

She looked at him doubtfully, though he couldn’t be sure yet the meaning of their facial movements. But despite the weapon, she seemed able to understand his question at least. “The name of village is Ubuntu. You outsiders canno-”

He didn’t understand what she said afterwards. His thoughts were dominated by the name. ‘Ubuntu?!¹⁴’

The words escaped him as a reaction and without conscious thought. “Abin ban mamaki!”

Instantly the woman dropped what she was holding and stared open-mouthed at him. He worried now if the expression sounded like something offensive in their language. But he received even more of a shock when she instead spoke in perfect Yorigbausa.

“You speak the holy tongue?! But how?”

“YOU speak Yorigbausa?!”

He couldn’t figure out how a stone-age culture thousands of light-years away could understand his words, but he couldn’t deny what his ears told him. Plus for the moment at least, it drastically eased communication.

“Nevermind. Yes. I do speak Yorigbausa. Everyone here is taught the holy language from the time that they can walk.”

14 Nguni term roughly translating to a universal bond of sharing -
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_philosophy

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Instantly the woman grabbed his wrist, and ushered him to follow behind. Now he wasn't even mildly worried. He was practically terrified. There was no way in this world that he could overpower the woman without using technology. Despite her concern for him, Rhumfa had insisted that he carry nothing more than a waya for communication to eliminate the temptation of causing harm to these people in an act of self-defense.

But now, despite the risk, he wished that she had allowed him to bring a tranquilizer. He had no idea what this native was thinking or where she was forcibly taking him. All he knew was that he was utterly helpless now against the powerful grip of a being that he knew nothing about.

At last he found himself being led to a modest hut built of compacted earth. It was larger than most of the other living spaces, but only by a little. What did surprise him though, was the sight of a taller than average looking native person wearing a series of thin copper rings around her neck. This was the first time that he'd seen metal used anywhere in this planet. But there was also something familiar about it, something just teasing at the edge of his memory that he couldn't quite grasp at.

CHAPTER 16

Lluchra gently asked permission to enter and she quickly gave it thinking the girl was asking advice for some healing plant once again. But to her surprise the girl ushered in a strange-looking, and very short, newcomer into the room. He looked much like her people, smaller knobhorns and not much godstrength by the look of him, but otherwise quite ordinary.

Instantly though, she experienced the familiar yet unexpected picture in her head of being surrounded by a great mist punctuated with countless shelterspace entrances. The vast expanse all around her was crowded with so many entranceways that they were beyond number. Some were impossibly straight, and made of a material that she didn't recognize. Some more roughly finished, as her own shelterspace was. A few seemed to defy logic in how they could stay vertical without falling over. It was a colossal village of entrances and 'doors' stretching

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endlessly in all directions. The experience was one that she often had with the hoomaas. It was a kind of gateway into their smarati. But how could it happen with this person when he looked no different than any other kinfolk? None of the denisovians that she knew had ever been this transparent.

By accident, she glanced into one passage and saw this person gazing into a reflection and putting his hands all over his face. But the reflection was not in water as might be expected with a pond or a drinking vessel. This reflection was perfectly smooth and stood upright and it was very confusing to her. There was another passageway next to it which was shrouded in mist. It showed only the neck of a being with dzilla¹⁵ like the ones she wore and there was a sense of struggling to remember something about it.

In her distraction, she realized that she had missed something Lluchra said. “Forgive me Lluchra, what was that?”

The girl was slightly bothered, but kept her voice gentle. “Gelfetia, this person is a newcomer to our village, but somehow he speaks the holy tongue.”

Now she was getting a sense of what brought the confusion. But how could this person be denisovian in appearance, but be utterly transparent to the sense-reading *and*, be able to speak the holy tongue without ever having been a healer?

Her thoughts were interrupted by some new image from this person. He was concerned about staying too long. He wanted to learn what he could to share with the others of his... crew.

Suddenly everything else went vanus from her mind. Could it be? After so many hundreds of generations, was the prophecy to finally be realized? Excitement began to saturate her kaba and she wanted to leap for joy and dance around with Lluchra. But her first priority of course, was to take care of her people. If she wasn't cautious she might raise the hopes of the kinfolk without knowing the fulltrue, or worse, raise false hopes. Plus of course it was not proper for her to speak with any hoomas, if he was one, in front of others and the trust of this person must be respected. She could not violate the visitor's privacy if anything of the condemnays were to be discussed between them. Enormous care would have to be shown with regard to this newcommer in order to protect her people.

15 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neck_ring S.African neck rings

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“Lluchra, I must speak with this person alone. We have personal matters to discuss.”

For a moment the girl was confused, and not surprisingly so. “But he’s not a... oh alright. I will leave you both.”

The girl would never question her which was good. Gelfetia was not sure what the story was with this strange person, but it was best to keep things quiet until she could find out for sure. She waited pensively for the girl to leave and then quickly turned her attention to the strange man in front of her. There was no doubt that he had the eyes of the hoomaas. It was most confusing. She looked carefully now into those eyes hoping to learn more. There was some fraidness, but also a warm curiosity. They were kind eyes and she took this to be a very good sign. But was this stranger trustworthy? To test the truth of what the girl had said, she addressed the man in the tongue of the holy ones. “Why do you come here in disguise?”

The person quickly paled and stammered briefly for words. He could not figure out how she knew his language or knew that he was in disguise. Of course if he were an outsider then he wouldn’t know about the sense-readin or the disturbing mind-pictures that she experienced with the hoomaas.

The being remained silent for a long moment while searching for a plausible response. He was of course holding much fraidness now. He didn’t want her to know about where he came from and he intended to speak an untrue to distract her but chose deflection for the moment. “What makes you think that I am in disguise?”

She wanted to help the man to understand but without causing serious harm. She made a tentative search for clues now among the great field of entranceways hoping by some accident to gain greater understanding. Here were to be found the most incredible pictures imaginable. There was a hallway built entirely of black fibres and something called ‘metul.’ There were rooms that were lit without being exposed to the Saülè. Then she saw the image from earlier, but with a hoomaas wearing a long tunic standing next to the man in the reflection and using some magic tool that glowed when it came close to the man’s skin.

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It was them! It was the people from the sky! The prophecy **was** being fulfilled and she, of all the previous healers, over many many generations was blessed to be the one who would bear witness. Oh praise be to Gelf and to Adeima! Now she began trembling all over from the excitement of it. She had the honor of being the first one to see that the stories of her mother and her mother's mother were *actually* the fulltrue.

"Huso, I am deeply humbled and gratified to be the one to greet you people from the sky. Please do not be afraid, we have been waiting for the arrival of your people for hundreds of annums. My name is Gelfetia and I am the healing woman for the people of Ubuntu. On behalf of myself and my kinfolk, I humbly welcome you to this land.

Despite her words however, the man began trembling himself, this time in great terror. His eyes became very wide and his mouth grew long and thin. "H..how, wha-"

She worried now for the hoomaas' comfort and did her best to keep her voice low and calm. "Huso, you do not know this but among our people there are a few rare members such as myself who are blessed with the sense-readin. Among fellow denisovians I can only grasp vague emotions and feelings. However from your own people I am able to see more deeply into the smarati. Please understand that I have been carefully trained to use this gift with the utmost care. This is why Lluchra was asked to leave. Whatever we speak of here will be solely between you and I so as to protect the people from knowing about your personal things."

The man became overcome by the ground-force and quickly sat on the underfoot in front of her. His fraidness continued to be dominant, but it was also matched by a strong confusion. This did not surprise her, it was one of the few things about the stranger that did not.

"H-how is it that you can know this? Are all of your people able to read minds?" Mind, that was something she did not know about. But it was a minor point right now. For the moment she had to figure out how to deal with this most unusual hoomaas.

"Huso, it is considered a very special gift among my people to have the sense-readin. There has not been another with this ability since my mother's mother

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was a child. For those of us who are blessed in this way, we strive to follow the path of Gelf the wise and to be a healer for the people. You need not worry for the moment about the others in our village falling prey to the condemnays. Our people have dedicated ourselves to the protection of your secret for as long as this village has existed.”

Despite her calm and deliberate words, the man’s trembling only seemed to increase now. “What secret is that?”

The man was almost too afraid to even ask, but she felt that he would be less upset if he knew.

“It is the secret of your appearance and your strange colored life-fluid. It is the fact that your people come from the sky and use magic.”

The man put a great deal of intention toward hiding his emotions now as he gazed back at her. “What do you mean by strange-colored life fluid?”

She realized that his people had only a superficial understanding of her own people. They had not seen a denisovian who was injured, or in fact spoken to any of her people at all before this day. So, as if she were teaching a young’in she explained for the man the differences between their people. “You hoomaas have a life-fluid that is red, and ours is blue. You have five fingers on your hands and we have four.” She held up her hand as an example. “You people have that strange horn on your face and we of course do not.”

There was still much confusion from the man and so she told him many stories such as she had heard from her time as a young’in. The stories of Gelf the blessed, who was favored by Adeima with the sense-readin. How Gelf had found the ones who had lost smarati, but was able to guide them with the help of the hoomaas to this sacred place. How the hoomaas had come from the sky long ago in order to learn about her people and how they had become trapped here. She told him of Sefi the great healer and Aye-yoobay the guide who traveled with Gelf to the far away temple of Adeima where they both were graced to bear witness to Her wondrous majesty. “But despite the great signs and wonders shown by the holy mother, our blessed Gelf was forced into exile. Our people have dwelt far from the holy temple of our mothers and our mothers’ mothers.”

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As she finished, the hoomaas began to understand some small amount. However instead of making him more calm the stories instead seemed only to bring him the unhappy.

“Buru aba! I can’t believe those fools would do such a thing. It was made completely clear to the crew of the Nneka! Every anthropologist on that ship swore an oath, the whole lot of them would have done it. And those idiots just blatantly-” She could tolerate a great deal from the people who came to her. It was in her training after all. But one thing she would not tolerate was the words of great unhappy toward the blessed ones. She quickly raised her tone and stood over the man intimidatingly. “You will not speak disrespectfully of the great ones in my presence!”

As quickly as the fire of unhappy had sparked in the man, it was immediately replaced by intense fraidness now. She sometimes forgot how large her people appeared in the eyes of the hoomaas. Even more-so with this frail man from the sky. He was worried now that she might cause him physical harm.

Feeling shame saturate her being, she quickly sat back down and apologized. “Do not worry Huso. Our people do not ever use physical force on you hoomaas. We are your protectors after all. I am sorry to cause the fraidness, but you must understand that Sefi and Oomkwo and Aye-yoobay are sacred figures in our culture. We revere them, much like” She thought for a moment of the man’s own history. “Like Lumumba or Mandela.”

The man paled again and she felt the sadness for not respecting his privacy. “I am sorry Huso. I was merely trying to help you understand. The hoomaas in our own village have come to accept my gift, but I must remember that you did not grow up among our people and you are not accustomed to such things.

“So... your people are comfortable with the way you can just pluck memories from their heads?”

She thought for a moment. This was going to be a very delicate conversation and it would test the full extent of her training in dealing with this particular hoomaas.

“I would not say ‘comfortable’ as you put it exactly. It would be better to say that the hoomaas of our village and myself have developed a feeling of trust. I make it very clear that I will never try to draw information from them without permission

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or dire need and that anything I discover remains completely personal unless there is very large danger.

Please understand that from your appearance I thought you were denisovian like us. It was only when I saw the mind-pictures that I realized you were a hoomaas in disguise. It wasn't since the time of the great Aye-yoobay that we have witnessed such a thing. I was merely trying to describe the situation in terms that would be familiar to you."

She decided now that it might help the hoomaas to see how his own people had fared within her village, and so she calmly asked him to wait for a moment. She poked her head outside and asked Mautide to bring one of the hoomaas to her hut. Only a short timespan passed before Kwandic slowly entered the room. "Yes Gelfetia?"

She only gave the hoomaas a cryptic response to protect the priyvasi of the stranger. "Kwandic, this is Huso and he is a visitor to our village. I feel that it is acceptable for him to know about your people. I believe that he will wish to speak with you when we are finished. Would you please remain nearby until then?"

"Yes Gelfetia. We are blessed by your guidance." The man then returned outside and she turned her attention once more to the strange hoomaas visitor.

"Huso, your visit here was foretold long ago by the prophesy of our matriarch. She paused reverently before speaking the holy words. 'Last spark from crystal source, sends ship to change course.'

It was the will of Adeima that you come to us with your magic tools. I consider it a great honor hoomaas, to be your guide. To facilitate your arrival and to build a bridge between your own magical tribe and ours. Your arrival here will bring much celebration to the people of Ubuntu.

CHAPTER 17

If the words of the native woman alone were difficult to believe, he got a fresh shock when he saw a perfectly healthy human walk into the hut and stand respectfully next to the entrance. Aside from being the most muscular person Huso had ever seen, the man looked just like the figures in the... museum! That's

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what had been teasing at his brain. The copper rings the woman was wearing looked like something he'd seen in the Lagos National Museum. It had been so long ago that he'd nearly forgotten.

He barely registered the conversation between the two natives as the implications of it all became clear. Somehow the crew of the Nneka had violated their oath and integrated their own culture with this village. So 'hoomaas' was really just a cultural descendant of the word human! He was torn between fury at what the anthropologists had done, and huge joy at realizing that there were other human descendants somehow living here on this immense planet.

But none of this resolved the strange words that the medicine-woman had spoken. The words that she'd said and the reverence with which she'd spoken them had brought a shaking to his limbs that even news of their damaged life support system had failed to cause. He was absolutely certain that she had said crystal source sends ship to change course. The idea that some kind of prophecy from hundreds of years ago had predicted Rhumfa's decision to divert to this planet, it was easily a thousand times more ridiculous than the idea of those scientists revealing twenty-third century technology to a Neolithic society.

CHAPTER 18

"Please Gelfetia-" She was quickly pulled back from her dialogue. This interaction for her was most strange. Unlike her own people, this hoomaas said one thing but his mind-pictures showed something different. His people did not feel devotion to the fulltruth that her own kinfolk did.

"Please. I cannot emphasize how dangerous it is for your people to know about our arrival. It-" the man paused for several seconds searching for a means to help her understand how such a truth could spell disaster if it were revealed. "It might bring enormous harm to the peaceful livelihoods of both 'hoomaas' and non-hoomas in this village."

Then she saw it. This hoomaas had looked back when he set out and she had the experience of seeing the magic box that rose toward the sky. She sat frozen in wonder at the see'in of a rounded 'egg-shaped' container with many faces that his

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people called hexagons but with no regular corners. There were small protrusions front and back which had a slightly red glow but otherwise there was no means of distinguishing one side from another. This strange craft simply rose up above the underfoot using some unknown magic. She realized now that she would have to search deep within herself and find strength, wisdom, and courage equal to both Gelf AND Truenye combined if she were to successfully interact with these hoomaas. It would require many sessions of medytayshun and reflection for her to fully process their peoples' teknowledgy.

But for the moment she must respect the desire of the venerable hoomaas if that was his wish. "Huso you are correct. It would bring possible tragedy if your magic were known. I will tell our people only what I told Kwandic just now. For your own sake and to reduce the condemnays." She felt rather than saw the man's relief when she said this. Clearly the hoomaas had enough experience telling the untrues that he was even capable of hiding it in his face. Only the man's eyes and her sense-readin allowed her to see through his words.

As she contemplated the situation with the stranger. It seemed possible that these magical people would simply leave their land once the damage to the magic flying boat was fixed. That would be very tragic indeed. For she felt certain that Adeima meant for her people to have a connection with these most unusual visitors. What that connection might be, or how to facilitate it however was still shrouded in mystery. She did her best to think of some casual means of encouraging further wordsong with the members of the man's 'crew,' and finally grasped at something. "Of one thing I am certain Huso. The blessed Adeima has brought you here for a purpose. What that purpose is, I do not yet know." She paused for a moment to search for the right words. "However I do know that the purpose will be made clear to you in no uncertain terms, and it will be a course from which you cannot stray. It would be wise hoomaas, for us to discuss the matter of this 'Nneka' that you are looking for. Perhaps with your leader at some future time."

The hoomaas was doubtful that anyone from the ship would have the courage to speak with a 'mind-reading alien' but for herself she remained optimistic. "Please at least tell Rhumfa and Ikasha that we are here to serve you hoomaas and we are honored by your presence."

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The man confirmed that he would do so and respectfully asked to take his leave so he could ‘think through all this craziness.’

CHAPTER 19

He left the hut in a heavy fog of confusion. It was one thing for these people to have been influenced by the stupidity of Umquo’s crew. But it was an entirely different matter for a people hundreds of years later to know that the distress signal would cause Rhumfa to decide to bring them here. He saw no evidence that this magic healing woman could foretell the future in any way nor could she have known that there would even *be* another ship to receive the signal. The whole thing was so insane that it gave him a headache even to think about it. He couldn’t wait to get back and hear what the rest of them had to say about this. It was either the most unimaginable find since the development of agriculture, or it was the greatest crisis the United Planetary Society had ever been faced with.

“How can it be that you speak the holy tongue?”

He was momentarily thrown off for a few seconds, until he saw the human villager standing nearby. His face must have belied his confusion for the man backtracked slightly.

“Forgive me stranger, but I heard you speak the holy tongue with Gelfetia. It is highly unusual for any to use the Yorigbowza except during ceremony.”

Huso flew through the conversation of the past few minutes and remembered this as the ‘hoomaas’ man Gelfetia had invited inside. Thankfully if the alien healer was the only one who could read minds, then he could probably stem off any further hazard regarding this person. He chose to think of something that would sound both innocuous and believable. “Hoomaas, please do not misunderstand. I am not a healer like Gelfetia is. However I am closely aligned with some highly skilled healers, in fact my father was a healer among my own people.”

At this the man began laughing. “Oh that is funny. I did not realize that your people could make such good jokes. It reminds me of Molayo who once threatened

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to cut off my Imú¹⁶ so that I would look more like the others here.” The man smiled, perhaps seeing Huso’s brief look of horror.

He was confused by the statement, but momentarily he managed to return the smile in hopes of stemming further suspicion. He was quickly coming to realize that the less he said, the safer things would be. So instead he told the native that he had come in hopes of learning from their healer. He then shared that he would meet with the people of his own ‘tribe’ and return when his people felt that the time was right. But inside, the whole discussion rang hollow in his mind. There were simply too many unknowns, and too many strange coincidences for him to hold any real concentration beyond what was necessary to get out of there safely.

CHAPTER 20

His trip back was empty of concerns for the high gravity now, or even the incredible surroundings. This time he was faced with mind-reading aliens, a group of humans who had grown up worshiping their scientist ancestors, and the possibility that their culture in Lagos had been implanted into a group of indigenous people dozens of light-years from Earth.

Something strange happened while he was distracted. He felt a particularly strong gust of wind wrap it’s powerful hands around his cloak. He threw his foot out, but was unable to find solid ground where he expected to find it. He saw, in an instant, the unyielding rock attack him with horrible speed and he flailed with his arms to keep his head from smashing against the deadly stone.

The pain was bad, but not as terrible as he’d feared. Somehow he had successfully broken his fall and rolled to the side the way his judo courses had instructed. But sadly his preparations could only do so much here. Through all of the thousands of years of human history, self defense and acrobatics were always practiced under standard terrestrial gravity. In a place such as this, a mere fall from human height was the equivalent of falling three meters and he counted himself lucky that he’d escaped without destroying a leg. He had managed to endure only some

16 Igbo term for nose

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scrapes to his hands and arms, a broken wrist, and what felt like some terrible bruising on his left side.

He sat down carefully, using his good arm for support and dug within his kit. The design of his accessory was ingenious and he would have to thank Fatima when this was over. What would have looked to a native like any regular undergarment hid a small flask of water, a thin bar of ointment, and a few painkillers which he took along with the water. Then he rubbed the bar over all of his cuts to be sure he didn't get some alien micro-organism in his system. With that done, he sadly ripped a length of his cloth and wrapped it over his wrist to keep the pain from flaring up.

The incident was a good lesson to him that for all its magnificence, this land was not a suitable place for humans to live. At least not humans from Earth he realized. It was all the more clear to him now that he needed to keep a careful watch on where he stepped for the rest of this trip. He was far too close to the native village yet for Ereeko to pick him up in the Gbowee without one of the natives spotting her. He'd have to watch where he stepped very carefully, or the next time he fell the injury might be fatal.

CHAPTER 21

Oibo notified her of a shipwide ipade to be attended as soon as possible. "Buru aba!" she swore. There was so much to do between learning something about the people down there so her crew didn't mess with their culture, digging through data from the satellite in hopes of discovering where the Nneka was, sketching out all the broken parts of the ship that needed repair, and Huso probably still out in the field and in possible danger. But she took a minute to remind herself that nobody would call for ipade unless it was vitally important. So she hurriedly closed out her hologram of the starboard landing strut and headed over to the common room. The good news was that Huso was sitting in one of the chairs safe and sound. So at least one of her concerns could now be let go. But once she looked more closely and saw the man's empty expression as he sat at the table morosely tapping on a pad she became more concerned for her friend's comfort than her own frustrations.

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He looked as if he'd just lost his first girlfriend and he barely raised his eyes when she approached. It was painful to see her normally cheerful friend looking so thoroughly dejected. She sat down next to him and put a supporting hand on his shoulder. But the eyes which returned her gaze were set within a face five years older than the man she'd sent out only that morning.

"Can it really be that bad my friend? I mean the crew must be dead over five hundred years by now, especially in this bone-crushing gravity."

"Oh Rhumfa, I wish you could be spared the terrible truth." His voice cracked with sorrow that gave the statement more strength than he seemed able to put into mere words alone.

Ten minutes later the last of the crew wandered into the room. Fatima saw the look on both their faces and quietly asked, "Is their language really so difficult?" He gave a long sigh before answering. "I'm afraid, it's much worse than that Fatima." Huso slowly gazed around the room before he finally dropped the news. Like a meteor strike it slammed into the lot of them, shattering their world as surely as if he were a deadly comet. "They know. They know absolutely everything. *And*, there are humans living in their village."

The aftershock reverberated through the room unrestricted now in the horrified silence. Every mouth fell open, every eye bulged, and soon the exclamations grew to a deafening chorus.

"That's impossible."

"How could a human survive out in that horrible gravity?"

"Just what in the hell are you saying Huso. How could there be humans down here?" Oneyda paused to do some mental calculations, "*eight hundred generations later??*"

The man's voice remained very quiet, so much so that Rhumfa had to repeatedly ask for them to hold off their comments so he could be heard. Only when complete silence returned was the whisper of his breath once again audible. "I'm not sure *how* this is possible. It's going to take some time to figure the whole mess out. But clearly the crew of the Nneka violated their oath. These people know all about humans, know that there are differences both external and internal, they know

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about how humans come down ‘magically’ from the sky. But the worst part is, their healing woman can read minds.”

Not a single one of them believed this of course. And now the room exploded into a hurricane of angry rhetorts. Being the closest, Kine’s was the only discernible spear thrust. She was in a bad mood, either because of the grav-plate adjustment or the foul-smelling air. “Oh come off it Huso. What kind of shit are they are they smoking in that village?”

Having been the first to see the state he was in, she knew that someone would have to speak out on his behalf, and quickly. “Now now, everyone please. Kine please. Hold your comments for a moment. You all know that we wouldn’t have sent Huso to the village if we didn’t trust the man.” Even so, the statement was too absurd to fully accept. “Nevertheless Huso, I’m going to need some pretty serious evidence to believe such a claim as this.”

“That wont take long. Once Oibo processes the recorder from the mission you’ll be able to hear for yourselves how their healing woman knew my name, knew instantly that I was in disguise, and knew that we had come down here ‘in a magic flying boat.’”

“Well this is just great. We get stuck on a world of crushing gravity, with a busted air cycling system, and now we have a group of mind-reading aliens. Tell me, did we just leap into some Nnedi comic or am I still in cryosleep?”

As if it had consciously heard the request, Oibo signaled that the recording transfer was finished and she immediately ordered for it to be played in the common room. She listened intently and with increasing horror at the things that their healing woman said. When it was finished she knew that any hope of a discrete layover on this planet was now as ruined as the their shattered landing strut.

“So these ‘hoomaas,’ they are the descendants of the original crew. That’s why we didn’t understand the different people living in that village. It wasn’t a class issue, they’ve had two entirely different species living together in one community for hundreds of years.”

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Fatima looked up from her pad now and offered her own inquiry. “And what is this bit about them *protecting* the ‘hoomaas?’ What are they protecting the people *from?*”

Rhumfa looked back over to Huso, but the man could only shrug his head. “I honestly don’t know. There are still a lot of mysteries yet to be teased out of this.” She did her best to keep her expression calm and kind, if only for the sake of Huso, who’d clearly been through more than she could ever imagine. So instead she directed her next statement to the whole group. “People, I think that it’s paramount that we learn what these dangers might be.” She paused to once again put her raucous thoughts into some kind of coherence. “These... these humans in the village they may be in danger, but it’s clearly one that they already understand. Aside from the gravity and the huge difference in mass between the two species, we might be missing some unknown risk and this doesn’t sit well with me. Not, at, all.”

Saaed picked that moment to throw his own [djenga] into the discussion, which only served to worsen her mood. “I’m afraid that we’re not going to know the answers to these issues until we can find some means to gather more information. We’ve already lost two drones in this exercise, and the others don’t function well in this extreme gravity.”

“Well then you’re going to have to find a way to make do with our remaining drones Saaed. I’m not going to risk any of our people out there without a damn good reason from now on.”

But despite her encouragement the questions continued to grow into a great sandstorm spinning around her and chafing at what little patience she was holding on to. Rhumfa finally was forced to ask that they conclude ipade, giving the excuse that it was for Huso’s sake. She suggested that everyone hold on to their questions or store them with Oibo until more information could be brought to light.

With all of the heightened emotions around this discovery, it was obvious to her that the crew needed some definite and challenging tasks to help keep them all focused on the more important issues. Otherwise the wild speculations could lead to any number of emotional outbreaks or even fighting among the crew.

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“Look, everyone. I realize that this is an unprecedented situation, but we need to keep our bearings and stay level-headed. So here are the current priorities as I see them. Number one- we have to get an understanding of their native language. It sounds to me as if the healer is the only one who can speak Yorigbausa with complete confidence.” She paused for a moment to think. “Which brings me to the second priority. Under no circumstances should any of us approach their healer, even if someone does have reason to be outside. We can’t have another run-in with any woman who can read minds. Number three, we need to find and get access to the Nneka and see what kind of record was kept there. Maybe we’ll find more clues as to what might have caused those fools to teach the natives about the cultures of Earth. Everyone who’s not working on those tasks needs to be helping me with the repairs on our thrusters, landing struts, or the air cycling system.” “What about the other village captain? Maybe those people know something?” She looked across at Shadai gratefully. It always felt like the sun was rising when that woman entered the room. Rhumfa wasn’t alone in such thoughts either. The whole crew felt lucky to have her joyous personality among them. The woman had a natural talent for keeping the crew from losing track of subtle elements. But for now there were much more important issues. “I think that we can ignore them for the moment. If we find evidence that the Nneka is somewhere close to that settlement then we’ll reassess our priorities. Until then, please focus only on the task at hand.”

CHAPTER 22

Regina sat next to a tree within sight of the Juantaylib brook. It was the same brook which she had sat in for many days when she had been with child the first time. The same brook where she had sat when she had been with her second, and then her third. She had taken the utmost care, eaten much fodiens, surrounded herself in the waters of Juantaylib and offered prayers and offerings to Nejtowil the provider of the blessed waters. Yet all of her care and devotion had been utterly futile.

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The vengeful Pritlaxtl had stolen every one of her children before they could even stand upon the underfoot. She had wept and she had torn at her hair. Each time the feeling of hope became more feeble, the devotion to the new life growing within her more pensive. There were seemingly no prayers she could offer, no healing plants she could apply that proved helpful in any way. Her body simply refused to create offspring vigorous enough to fend off Pritlaxtl's cruel grasp.

She looked on with no small amount of bitterness at Sefin who sat building a raft for her newborn daughter. She looked on while the pain and the frustration grew like a hollow seed husk within her. Somehow she could not keep from torturing herself over the longing, could not keep from seeing within her smarati the sweet and innocent faces of the three young ones (the fourth having never even survived to open his eyes to the world). How many annums must she bear this pain and torture within her kaba? She stared at the other woman, and took ever longer sips from her flask of fire water until the scene around her began to blur and swim before her eyes.

After the last child had ended its life still inside her, she had resolved to never mate with another person again. If she was destined to remain barren, then at least she would end the cycle of hopes raised and then crushed, for all eternity. She sipped again from the flask, and finally the images faded in a blur of sickness.

CHAPTER 23

"He peered into...forst-"

"Rhumfa, they say it like this, 'He gave the straight-eye to the forst.'"

She stared at the pad, and the funny words on it. They could find no evidence that the natives had a written language, so Oibo had used their own alphabet to form the words and it was enormously confusing to match the letters to what sounds she could glean from the recordings.

"I honestly don't know how you picked up this strange language so quickly Huso." The man smiled back at her. "Don't worry. You'll get the hang of it little by little. Just keep practicing."

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She struggled for another half-hour with the unusual dialect and then asked for a break. She found herself, almost obsessively checking the satellite, if only to distract herself from worrisome thoughts of the ‘mind-reading aliens.’ This time she noticed that the large dead area to the east remained at a cooler temperature than the surrounding forest. That might be due to a higher water content or something on the surface which absorbed less heat. There wasn’t yet enough data to be sure. In looking at the terrain map she had to again remind herself that this planet spun clockwise meaning their sun rose in the west and set in the east. It was just one more confusing element of this increasingly baffling place. Her concentration was interrupted by the chime and she opened the doorway to see Ikasha standing patiently. She quickly motioned the woman inside and offered her a seat.

The woman ran her fingers nervously through her fraying braids before preparing to give her report. “Rhumfa, I’ve been looking over the data from both the Ubuntu village and the farther one. They seem to have a common linguistic root, but there’s no question of human intervention within the closer village. I found words that were clearly of Igbo, Hausa, and Fulah origin. Their people hold the remnants of our culture in high esteem, and treat the original Nneka crew almost like the Muslims viewed Mohammad.”

“Now you see?! This is *exactly* the kind of contamination that those dam-” Barely had the words left her mouth before she cut herself off like the closing of an airlock door. “Ikasha, what was that word they used? The one we couldn’t figure out it’s meaning?”

For a second the woman was confused. But then she remembered. “Oh right. Condemnay-” Her eyes suddenly got very wide. “That’ it! That’s what the healing woman spoke of! ‘Condemnays’ must be a descendant of the word contamination. She said that their whole village was focused on protecting against contamination.” “But contamination of *who*? If their whole damned village knows about our people then what is there to protect against?”

“I think I have that Rhumfa.” The linguist tapped through her pad for a moment before finding what she was looking for. “Here it is. There’s a story picked up from one of the inhabitants of a foreign man who reached their village intending to

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attack them. He came very close and managed to strike one of the humans with a spear. Once the villagers realized that he'd seen what a human looked like and how different his blood was, a large group of them attacked him and prevented him from ever leaving."

This gave her so much to think about. If the original crew were so casual about letting the indigenous people see them and their technology then why were these villagers so monkish about isolating themselves from outsiders? Her brain was turning to mush trying to tease out some meaning and she encouraged Ikasha to keep examining the feed from their remaining dragonfly drone.

"There's something else Rhumfa. One of the villagers made reference to a tradition of keeping watch with the iran ologo-

"Glorious vision? What does that have to do-

"None of us know yet, it seems to be related in some way to 'Higsthon' which I believe is the mountain we're perched on."

They all had a thousand questions, and so far there were precious few answers to any of them. She gazed at the woman doubtfully. "And you don't know why they do this?"

"I'm sorry Rhumfa. None of us have found anything that could provide more clarity. I mean, if their people are so preoccupied with the contamination, then why would they be watching some inhospitable mountain slope?"

As if her point needed emphasis, she pointed out the viewing port at the empty horizon. "There's nothing up there but rocks and that small river coming off of it. Maybe a few scraggly trees here and there, but certainly nothing to write home about."

"Well, many of our own ancestors worshiped Kilimanjaro in our early history. So maybe it's the place itself that is holy for them. Perhaps they don't want anyone treading on their sacred ground. Or maybe they have a burial site which has cultural significance to them." She let out a sigh once again wishing there was somebody with experience who could help make some kind of sense of all this madness. "Look Ikasha, I'm not a scientist. I don't really know what all-

"Rhumfa" The woman now put a comforting arm on her own shoulder. "It's okay. Listen we're not going to have all the answers on the first try."

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She looked at the woman with fresh eyes now. “Thank you Ikasha. I’m sorry. It’s just- It’s all just so confusing.” She took a deep breath and thought over the situation, hoping that two heads might be better than one. “So let’s just focus on what we DO know. The mountain has a strong significance for their people. Probably religious in nature. There’s some element about the humans of that village which the people there are focused on protecting. And their people have some strange obsession with something, perhaps the mountain itself. So unless there’s an intense need, I’ll be sure that none of our people go anywhere upslope of that village. Then we also have another group, farther away and there are some historical ties between the two of them.

“Yes Rhumfa.”

“Okay. Well I guess that’s all the information we have. With any luck we can keep focused on the domestic problems and let sleeping dogs lie. Feel free to let me know of any new discoveries if anything important comes to light.”

The woman smiled and tapped at her pad. “Yes captain. I’ll be sure to message you with anything relevant.”

When Ikasha left, she stood at the window just gazing up at the great mass of stone, trying to imagine what might be up there. Wondering if whatever it was might be the threat that the ‘hoomaas’ needed protection from. She believed, and hoped, that it wasn’t anything that their technology couldn’t protect them from.

CHAPTER 24

Beljutil sat morosely by the brook. He couldn’t stop thinking of Imotren, the damn fool. But oh what a gorgeous fool. He kept reminiscing over the man’s gleaming knobhorns and lovely hair tufts. He so wanted to stay with the man, wanted to feel his arms around him at night. But Imotren just wouldn’t stop thinking about the plans for avenging his grandfather. The continuous lust for the spilling of life-fluid had moved way beyond simply the repair of his family name as the man so often claimed. Beljutil had implored his mate so many times. He had entreated Imotren constantly to seek other ways for ensuring a legacy for his family among the plutolatri. But their arguments always ended the same way. Imotren would

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ask him what other way there was, and any suggestions that he gave would be batted away like an annoying hutzfly. The politics and social graces of the plutolatri were as confusing to him as the ancient prophecies of Adeima. Nevertheless, he couldn't help believing that it was *his* fault that this was happening. That it was *his* stupidity and ignorance which drove Imotren to seek violence. It was all because his searching could not manifest within himself the ingenuity which chief Gjintruk seemed to possess in abundance. That man always seemed to have the most inspiring wordsongs, the most enticing tone of voice, and the greatest confidence to win people over to his point of view.

Thus he was forced to watch as the chief used that skill to weave great speeches professing glory for all who joined in their escapade. He entreated the people to support their warriors with contributions of weapons, clothing and fodiens to their already impressive bulk of supplies. But it was clear to anyone who listened to Gjintruk's speeches that he and Imotren were building off of each other. By the spear of Prijnak it must have been sixty annums in the beforetime that Itroveepu and his men went missing and nobody alive now had the slightest evidence that the people of the mountain were the ones who had killed them. Perhaps the woman who returned had been telling an untrue and she herself had sent the scouts to Pritlaxtl. Maybe it was the great morass which had swallowed the men up leaving only one to speak the wordsong on her return. There were any number of ways that a small group could succumb to Pritlaxtl. And there was no way to delve into the smarati of a people who were barely more than legend.

He put his head back into his hands and thought dreamily of his former mate while watching a tear drip from his face and hasten towards the brook below where it shattered the otherwise placid surface.

Soon he was going to have to get back to work on building more spears for their warriors. The march toward Higsthon would easily take fifteen days even without the trouble of crossing the great morass. He just didn't know how an army of warriors would find a way to do it. But thankfully, the burden of solving that particular challenge was somebody else's problem. He had only to worry about providing weapons for this ridiculous browbeating.

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CHAPTER 25

Ikasha tapped absentmindedly at the map that she'd drawn of the surrounding landscape. Sure, Rhumfa and Huso might depend on vidscreens, holographic projections, and conversations with Oibo, but she still preferred the casual human feel of running her stylis over the synthpaper. She found that the winding natural lines helped her to relax and see things more definitively than she could through a technical interface.

She gave a flourishing squiggle to delineate the strange hole in the forest and laid down a bunch of squares to represent the farther village with a few larger rectangles representing a temple, a market, and some kind of royal courtyard. From the satellite it looked to be quite extensive, possibly on the scale of pre-dynastic Naqada¹⁷, but somehow they seemed not to spread past the river or the morass. Their technology was probably not advanced enough to allow for traversing those natural boundaries.

The fact that she saw evidence of a temple and some kind of ruling class denoted a wealth disparity which they hadn't found in Ubuntu. But the most interesting part was that the name 'Gelf' was heard in a couple of conversation pieces and the tone was distinctly negative. She was beginning to get a grasp of the language and she felt sure that these people viewed the historic figure as some kind of evil magician.

"How are things going Ikasha?"

She'd been so wrapped up in her mental wanderings that she'd been completely blind to Rhumfa's entry. It took a second or two for her to reorient her thoughts and register what the woman said before she could turn her attention to the pilot. She gave Rhumfa an update on her thoughts and what little she knew of the other town's language.

Sadly though, the woman displayed much less interest in her discoveries. "Ikasha, I thank you for being thorough. But this isn't a research ship and our mission at this point needs to be limited to the task at hand. For the moment I'm only interested in finding out what happened to the Nneka and on getting our ship

17 [Naqada](#) II, existed around 3500BCE in northern Nigeria

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operational again. I don't really see that we have the resources to deal with superficial issues here."

Her smile faded to a thin slit. She didn't really understand of course. It was completely absurd for them to squander this magnificent opportunity to explore a situation that the Interplanetary Council had never experienced in its entire history. The pilot may have authority over the ship's systems, but she wasn't a leadership council. Why couldn't the woman see what a grand opportunity sat before them. Just waiting to be unraveled by anyone driven enough to dig through the clues.

But she noticed something in the woman's eyes then. It was subtle, but it was a darkness that told her it would be best not to argue. She reluctantly rolled up her synthpaper for the sake of the other woman. "I understand Rhumfa. I'll keep going over their language in hopes that there's a clue to the ship's location." She would just have to wait and hope that a better opportunity came along down the road.

The woman smiled now, perhaps to mitigate her earlier rebuke. "Thank you Ikasha. I'm sorry to push you like this, but there's just too many different problems and too much risk for us to get distracted."

When the pilot left though, she pulled up the last few hours of telemetry from the second probe. She understood that the woman blamed herself for their situation, but that didn't mean *she* had to suffer as well. They had an opportunity here. She was absolutely convinced that there was something important buried among the thousands of hours of voice recordings, it hovered out there like one of those dragonfly drones just a hairsbreadth out of reach.

As she listened in to the audio however, she heard nothing but mediocre everyday chatter. There was talk of harvesting crops, bringing water from the river, helping one person fix their roof, and the like. But at one point she caught a discussion between two males in which they boasted about how many spears each had carved that day. One of them spoke of sending those 'grishneevit cowards to Pritlaxtl.' It sounded as if there would be a battle soon. But with who she couldn't manage to figure out.

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With Rhumfa pushing her to stay away from ‘trivial matters,’ she would have to grudgingly limit her time dwelling on anything that didn’t involve their own crew or the missing ship. Despite the nagging in her gut, she turned off the recording and went back to looking over the satellite feed for clues that would bring answers to one or the other mystery that Rhumfa wanted answers to.

CHAPTER 26

Oneyda wandered into the workshop while he was examining data from the final drone. “How is the data recovery going my friend?”

Manuel looked up at the woman mildly frustrated. “Not good at all. The second drone suffered a complete failure I’m afraid. That damn animal attacking it couldn’t have helped, but I had thought that only the camera was messed up.” “But the thing should have returned to the ship if it was able, right?” The woman peered over his shoulder, but he knew that Oneyda didn’t have the experience with programming needed to understand the long stream of code that filled up two screens of the interface.

He looked back at the woman bitterly. “The thing is, it never came back. Which means either the navigation or the propulsion system was screwed up as well.”

Now he could see the worry in his friend’s face. “Don’t regulations dictate that we send it up to a roof or rock formation so that it would be out of sight?”

He didn’t enjoy retelling this any more than the others would enjoy hearing it. It was bad enough that he’d be giving a report on the incident to Rhumfa, and he could only imagine what *she* would say about the news.

“Geezleweez Oneyda. How you think a 30 cubic millimeter fuel cell is gonna haul that thing up to a rooftop against 1.7 standard Gs. You no be thinkin. That thing barely has the power to keep itself a meter off the ground in this insidious place. I tried issuing it an order to fly toward some shrubs that I’d seen earlier. But it probably failed for the same reason that it couldn’t make it’s way back here. I had to issue a self-destruct to prevent it’s detection by the natives.”

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“Damn. Those things are valuable.” The woman heaved a sigh dramatic enough for Manuel to think the cost was coming out of *her* credit account. “Well let’s just hope that none of the natives were around when that happened.”

“You’re telling me.” He stared at his pad ruefully.

“Things they be so cray over there I wouldn’t be surprised if we saw a whole group of them standing right outside the ship tomorrow.” She laid her arms across her chest heaving a sigh once more which led him to wonder how deeply invested the woman felt in all this. Or if, like Rhumfa, she blamed herself in some way. But then he dismissed the thought. The vision of what Oneyda had said finally impressed itself on his consciousness. His face paled in response and he wondered what might happen to them if they did have to face such a catastrophe.

“Don’t worry Manuel. I’m sure that even if they made it here, none of the natives would know how to turn off the force-field that Rhumfa activated in the airlock. We’ll be fine inside the ship.”

The shadow of a scowl briefly surfaced on his otherwise placid features. “Sure Oneyda, *we* might be safe in here. But I can’t even begin to imagine the destruction for the people of this planet if even one of these native people were to get a look at the Boabob.

CHAPTER 27

She was just finishing one of her kulmelons when Lluchra entered the hut with her face showing great excitement. She barely even remembered the respectful greeting before embarking on the wordsong of how Sefri had been out behind her shelterspace and noticed something that shone brightly where the Saülè reflected off of it.

“... and when he stooped to examine it, he found this!” She held an object in her hand that was incredibly small. It was not even as large as the head of a wingsqerl and yet there was an amazing amount of detail to it. She allowed the woman to carefully place the gift in her hand, and looked closely at the strange object which gleamed even in the dim light of her shelterspace.

“Do you have any idea what it could be?”

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The young woman's voice was full of hope and excitement. However excitement was the one thing she herself was seeing in the need to keep masked. For the mind-pictures she had experienced from the disguised hoomas led her to believe that this thing might be related to their magical appearance and the dangers which the legendary Oomkwo had warned of. It was becoming more clear to her how relevant the man Huso's fraidness had been. For the great prophecy had said; 'as curiosity burns, danger unturns.' And the prophecy of Gelf certainly would apply to something so strange as this.

As saddened as it made her, she forced herself to show calmface and carefully lifted the tiny item up with the ends of her fingers. "This perhaps is a new type of plant seed. I will go and explore the edge of the forest to see if there are others." Disappointment pervaded Lluchra's emotions at such a mundane response. "You really think that it's just a seed? Sefri had thought that it might be something magical, the way the Saülè shined from its many surfaces."

"Yes, but does not the kul-melon flower shine brightly as well when the drops from the mist collect on it?"

She could tell that Lluchra was not entirely convinced, but the young woman held such reverence for her that she could not bring herself to contradict a healer's opinion. The woman left with a small degree of dejection and Gelfetia felt even stronger unhappy in her kaba at even this tiny misdirection. There was something about this tiny thing, which led her to believe that it held great importance, and perhaps some danger as well. Whatever that might be, it had to be concealed from the kinfolk until she understood more. She waited until the area in front of her shelterspace was completely empty of her kinfolk and set the item in the light where she could look at it closely. The thing looked terribly fragile with a number of intricate sticks attached to it in strange places. The slight pressure from her finger ends caused no damage to them. They bent slightly and returned to normal when she released her finger. There was a small black circle at one end of a long cylinder body and two pairs of flat pieces sticking out that looked like leaves but they could be seen through, like water. But then she got an enormous shock when two of the flat pieces began to vibrate slightly. It was as if she held a giant but

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injured huitsfly. She opened her hand and held the being carefully. But after the initial movement, the thing became still.

Through the extent of her gazing at it from many angles it was clear that a full annum of examination would not provide more clues, and so she set the device next to her little wooden statue of Gelf and attempted to relax into the medytayshun. However she had only closed her eyes for a moment when there was a strange crackling sound. She grudgingly looked up in horror to see flames licking at her beloved statue.

Instantly she leaped up and snatched the statue to the underfoot rubbing sand from the ground along it's surface which was charred as if from a fire. But how could there have been a fire without-

The thought barely finished before she looked back up to the shelf only to see the strange object gone completely, with a charred spot on the shelf marking it's disappearance.

Now things were really becoming mysterious. And following shortly after the appearance of the magical hoomaas. The two things must be connected somehow, but what this connection was she could not yet understand. She had the strong feeling within her kaba that important events, terribly important ones, were being eduuced like a rock being brought to the surface of the brook. Yet there was nothing in the present that was definitive enough to direct her in any one direction. And so remorsefully she returned to her meditation which was no more successful then her examination of the strange object had been.

CHAPTER 28

NewMali was supposed to be the most distant human outpost yet attempted. In spite of the vast distance from Earth, it could otherwise have been a carbon-copy of their home planet in the early Pleistocene. There was extensive vegetation, only a few of which were found to be poisonous. The rich atmosphere of carbon dioxide, nitrogen, and oxygen was breathable and would become only more so with increased tree planting. The planet's volume was smaller, but it's dense core gave it a gravity strong enough that the inhabitants weren't expected to suffer bone

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density loss. Most importantly, there were two gas giants in more distant orbits which would draw in random comets or meteorites and protect the colony from disaster.

Kinfe had been the lead jirgen-sama pilot and she spent long days ferrying people, equipment, and seedlings down from the ship to the surface. It was boring work, but her brother and his wife were planning to stay there and she loved the woman immensely. It had taken only a little convincing for her to get permission to spend most of her free time down on the surface where she relished the time spent with Rishaada.

There had been dozens of trips in the various jirgin-samas. But Rishaada had been the unluckiest passenger. The woman had been an atmospheric scientist and she had gone with Malawe to the planet's tallest peak in order to gather data on some gas concentrations. Unfortunately for her, Malawe wasn't a particularly skilled pilot. Not by a long shot. There had been high winds in the area and their craft had ended up getting thrown against the side of a cliff.

On Earth they might have survived merely due to the density of ships in orbit to transport someone in trouble. But on NewMali there had only been a few, and the Emem Okon had been too far away to reach them in time.

The council had blamed Malawe and given him a post-mortem extradition. But she knew that it was Rhumfa who had trained the man and it was she who had decided on which people were qualified enough to fly a jirgen-sama.

As far as she was concerned, there would be a glacier in the Sahara before she would give more than the most elemental courtesy to their pilot for the remainder of the mission. This however, was sadly becoming a great deal longer than any of them expected and there was no telling how long it would take before the damned woman managed to get the lot of them back to Earth. She told herself that if it didn't involve the Boabob or its life support systems, then she wasn't giving the pilot a flake of skin off her nose.

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CHAPTER 29

Akinniyi finished his shift on the iran ologo. He carefully placed the device back in it's precious djengord case before handing it ever so gently to Kwandic. Every time he used the strange tool, he wondered at the magic which could create something that allowed him to see any part of the mountain as if it were twenty footfalls away. It was clear that his ancestors were an incredible people and he often surrendered to a brief melancholy that their great power device had failed. The wonders that his ancestors must have witnessed were beyond anything imaginable by the kinfolk, and he felt no small degree of envy for all of the exciting adventures spoken of in the wordsongs of the far back beforetime.

He paused then, dreaming of the wondrous land of Urth where the great expanse of waters met with an underfoot covered by fodien plants, and beautiful shelterspaces as large as their whole village stretched their great arms high into the sky above.

“Hey Akinniyi. You want to hear something funny?”

He grinned in anticipation, for Kwandic often had entertaining wordsongs to share, and he imagined his friend spending long hours watching the mount of Higsthon and dreaming up all manner of amusing things to share. “Did Molayo threaten to cut off your Imú again?”

The man laughed good-naturedly. “No no, this is much better. There was a stranger in the village two days ago, a terribly scrawny fellow. Anyway, I asked if he was a healer because he seemed to only speak the holy tongue. And he said that his father was a healer.”

Akinniyi laughed heartily at that. A man being a healer, that was funny. “Did you make that one up on your last watch of the mountain?”

At this the man's smile faded. No no. It actually happened. The man was in Gelfetia's hut and she called me to enter for some reason.

Now that indeed *was* strange. “Did the healer share with you why she would decide to reveal our existence to an outsider?”

The man thought for a moment. “No, strangely she didn't. Gelfetia just said that there was no risk of the condemnays with this man.”

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“No risk of condemnays?” He wondered aloud over the statement. “I hear what you say my friend, and it is not for us to question the healer. But it does seem incredibly strange. After more annums then any of us can count to suddenly allow an outsider to see one of us.”

“I’m sure that Gelfetia has her reasons. But you’re right that it seems very unusual. I will see if Lluchra has any insight. The woman follows Gelfetia like a shadow.”

They spoke just a bit more, but then he urged his friend to return to his watch. It was their holy mission to keep sharp-eye on the mountain to help protect against the condemnays. He could not allow himself to distract the man from their privileged duty for a friendly conversation that could be shared any time. He wandered back to his shelterspace thinking of how a stranger could have shown up in Ubuntu without someone stopping him from getting in. As far as he knew, it was the highest law of their village that no outsiders be allowed to see the place, especially people like himself. Unless it was an untrue, but he knew that Kwandic would never say such a thing. He felt the strong hope that Lluchra would know something of the matter, for she knew almost as much as Gelfetia herself even if she held little confidence in her own smart-know’n.

CHAPTER 30

“Nasara¹⁸, I found it!”

Sefri glanced up from her kuli-kuli to see Manuel practically jumping up and down next to her. The man’s beautiful curly hair was only beginning to show touches of gray despite their extended time in the stasis chambers. The pudgy arms poking out of his shirt continuously strained against the force of the grav-plating, which was now set to 1.25 standard (that was probably why he wasn’t *actually* jumping). “What is it [X]? What’s got you so excited?” She didn’t want to spread false hopes like Rhumfa had, but the anticipation saturated her voice nonetheless. She could really use some good news. And she expected the rest of them felt the same.

18 Hausa term roughly translates as ‘eureka’

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By now the man seemed barely able to contain his excitement. “The Nneka. I found the Nneka. It’s on the far side of that mountain about four kilometers above the nearest village.”

“Ayo! I can’t believe it. That’s just fantastic.” She embraced the man in her excitement and gave a small kiss on his cheek. “Tell me. How were you able to find it?”

The man pulled back slightly as he thought over the process. “Well, their power would obviously have been gone a long time, so there would be no heat or electrical energy coming off it. And not surprisingly they covered the entire ship with boulders-”

“My word, in this gravity it must have been a project as laborious as the mosque of Djenné.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it.” The man continued, “anyway the boulders in one area seemed unusually tight and continuous with no projections or crevices at all. So I set the satellite to map the boundary of the area and it matches perfectly with the specs on the Nneka. They must have set themselves up there so that they could observe the village.”

Sefri gave the man another hug and thanked him for such innovative research. It was this kind of ingenuity that she admired in Manuel. The man was incredibly skilled with computers and she was especially grateful now that Rhumfa had managed to get the UPC to approve him for the mission. But for now she hurriedly finished her food in anticipation of sharing the holographic telemetry with Rhumfa and Huso.

CHAPTER 31

The time of mists was clearly upon them now and the air was turning noticeably chilly. Gelfetia looked somewhat longingly at the hoomaas who seemed to bear less discomfort from the chill than her own people did. Mayhaps, she thought, the place where their people came from was colder than Ubuntu, or it could simply be that they could endure things more than a denisovian like herself. Looking down at her outer cloak, she realized that if she didn’t hurry and mend the thin parts

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soon then she would find herself suffering of alidity which her kinfolk occasionally endured on a pilgrimage.

Looking also through her store of fodiens, she hoped that there would be enough to last through the time of mists. It looked remotely possible, but she would endeavor to eat less before the pilgrimage just in case. After all, if Gelf the wise could make the trip on a few pieces of the blessed hotzfruit then she felt certain that her body would not suffer too severely from the weakness of hunger. But then she had to remind herself that Gelf the wise had not been leading a whole village, which always required a great deal of stopping for speeches or just to let those with less of the gudstrength catch up.

In the end she decided that her original plan to fast more in the present would be wise so that she could save her stores of fodiens for the long journey up the slope of Higsthon. It would not do at all for her people to see their healer suffering from hunger.

Meanwhile she wandered down to the stream where Sefin was watching over her newborn child. The hoomaas sat partly submerged in a lovely pool which her people had carved into the bank of the Juantaylib. She smiled and offered a wave to the woman as she approached. The woman's joyous reply told her that this time her offspring might be graced to escape the clutches of Pritlaxtl. It was unusual for the newborn hoomaas' to survive long after they were born and her kaba cried for them each time one of their young'n departed for the aftertime. It aided the hoomaas' a great deal for them to spend much of their early weeks floating in the water where the ground force did not cause damage to their fragile bodies. Then little by little they would be pulled out for short periods at a time until the youngsters' limbs developed more gudstrength. Gelfetia was always so excited when one of them pulled their offspring from the brook and the struggling young'n managed to crawl around on their own. If they managed to take a couple of steps then it was a good sign that the little hoomaas would manage to remain with them for a lifetime.

"How is your soaking time Sefin my friend?"

The woman sat lazily against the bank holding her daughter in the small wooden raft with support for the infant's arms and holes for her legs. "I built this raft so

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carefully. I pray to Prijnak that it will give her the support she needs to adjust and build enough gudstrength.”

Gelfetia watched the little girl tapping playfully at the water’s surface. “Well she certainly looks happy. I think that you will make a fine mother to her.”

The woman smiled back. “Thank you Gelfetia. Your blessing is deeply appreciated and I am honored.”

“Do you have a name chosen for her yet?” She tapped playfully against the brook while the infant looked on.

“Oh yes. I was thinking that if she lives enough to make steppins, she should be called Ayozealla.”

“A joy for Azealla.’ That sounds like a wonderful name. I am certain that she will live up to her title.”

Once the little one teetered over the side and Sefin had to rush and grab the infant before she was without breath. It was amazing how much care the hoomaas’ required in their early time. She felt sad that their people were not blessed with the very practical birth pouch that her own people had. It must bring the young’n so much struggle in their early days. Mayhaps it had to do with the stories of ‘Urth’ and how much easier life was said to have been out there. She wondered what images Gelf the wise had seen of that wondrous place in the far back beforetime. She sometimes tried to imagine what life was like for the hoomaas who dwelled there. But sadly she would never know these things. For it was said that the home of the hoomaas was so far away that it would take many lifetimes to reach it even with the fastest boat ever created.

This caused her briefly to think of the mind-pictures she had seen from the visitor Huso. She wondered if he had been blessed to see that faraway land. But glancing over at Sefin she chased those thoughts from her think’n. There were kinfolk here in the present time who needed her attention and she should not allow herself to be distracted.

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CHAPTER 32

Rhumfa sat down on the guest chair while Oneyda stared intently at Oibo's interface. The tall woman paused to look over the some UPC setting before she typed in commands to pull up the terrain hologram so that they could more easily plan the mission.

With a few more movements of the woman's hand the board to her right lit up with a false-color 3D image that extended from the peak of the mountain down to the native village. Highlighted in blue was the unusually uniform ring of stones which only now became noticeable as an artificial construct.

Upslope of the ring was steep terrain which she feared could be a threat due to rockslides. But Oibo had pointed out that there was no subterranean stress which might trigger a quake. What she hadn't noticed earlier in looking over the region was what appeared to be a dry wash extending downslope from the Nneka. There seemed to be a line of sight spanning between the village and the ship which nobody had paid attention to before now. She leaned in close to imagine what it must be like for them and gave a sigh in awe of their people's experience down there. But she soon felt the eyes of the other woman on her and finally relented her focus.

"Thank you. So Rhumfa the only space where the kefatz might get one of us through that much rock is here. There's a small gap in the perimeter stones between the Nneka and this cliff over right here. But UPC regulations state that no jirgen-sama approach the ground if less than twenty-five square meters remains clear or if the terrain slopes at more than 20 degrees. However there are no regulations preventing the Gbowee from simply landing on top of the Nneka and sending a person in from just above that gap."

The woman was truly intolerable with her religious adherence to rules and statutes. The regulations had been fine on NewMali where some level of authority was needed to control the bickering and occasional subversion among the various specialists. But here there was no colony, no UPC, no Sol influence of any kind (save for a few rebellious anthropologists she reminded herself). Taking a couple of calming breaths she did her best to reason with the woman. "Oneyda there is just about twenty-two square meters there, it's just very long and narrow"

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“Rhumfa, it’s not a full twenty-five square meters. And what of those cliffs along the far edge. In this gravity even a small boulder falling from them would wreak havoc on the Gbowee’s structure. You really need to understand that UPC rules are set in place only after careful deliberation.” The woman was clearly not interested in compromise.

She tried to point out that there was no litter of material in that area to imply a history of rockfalls, but no argument seemed to have effect. “So what would you do? Park the Gbowee in plain sight on top of the Nneka where anyone might notice the change in outline?”

The woman scowled back, obviously as frustrated as she herself was. “That’s beside the point Rhumfa. The village is over a kilometer away from there. How would they even know something had changed-”

Despite her best efforts, a scowl crept over her features and she had to consciously relax her face to avoid escalating the tension. “And you’re certain of that Oneyda. Have you personally tested the capability of the natives’ eyesight? I mean there was documentation that some birds in the northern hemisphere on Earth could see details from half a kilometer away. Is it completely impossible to suggest that one of their people could catch details through the line of sight here where the dry wash is?”

“Oh come now Rhumfa. That’s just impossible.”

Clearly it had been a ridiculous choice to include the woman in her planning and she finally accepted that she would not repeat such a mistake in the future.

“Alright. Thank you for your input Oneyda. I’ll go talk to Shadai and get her opinion.”

She found the woman sharing some kuli-kuli with Manuel in the common room.

“Oh hi Rhumfa. So good to see you.”

Shadai was a shorter chocolate-colored woman with only a few gray strands intertwined with her intricate braids. The woman was well toned and spent more time than most on keeping up with her exercise regimen. She was one of those happy bubbly folks who on some occasions could be almost annoying in her optimism. But after dealing with Oneyda, the woman’s grinning face was just

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what the doctor ordered. “I’m glad to catch you both together. I’d like to talk to you about a data-gathering mission to the Nneka.” She laid out the conversation she’d had with Oneyda and about the possibility of using the kefatz through a small gap in the perimeter stones. Despite their meal, she was itching to get her hands on that data. She tapped the table in a few spots and a false-color terrain map floated just above the two bowls of food.

Both of them looked over the hologram with interest before Shadai responded.

“Rhumfa I’ve made plenty of trips with Ereeko. She’s a fine pilot and if that spot isn’t safe to land in then she won’t hesitate to let you know. I have complete confidence in her.”

Manuel chimed in now as well. “I have to agree. UPC regulations are fine back in the Sol system. But this is completely uncharted territory.”

‘Literally.’ She thought

“I have no doubt that Ereeko will manage just fine.”

“Thank you.” She couldn’t have even described to them what a relief it was to have support of these people on such a deeply critical excursion. “So given that this spot is on the far side from the village, it makes sense that they would have spent less time hiding that portion of the ship. If the team heads out when the sun goes down and Ereeko brings the jirgin-sama behind the ship to this area here” She pointed at the depression that was barely twice the size of the craft, “then we should be safe from exposure to the villagers.”

There were some more comments on the unlikelihood of anyone seeing something so far from the village, which meant repeating the frustrating conversation from before.

Manuel tapped his pad to download the terrain data. “No question it’ll be tight. But I’ll make sure that Ereeko has all the data needed to make a few simulated landings before we take the Gbowee down there.”

“Also, we can set up geo-feric stabilizers next to these two cliff faces. Even if Oibo hasn’t completely ruled out non-geologic rock movement here, it can’t hurt to be cautious. Those craft aren’t designed to withstand much punishment, especially in this gravity.”

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“You know Shadai, I’m even more grateful that you were included in the trip out to NewMali. Your creative thinking is very appreciated.”

The small woman’s face lit up like a landing strobe. “Thank you Rhumfa. That’s so good of you to say.”

She spent some more time looking at the gap between the Nneka and the cliff face, then laying out a series of failsafe options. “Good. How many people would you like to include for the trip?”

The woman thought for a minute. “Well there’s Ereeko to operate the Gbowee, and of course we’ll need Manuel here to work on the computer systems. Ikasha would be a good person to help with any obsolete Yorigbausa terminology. They’re going to need to take along a portable power supply if we want to get any data out of their computer of course. I expect Anya would love to see this also.”

As she listened to the woman list off the needed elements, she found herself becoming impressed by Shadai’s planning skills and believed that the woman would show herself to be an excellent mission leader down the road. “That sounds good. But I think that you should limit yourself to Ereeko, Anya, and Manuel. It’s going to be pretty dangerous in an unknown environment without lighting or functional gravplates. We don’t know for sure if there’s even a breathable atmosphere in there or if it’s been sealed off too long for there to be any oxygen. So I’d prefer to limit the risk here. Have all of the necessary equipment ready and loaded onto the Gbowee and expect to depart by sundown.” She was about to excuse herself, but then another thought occurred to her. “Oh, and don’t load up the jirgin-sama too much with supplies for the ride out. Leave plenty of room for artifacts which might be useful. After all, that ship is the oldest extra-terrestrial time capsule known to humanity.

CHAPTER 33

Anya made a sour face as the horrific itching finally subsided and she found herself in absolute pitch-blackness. She immediately took a tentative breath in fear that a respirator would be needed. But thankfully the stale air still had enough oxygen, it just smelled incredibly bad. She then shifted the dark-vision scope over her eyes

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and gave it half a minute to kick in. When it did, she found herself surrounded within a dusty interior that was bathed in a ghastly magenta hue. Her chest heaved and she still felt more than a bit light-headed from the combination of darkness, high gravity, and the after-effects of having her atoms tossed through the air. No matter how slowly Rhumfa dialed up the gravity plates in the recreation room, the actual experience of being out here was never going to be easy. Not for any of them. She forced herself to stand unmoving until her body could come to grips with the jarring transition from the comfort of the Gbowee's cheerful interior.

“Olúwa ò!”

She jumped half out of her skin from the sound until she spun around and saw Manuel rubbing his knee and scowling.

“Manuel! You scared the crap out of me!” The place was haunting enough given the total darkness, the blood-red of her scope, and the invisible hand of gravity crushing her down to the floor. She slapped her colleague lightly on the shoulder, but smiled after a second to show there were no hard feelings.”

“Sorry Ikasha. My super cyborg optical nightvision implants haven't been transported from Earth yet.” He smiled back with that beautiful smile of his which only made her want to hug him despite the heart attack. She just couldn't be angry at him for long, no matter how clumsy he was.

“Just watch it though, seriously. This place hasn't seen a light source of any kind in hundreds of years. There could be all kinds of hazards and we're not going to be able to stay here more than 9 hours. Don't forget how short the nights are in this place.

“Eye eye mon-cap-ee-tan.”

She smacked his butt playfully and wagged her finger. “Just let me know when you have that power cell connected to their computer. I'll go rummage around and see if there's any equipment that would be useful.

The first thing she noticed was how cramped the ship was. Obviously without the need to house several dozen colonists, a ship like this would be smaller. But even the corridors felt more like rabbit holes than actual passageways. She barely had a third of a meter on either side of her and it didn't seem like there was any way that

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the crew would have been able to move equipment around with them. She had to remind herself that it wasn't much different from crawling around within the Boabob's accessways. And she wouldn't have to be in here long. She just had to make sure to keep slow even breaths while navigating through the diminutive ship.

Looking through the rooms was a humbling experience. Here they were, on a ship with two power crystals, grav-plating, and a food replication system. Yet the people on this ship had clearly gotten around with nothing more than a simple sleeping pod, their work stations, and basic computers. They probably didn't even have an AI system, as inconceivable as that felt. Hopefully Manuel would be able to get answers from whatever primitive computer technology the ship possessed.

She made her way slowly from one chamber to another. Most of the rooms were the same size, many filled with pieces of obscure antique devices. But they would be little use without a power source to figure out what their purpose could be. Any research here would have to wait until they could install the backup energy crystal (assuming Rhumfa agreed to this). Peeking into a cabinet, she found a rectangular box about half a meter square. There was a series of numbers on it, but nothing to provide further clues to its purpose. Her own knowledge of ancient extra-solar tech was way too rudimentary.

Instead of turning left in the next corridor, on a hunch she turned right and poked her head into the lead scientist's quarters. There built into the wall was something she wouldn't have believed she might see in ten lifetimes. Several shelves stared back at her, filled with some heavy rectangular objects of varying colors, each with bits of writing peaking behind the sizable collection of dust. The first one that she pulled out opened up to show a bunch of pages. Pages made of *actual* synthpaper. Back when this ship was built it must have taken a year to get ahold of even *one* book made of that stuff. She stared at the five-hundred year old volume and dusted off the cover. 'Replenishing the Earth' by Wangari Maathai¹⁹. She almost dropped it when she saw the date on the object, 2243.

19 Wangari Maathai was an internationally recognized environmental activist and Nobel laureate. She is most well known for founding the Green Belt movement, planting trees to slow the expansion of the Sahara desert.

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“Shàngbá ò!” She was holding a *seven-hundred* year old book. A book made from antique synthpaper right in her hands. But that wasn’t all. There were other books on anthropology, astronomy, extra-solar politics, and xenobiology. Though most of the newer ones used the more modern programmable synthpaper. By the stars, this scientist must have been an absolute genius to be so well read. She very carefully placed the books in a backpack and made her way to what looked like a common area. Here she found an even more spectacular treasure. There were more of the books, though these were obviously computer simulations. But the amazing thing was that they translated Yorigbausa children’s stories into the native language of this world. It wasn’t clear to her what purpose they served, but this would no doubt resolve all of their challenges with the local dialect. It was, she struggled to remember the archaic term, it had sounded something like rose-eeta. Anyway she quickly tapped her waya and asked Ereeko to forward a message to Rhumfa.

Not surprisingly the captain was no less excited by the outstanding find and reminded her to be enormously careful with the artifacts. She sent another message describing the strange translation books and her idea about returning power to the ship.

With that done, she asked Ereeko to transport the artifacts back to the jirgin-sama and return the backpack to her. She also stressed that the woman use utmost care in storing the books safely until they all could finish up here. Those things were absolutely priceless.

CHAPTER 34

She wandered through the ship not really knowing where she was most of the time. It was no surprise that any data which survived from the original mission and historic ship layouts would be lost to the sands of time. But she still had her flawless memory and an impressive sense of direction so it shouldn’t be a challenge.

She pulled the manual release on one door and found herself in the largest room on the whole ship. For some reason that she couldn’t fathom, this mission carried

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three jirgin-samas on board. She ran her headlamp over the nearest one staring awe-struck at the ancient machine. It was incredibly preserved and she hoped that they could safely bring it back to earth for display in the Abeokuta Extra-Solar Museum.

Then she wandered over to the next machine. This one was named Lumumba which she searched her mind for. But all she could remember was that it was someone from Congo back before the fall of the colonial powers. Interestingly it had suffered massive damage and only some of the craft had been repaired. She could imagine that the immense gravity here must have made controlling the little ships quite an adventure.

“Ikasha what’s your status over there. The clock is ticking you know.”

In the vast and dimly lit space she must have jumped half a meter in the air, despite the horrific gravity. But she put her hands against the ancient jirgin-sama and took a second to calm herself. “Hello Ereeko. We’re fine, thanks for keeping tabs on us. I’ve just been looking over the artifacts here on the ship. I’ll go check on how much progress Manuel is making with the computer download. Sorry for making you worry.”

Looking at her smartwatch, she quickly ended the conversation so she could switch over to the computer programmer. They weren’t in the red quite yet, but the woman was right, there wasn’t time to dawdle here. She raised the volume to add emphasis to her communicate anticipating a jump in the air for someone else this time.

“Manuel. Have you finished the download yet?” She expected that it shouldn’t take long assuming the power systems were compatible. With his wonderful level of skill, the man should be at least halfway finished by now.

“Chi moo! I haven’t even gotten the systems to recognize each other. This computer is almost as alien as the inhabitants out there. No AI, no emergency backup, nothing. This thing isn’t just ancient. It’s downright prehistoric! I’d almost expect to see an HDMI port on the thing.”

She didn’t know what that was, but she decided to head over to his location while also going over transport logistics through the kefatz with Ereeko back on the Gbowee.

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The door that should have led her to the main computer though somehow opened into the food room. There were several tables and an ancient refrigerated food dispenser that she wouldn't have trusted to hold stale cornmeal. Her frown deepened as she realized that she must've gotten turned around somehow. But the holo-map on her smartwatch showed that she was inside the main computer core. A passionate Olúwa ò escaped her lips but fell impotently against the far wall, heard only by unconscious metal.

She raised Ereeko to tell her what was happening, but the woman obviously had the same ship specs, and wouldn't be of any more use than her own smartwatch. This started to raise a mild panic within her. They couldn't afford any more delay in getting the jirgen-sama back. If she got lost it might keep her on the ship past sunrise. "Okay. Well can you at least give me Manuel's location relative to mine?" The tone of voice coming back at least quelled her worries temporarily. "Oh sure." She had to wait an eternal 40 seconds while the pilot looked through the data. "Well, you're not going to like it. The signal from your waya is over thirty meters across the other side of the ship from him."

The curses she threw now held much more impact. For they flew not only to the empty room, but to the Gbowee and it's pilot as well. "I'm sorry Ereeko. It's not your fault. We're just dealing with obsolete data, obsolete computers, chi moo everything around here is obsolete. Alright, let me get off the waya and focus on navigating over to him."

She hurried through the cramped ladders and passageways hoping that she could reach the man and offer some support before Manuel finished everything on his own. He was really a gorgeous person and she had to admit that her focus wasn't entirely professional, even despite the current situation.

The hand-footholds were flying past her as she strained against the gravity to make it just a little bit faster when her hand grabbed for empty air even as her foot moved out of it's support. Her progress up the corridor was reversed at high speed for the briefest of moments before everything went black.

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CHAPTER 35

Damn, how these people managed to run an extrasolar scientific expedition with such computers as this was completely baffling to him. The data bitrate was like something out of an old 23rd century museum piece. But then he looked at his smart watch again and made a worried check in with Oibo. “Please tell me how long until the sun rises.”

The computer’s eerily calm voice, forwarded from the Gbowee to his smartwatch gave him a most unsettling estimate of two hours. Given that they’d still need time to get back to the jirgin-sama and fly past the far side of the peak, he wasn’t at all optimistic now.

It felt like hours had gone by before the bitrate ended and the data was at last fully transferred to his storage cube. He gave a long sigh of relief at that before letting his partner know that everything was ready. But there was no answer on the waya. At first he couldn’t think of what might be interfering. Could there be something in the ship’s structure that blocked it? No, that was impossible. They’d checked in with Ereeko after getting through to the ship. Besides, the waya had to be the only technology that hadn’t changed in at least 300 years. Nobody would construct a ship with anything which might hamper communication.

“Ereeko, hello?”

For a brief moment he had the panicked thought that she wouldn’t answer either and he’d be stuck on this ship alone. But finally, like the first rays of sunlight on a winter morning, her voice floated up from his smartwatch.

“Ereeko, I’m finished with the data. But I can’t raise Anya on any frequency. Can you try from the jirgin-sama?”

It was a tense moment before the pilot responded that there was no answer at all.

“Chi moo! Where could she be??”

“Manuel, I don’t know what’s going on. She became lost due to the inaccurate data we have on the ship schematics. I know she was making her way to your location the last time I spoke with her.”

He mulled that over and thought of what a bad idea it would be if he followed the same mistake of heading blindly through the ship without the slightest clue where

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he was or where he was headed. “Well can you just use the kefatz to bring her back to the Gbowee?”

“I’m sorry Manuel, but it’s not a good idea to transport her without knowing if there’s anything dangerous involved. She might be tangled up in the structure or something. I can forward you her relative location, I just don’t have enough on the datamap to give you more than a general direction. And” there was a pause before a low curse traveled over the wave “you’ve only got 40 minutes before sunrise.”

He thought it over for a second, hoping that he wasn’t going to regret this.

“Ereeko, I think that you should send us over a day’s rations and get the Gbowee off out of sight. There’s no danger of anyone seeing us in here, but there could be danger of somebody seeing the jirgin-sama.”

“Manuel, I’d be more than happy to do that. But what if the woman happens to be injured? What if she’s unconscious? As pilot for this little excursion, I’m responsible for both of your safety. You two are my priority as long as I’m at the controls here. So get your ass moving and go find her.”

He was not a little offput by her tone, though he really couldn’t argue. “Yes ma’am. Aye-aye.” The connection was cut and he pushed off down the cramped tubes in the direction that the woman had described, hoping that he wouldn’t get there too late. Or worse, get *himself* lost in the process.

CHAPTER 36

Truenye sat by the brook doing her warrior exercises. She spun the stick in what would have appeared to be wild abandon. Yet she knew that her control was sharp and precise. Like her grandfather, she practiced the donga²⁰ ritual with reverence and a deep concentration. Aninniyi might focus on his watch over the mountain and Gelfetia offered prayers to Adeima. But for her, worship came in the traditions of the hoomaas warriors from hundreds of generations in the beforetime. If any of the cruel people from the morass were ever to attack their village again, she would protect against the condemnays with all the courage and honor that legends described of the great warrior in the beforetime.

20 South African stick fighting

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She jumped, rolled, and thrust her spear over and over until her breath hole was pulsing with the effort. It was halfway through one particular form that a leaf crackle sent her throwing herself into a roll along the underfoot. She gave the straight-eye in the direction and spied the hint of movement near some trees. It sent a thrill of excitement through her. In barely the span of a single breath, she was leaping for the spot as demonstration of her prowess in surprising and intimidating any opponent foolish enough to consider an attack.

“Show yourself or be sent to the realm of Pritlaxtl!” She called with confidence and strength pouring through her limbs.

“Just try and defeat me! You never will!”

The voice was instantly familiar. It was Molayo, the wanderer. She playfully came at him with her spear, looking forward to a raucous battle. In all the time they’d known each other, the man had never managed to throw her to the ground, but he was one of only three people to have come close.

To her surprise, as her spear came down to smack him, the man held up a large flat object which deflected her blow as if she had struck a great boulder. The shock of it actually stunned her for a moment and the other man quickly took the advantage, holding his own stick up next to her eye.

But she was quick to feign away and she thrust a solid strike at his leg.

The man yelped in pain, but only for a moment before he struck her on the head with the big flat thing.

Pain soon flooded through her and her spear fell involuntarily to the underfoot. She saw Molayo pick it up, but it was as if she was watching things happen in slow-motion. Strangely, her body would not respond to the commands she was frantically sending it.

“I have defeated you, the great Truenye!” He shouted proudly and with great ceremony. “This will be celebrated among my people for generations!”

But she managed to recover and smacked the man’s leg with her fallen spear. “You don’t have any people! Grishneevit. You cheated by using this-” she couldn’t think of a word to describe what Molayo held in his other hand.

“All is fair in battle great warrior.” The man’s grin was as wide as the whole of Higsthon, and he radiated excitement over his supposed victory.

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“Alright alright Molayo. So what is this thing? Tell me the fulltrue.”

Finally, with their banter passed, the man became serious at last. “I do not know Truenye, but I am certain that it would be of great value. I discovered it in my wonderings on the far side of Higsthon beyond the great river.” The man gave a dramatic pause, as if he were some hoomaas selling trinkets by the well. “Do you not think this would be useful in deflecting an opponent’s attack if the warrior people return from the morass?”

“Oh that’s quite unlikely. Grandfather defeated their warrior grandly in the battle of the brook and Itroveepu was forced to remain among our village once he had suffered the disease of the eyes.” She loved to recall the great victory that her ancestor had won and to describe great donga battles in which she would remind the cowards of her namesake.”

“You would be showin the smartknow’n to not let hubris take control of you. Tebrisye has heard rumors that the healer of their people expects a great victory against a foreign mountain village sometime soon.”

“They can expect as much as they wish. However their people do not have the smartknow’n to navigate the great morass as Gelf and Truini did.”

“Does that mean you do not have interest in this” Molayo held up the large item grandly.

Looking at it, she could definitely see value in such a thing for deflecting spear blows, and of course a wanderer would find such a thing to be nothing but a burden.

“Very well. I will give you ten plantains and another five djengourds in exchange for it.”

“And a bowl of jadzabean pudding.” The man smiled, knowing how valuable his find was.

“Jadzabean pudding? But we hardly ha-” Truenye actually saw the man begin walking away. Knowing how little he himself would be able to use it, she could not help but admire his courage.

“Grishneevit! Very well. You will get your young’n food.”

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Though furious, she watched with satisfaction as the man turned around and displayed gladface, ignoring the insult. They both made plans to meet again after two risings of the Saülè in order to make the trade.

Though she was somewhat bitter at her friend's victory, and the ache in her head reminded her all too regularly of that, she was excited at the prospect of practicing donga with this new defensive weapon. It would make her even more indefeatable, she would be the greatest warrior *ever*.

CHAPTER 37

The cramped corridors were beginning to blur together as he fought against the crushing gravity and the impending sunrise. There were so many wrong turns and dead ends that he felt as if he'd looked into every single room on the ship without the slightest clue of her whereabouts. It felt like another small eternity before Ereeko confirmed that he was no less than nine meters from where Ikasha was thought to be. But that once again proved to be a storage room with only one door.

He was forced to backtrack and try a different corridor as he fought against hyperventilating when he couldn't move his arms more than halfway in any direction. That was when he reached yet another roadblock in the form of a stuck hatch above him. He wrapped his hands over to the manual hatch override on this final door and gave the lever a strong yank, but this time there was no movement at all. Even after several tries, it refused to budge. Ereeko confirmed that Ikasha was only one meter above him and so he devoted several more precious minutes looking through the circuitry next to it. He pushed again with all his strength, wondering what else could go wrong in this cursed place. But no amount of shoving would bring even a hint of success. There were no other passageways nearby and this was the only means of getting to his crewmate. He banged with his fist, and when that became bruised beyond use he even took some antiquated metal tool and struck it. But for all his struggle, the hatch might as well have been buried under a ton of rock. Absolutely nothing would shift it even four millimeters.

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He had to pause to rest his arms, despite the panicked glances he regularly took at the countdown clock that he'd programmed. That was when he heard a slight moan. It was spooky in the pitch black and cramped passage. But he got ahold of himself and listened more closely.

Yes. It was definitely coming from above him. "Anya? Are you up there?!"

"Hey, tone it down. No... mfthept shout." The comment was barely a mumble, but it was definitely her voice.

"Anya, it's Manuel. Are you hurt?"

"Nggg. Everything hurts. Feels like mmm...ead is splitting open."

He lowered his voice and brought himself right below the hatch. "Anya, are you able to move. Can you get above the hatch there so I can open it?"

"Sss, mmnya. I think I... Bura uba! Hold on. I think that my leg is broken, or something. It hurts like a..."

He was getting really worried now and pushed even harder on the door.

"Hold it. Just hold on. Let me... aside."

Finally with her weight shifted off of the panel he managed to get the hatch open enough to push through. But the sight from his dark-vision scope was ghastly. The woman's face was caked with blood. There were purple spots all over her hands, one arm was twisted to a sickening angle, and the suit along her leg was torn where a piece of bone was pushing through.

"Anya, Manuel, what's going on over there?! The sun is going to be rising in less than twenty minutes and we need to be out of here before it gets light enough for someone to be awake in that village."

"Ereeko. She's horribly injured. We need to get her onto the Gbowee right away!"

He struggled to keep the terror out of his voice and failed miserably in that regard. The two of them had to endure an emergency transfer in the kefatz, which actually managed to be more unpleasant than a normal one. Then Ereeko helped him to gently lower their crewmate onto a couch where the pilot strapped the woman down carefully. As he watched, he had to give her credit for being much less squeamish than he'd been on first seeing the woman's condition.

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Once his friend was secured, the pilot punched it and he was thrown into a bench hard enough to get his own bruising while the craft hurtled off for the safety of the far side of the mountain.

CHAPTER 38

Regina sat down for her shift with the iran ologo. There wasn't much to see yet as the Saülè was barely raising Himself above the great mount of Higsthon which meant the shadows were quickly running in fear of His great fire. Until the God of warmth brought Himself farther up into the overhead, the holy mountain was wrapped in a confusing shroud of mists. Already the shimmeri overhead were vanishing one by one and by very slow degrees the chill of the early morning was fading, but not quickly enough for her.

Regina shivered and took another long sip from the precious vile of fire water. The escape that it provided was a welcome relief when she fell back on her thoughts of the four young'ns who'd been stolen away by Pritlaxtl. The last one was only half an annum ago and she continued her resolve to never mate again in order to close herself to such a terrible ache in her kaba. The tears which brimmed around her eyes were quickly drowned out by another sip of the caustic liquid which she always made a point of distilling for extra strength. But soon her vision began to blur and she grew terrified that the great responsibility to watch over Higsthon might be compromised and so she reluctantly closed the lid back on her flask until time of keeping watch was finished. It was after all, one of the few tasks that her kinfolk were still willing to entrust in her care.

She looked through the device again and noticed that strangely this time there was one shimmeri very low near the mountain which seemed unafraid of the Saülè. It retained it's red glow even through the shining rays that peaked out along the slope of the mountain.

Turning the dial carefully (for any damage to the precious device would easily mean extradition) she tried to see closer. But there was nothing that she could make out except the one tiny red glow. It was several moments of staring before she finally caught sight of the most amazing thing. There was a shadowy form

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that was attached to the red glow and it rose straight up from the underfoot. It turned slightly and she soon witnessed a second shimmerer join the first as they flew with impossible speed sideways toward the great peak!

Was this the work of Higstho? Or had Oomkwo returned from the beforetime to guide their people once again? She pondered the thing for only the briefest moment before making fast-steppins back to the village.

With her feet pounding the underfoot, she frantically gave the sharp-eye for anyone who might be awake at such an early time. She searched more desperately until she breathed a sigh of relief upon catching sight of Aninniyi stretching just outside of his shelterspace.

“Brother Aninniyi! You wont believe it. Something magical has appeared on the holy mountain!”

At first the man’s eyes grew wide and his mouth became a round ‘O.’ But momentarily he brought his face closer to hers and wrinkled his imú for some reason.

“You know Regina, your wordsong would be greatly more believable if it were not accompanied by the smell of your fire drink.” Now the man actively scowled at her. “How could you forsake your holy duty by carrying along that flask?”

“But Aninniyi. I’s true! I would swear on the throne of Adeima that I saw something magically rise up into the air beside the mountain!”

Sadly the man showed even more unhappy now. “Be careful lest you bring the wrath of the the Holy Mother in your excitement. It is clear to anyone with eyes, denisovian *or* hoomaas, that the Saülé is only just peaking above the mountain. It would not be possible for anyone to navigate their way up there until midmorning. Do us all a favor Regina, and let Gelfetia give aid in helping you to abandon the drinking flask. You bring shame not only upon yourself, but upon the whole village this day.”

For several moments she just stared at the man in utter shock. He didn’t believe her. The first time in the whole history of Ubuntu she had spotted some risk of the condemnays, and her kinfolk thought she was merely suffering from the drink. Clearly it was her own fault for lacking the courage to leave it back in her shelterspace. If she had, perhaps the man would have followed back up to the iran

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ologos with her. She was clearly an absolute failure within the see'n of every single person she knew.

Dragging her feet along through the dust, her gaze never left the underfoot through the entire way back to the lookout spot. It was clear once the word spread, that she would be without the kindness of a single person and it was likely that they would not even trust her now to take her place guarding the holy mountain anymore. Every element of her being would be without purpose until Pritlaxtl mercifully took hold of her kaba and rejoined her with the lost young'n.

When she returned to her post, she took another long sip as her tears slowly built up a puddle within the dust at her feet.

CHAPTER 39

Rhumfa tapped her feet impatiently waiting for the jirgin-sama to land. Sleep had been a scornful lover from the moment the three had traveled out to the site of the Nneka. But the terrible worry that she was feeling now that they had an injured crewmember brought her to pacing canyons into the grav-plate of the deck. It felt like the last sun in the universe would die out before the door on the Gbowee finally opened. *"Please tell me that your terrible risk will be worth something."* She practically shouted at the first pair of eyes to peak out of the craft. "Tell me that Anya is going to be okay. Chi moo."

She would never forgive herself for letting the woman go off and put herself in danger like this. And the feeling was made a thousand times worse when she saw Manuel's expression.

He quickly put a hand in front of Ereeko and answered first, but the guilt kept him from meeting her eyes. "I'm so sorry for the delay captain. We downloaded everything that we possibly could from their computer. As for Anya, she should be with Kotingre in the medlab by now. We transported her the moment we were in range."

She glanced past him at the jirgin-sama pilot, knowing that she at least had basic life-care experience. "How bad is it Ereeko? Will she recover?"

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The woman edged past Manuel and put an arm on her shoulder. “Rhumfa, it may have looked bad, but it’s absolutely not fatal. Just a broken leg, a twisted shoulder, and a lot of bruises. The woman is probably going to be walking around in three or four days.”

She let out a breath of air she hadn’t been aware of holding and offered her gratitude to both of them. “And Manuel, how long before we know the extent of the data?”

At this the man perked up slightly. “Well, I can’t be totally certain of course, but assuming there wasn’t degradation of the processors, I’m hoping that we can get it transferred within an hour. Oibo is about as fast compared to their computer as the Nneka was to an Egyptian sailing vessel.”

“That’s good to hear. Well both of you deserve some rest, but I’d like every detail from your perspectives uploaded to Oibo while it’s still fresh in your minds.” But she paused for just a second, realizing how harsh she’d spoken. “Please.”

Next she rushed over to the medlab to see what the situation was like with her friend. But when the door opened she was accosted with a shout.

“If you want this woman to recover her motor skills without losing a day in rehab, you’ll not interrupt me for at least the next hour.” She briefly saw the man hunched over one of the beds before taking her cue and letting the door close.

There was nothing that she could do for Anya at the moment. With all of the strange goings on among the people down on the surface, she would be sitting on pins and needles until the ship’s logs became available. Waiting for the results from Manuel’s transfer would be as frustrating as her broken ribs. If only there would be some clue within that ancient computer which might help resolve all of this freakishness with the people on this absurd planet. And, if they were very lucky, some small chance of shedding light on their current situation.

CHAPTER 40

The cold time was full upon them now and Kwandic slowed to give help to Lluchra as they made their way along Adeywalley Creek. At the end of each day Gelfetia would share tales of the great trek which Gelf had bravely undertaken to discover

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the magical hoomaas. He thought back with awe at how anyone could possibly travel all the way from the great morass to the height of Higsthon with only the sustenance of two hotz-fruit and the support of Ilhamet as a guide. But then of course Gelf hadn't been just a simple denisovian, she had been the *greatest denisovian ever*. He might have an easier time when traveling high above the village, but his need for fodiens remained quite large and the weight of his pack reflected that.

Up ahead, Gelfetia paused the group and proclaimed in a proud voice how the cave they were at was the one which had provided shelter to Gelf and the hoomaas. She told of how Gelf had single-handedly brought gudstrength to the injured hoomaas, not only saving his life but securing the respect of all his people as well.

“For all of their magic, the magnificent hoomaas were no match for the will of Adeima. For *She* had decreed that the hoomaas Adey-walley should be found in the sleep of sickness in order that Gelf the wise could prove her skill of healing as well as her devotion to the Holy Mother. She gained not only the gratitude of that particular hoomaas, but of the healer Seffee as her reward.”

The group now paused and each one pulled a precious hotz-fruit from their packs. Then he listened as Gelfetia continued.

“We honor you Gelf the wise, and we honor Azeala who created this fertile land as we take strength and nourishment of the venerable hotz-fruit. May it provide sustenance to each of us as it provided sustenance to Gelf and Adewale.”

Once the rest of the group moved on, he stopped to respectfully say his prayers at the entrance of the cave before continuing on with their trip.

For a short moment he looked back to gaze in awe at the height which they had reached by now. The entire valley lay hidden by mists below them with a few stunted trees nearby speaking of Higsthon's awesome power over this great land.

“Can you help me please?”

He looked over for a moment and saw Regina calling to him from the bottom of a large boulder. It was one that he himself had been able to surmount easily, but of course he did not spend all of his spare time making and consuming the drink of fire. It clearly had sapped the woman's gudstrength and he was reminded with sadness of the child which they had lost three annums before.

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He was half tempted to scold the woman for damaging herself by constantly drinking from that flask. For there had been much sadness between them when they decided to end their mating. But then he thought back to the prophecy which Gelf the wise had received directly from Adeima, ‘if you want to walk far, walk with others.’ He embodied the words by stooping down to help the woman in keeping up with the rest and they eventually regained their places near the edge of the great ring of boulders.

CHAPTER 41

Once everyone was gathered at the holy stones of remembrance they all fell to their forelegs and offered thanks for another prosperous annum. Gelfetia led the traditional prayer which went on for some time, along with a few devotional responses. Then she led the group in bowing to each stone in turn. There was one each for Oomkwo, Seffee, Adey-walley, Aye-yoobay, and of course the warrior Truinye and Gelf the wise. After showing her respect and repeating the holy prayers, she waited patiently for the whole group to follow suit. Meanwhile she puzzled over the white flakes which she saw drifting down from the overhead. She put her hand out to catch one and found it to be so very cold. But the amazing thing was that shortly after it touched her hand it transformed into a liquid, just like water. She put her lip to it and sensed nothing unusual about it.

She had to think back carefully within her smarati, but it did seem familiar. At last, while more of the white flakes came down she was reminded of a pilgrimage taken when she was still a young’n where she had delighted in the funny white flakes. What had the healer said of this back in the beforetime? She had said something about it being an omen of change, but Gelfetia could not remember more than that. It had been so many annums back in the beforetime.

“Look Gelfetia. Higsthon has sent us a frozen mist!” She looked down, only now seeing little Sefeera dancing around and waving her hands in the strange things falling around them. Gelfetia watched in amusement as the young’n stuck out her ‘tungk’ to catch the stuff.

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“Ayo. Please do not put this white thing into your mouth. You do not know if it is safe.”

“But great healer, it’s just another kind of water. I can smell it.”

She watched in awe as the young’n put a few flakes of the stuff next to her imú and made a breathing sound. Seeing this, Gelfetia again felt the wonder of what it must be like to have that large organ in the middle of one’s face. It certainly looked strange, but clearly it gave some advantage to the hoomaas. So with a shrug, she put a few flakes into her mouth and felt the cold transformation as they instantly turned to water. It was such a fascinating experience. But soon she saw the eyes of the group facing her and realized that she had to return to fulfilling her role as leader of the pilgrimage.

She quickly excused herself from the young’n and began repeating the tale of Gelf’s encounter with the hoomaas and how she had convinced them to share their smartknowin with her and the tribe. She told of the great unhealth that fell upon the whole land and how Gelf and the hoomaas had become as one tribe, working like two arms of the same body to bring gudstrength back to all people, even the evil ones on the far side of the morass. Her kaba sang with joy, as she spoke the holy words once again from memory. “For as the blessed mother said- ‘If you want to walk fast, walk alone. But if you want to walk far, walk with others.’”

By the time she had finished the holy prayers, the white stuff was becoming so thick that she could no longer even see the whole extent of the wallside of boulders. “My children, I have the fraidness that we will not be able to return safely if we do not depart very soon. Therefore I implore you to keep your medeetayshun short so that we may make fast-steppins to our village while the sharp-eye still gives us the proper direction.”

CHAPTER 42

Rhumfa watched the log for what felt like the tenth time and she still didn’t believe it. I mean sure, the idea that a native back then might be able to do the same mind-reading that the person down in Ubuntu had was tough to deny. But the stuff about an alien diety who caused not only the Nneka but the Nelson Mandela

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as well to end up in this star system 60 light years away? That was completely bonkers. Then of course there was the absurdity with the native convincing their crew to expose her to the dark energy crystal. How could those people be so blatantly reckless?!

It was almost better, she thought, that they ended up getting stuck here. She could only imagine the inquiry that would be had if the crew had ever made it back to Earth. They would have spent the rest of their lives rotting in prison, probably on a planet even more hostile than this one.

But on the other hand, the data was able to clear up a great many questions for her. The natives who had become isolated due to the contamination, the near obsession that the Ubuntu villagers had with keeping the 'hoomaas' from being discovered, and their understanding of Yorigbausa. It all began to make sense, though not in any way she would have preferred.

It was clear to her now that the best thing to do was to remove the Nneka and finish the repairs so they could get off this rock as quickly as possible. This planet was absolutely no place for civilized humans to exist.

CHAPTER 43

Something was wrong. She couldn't quite put her finger on what it was exactly. Perhaps it was that the sound from Adaywale Creek was coming from a different direction, or perhaps it was the big white cold place that she had never seen on previous pilgrimages. But they were definitely in a part of Higsthon that was new to her. She did her best to show confidence for the rest of her tribe, but with the great storm of white swirling around them and the clouds low in the sky, it was difficult to be sure that they would manage to return safely to the village.

Her breathing hole felt numb even with her cloak wrapped over her head and her hands barely had enough strength to keep it held against her body. The woven moccasins were so thin as to be practically useless with her feet suffering much pain from the freezing white stuff pressing against them.

Once again she spoke prayers to Ilhamet and to Gelf for a safe delivery from this terrible place of cold, but her confidence that these entreaties would be answered

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felt as tentative as the fragile white flakes twirling and floating around their shivering group. It seemed that no matter how regularly she gave the straight-eye in all directions, she saw nothing but a foggy white nothingness. There was not a single landmark that she remembered from her many travels to the resting place of the great ones.

She began now to worry that her outward confidence would soon be seen for what it really was, an untrue, and on the very height of Higsthon's majesty. It gave her a great deal of worry that she might even incur the wrath of Adeima Herself. But on the other hand if she were to share the fulltruth with her people, they would lose the thin strand of devotion that kept everyone from giving up hope altogether. It was imperative that she protect the spirits of her people as well as she was able. Looking back, she had to reluctantly pause and wait for Regina and the slower kinfolk to ensure that she didn't lose sight of them. Up until now the exertion had been thankfully keeping her body itself warm. But every time there was a pause and the frigid wind blew into her cloak, she did much jumping and rubbing her hands together in attempt to keep them from becoming frozen as well. Unlike the hoomaas, she did not have the mouth shaking from the cold, but she did have a trembling in her legs and fingers, this time with fraidness. It was a fraidness that she might lead her entire tribe to a realm as inhospitable as the great morass itself.

As the barely perceptible light of the Saülé moved toward the east, her worry increased that instead of being an exemplar of her namesake, she would instead deliver every one of her kinfolk to the aftertime, and a tiny tear dribbled from her eye at such a thought before freezing against her face.

CHAPTER 44

With the strange white material building up all around them and even the peak of Higsthon hidden from view, Kwandic was beginning to suspect that Gelfetia might be lost. Though the mere concept felt like an absurdity.

As unshakeable as his faith in the healer had always been, none of them had seen a familiar boulder or wudfell for an entire day and he had made this trip for over

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twenty annums. His legs had never ached this much and his nose felt like it was going to fall off from the cold which he thought with some amusement would allow him to look more like his friends. Thinking about that distracted him for the briefest moment as a smile flitted across his face like the Saülè shining between the clouds.

He slowly made his way past the kinfolk to the front of the group and waited until Gelfetia was standing alone. Though he worried very much if it was out of place for him to advise their leader, he worried even more for the safety of the kinsfolk. Finally she had left enough of a distance that he felt willing to approach her.

“Great healer, I do not think that there is shame in admitting to the group that we are without direction. This great white rain is most unusual and it has never been seen before by anyone I have spoken to.”

The woman gave him kindface which greatly eased his kaba. Yet her words were a great deal less comforting when they reached his hear’n. “That is very observant of you Kwandic. I understand that you are tired. But there is no place for us to safely stop for the night. There is just this endless white expanse wherever I give the straight-eye.”

“Chi moo. I did not wish for you to see my thoughts great healer.”

Now, for the first time the woman seemed to *actually* see him. “Oh Kwandic. I am sorry to not respect your trust. I am so very cold. And I have failed all of you in protecting you from harm.”

He was momentarily taken aback. In all of his days of knowing Gelfetia, he had never known her to be without the smartknowin, without the sureness of leadership. She was easily the most capable person he knew in the whole land. “Blessed healer please. You are not Gelf the wise, or Aye-yubay. We can only ask that you do the best that you are able to. Without the temple, we do not have the wisdom to know Her prophecy or the wishes of the holy ones. We trust you great healer, all of us. But it is not for you to bear the entire village upon your shoulders alone.

Now he felt small as Gelfetia gave him the straight-eye most intensely. He worried that he was perhaps speaking too boldly. But her next words greatly eased his kaba. “You know Kwandic, I had not realized in the beforetime that you possessed

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such smartknow'n. My sincere thanks to you. You have filled my kaba with gudstrength.”

He beamed at the compliment. It would never have occurred to him that a simple hoomaas could be of service to one as wise as Gelfetia. Many times more that day she consulted with him on ideas for how to keep the kinfolk safe as they watched with fear the Saülé become tired and fall to the far distant underfoot.

CHAPTER 45

Her body yearned for more. Just a tiny bit more. Every fibre of her kaba seemed to be saturated with a deep and unrelenting desolation. One no less stark than the landscape they trudged through.

The pain of it was almost more excruciating than the fire of her terribly cold hands and feet... almost. Regina had desperately wanted to bring her drinking flask along. For most of the day before they departed she had put it in her pack, and then taken it out. The flask was seemingly her only friend in a land where the kinfolk seemed, in the best of times, merely tolerant of her. The terror of being without this sole ally had been like a shawl of fraidness wrapped tightly around her. But in the end she had thought back to Anninye's words and how full of the shame she had felt in realizing that nobody would trust her with the iran ologo because of her weakness. She had shown more courage than any of the kinfolk could have known when she finally left it back in her shelterspace.

But now the cold was all around her and the whole of her kinfolk were packed tightly against each other for warmth inside a tiny circle of the white stuff. She had watched, quite aghast, as Kwandic and Gelfetia had told them of an idea to pack the white stuff into a circular wallside. They had built a whole shelterspace in only a quarterspan of the day by pressing the white stuff until it behaved like a solid thing. Then some of the people made a ring closer to the walls and wrapped in blankets while the rest filled in the middle. This allowed at least some of them to sleep for a short while. When the cold became unbearable, some of the kinfolk on the outside would switch with those in the middle. She had managed at least

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some rest in this way, but the craving within her made the reprieve only slightly less horrible than what the others experienced.

The thing that she could not understand was how the great leader of their group had managed to overlook the footsteppins back to Ubuntu. She had seen what looked like the regular path, but none had followed in the direction that she would have expected. It had been obvious to her that to bring up such a mistake by their blessed leader would be highly frowned upon were any of the kinsfolk to do so. For her to contradict Gelfetia would have easily erased the last shreds of goodwill that her leader held for her. Obviously Kwandic or Aninniysi would have simply told her to listen more and speak less.

It felt so wrong. Everything about this journey felt wrong. The whole of her kaba told her that they were moving towards danger rather than towards safety. Yet for all the concentration she gave it, there was nothing more clear than this vague sensation. There was no wordsong that could be offered which would make things right. Or even if there were, it was certain that nobody would trust a word that she said. Everything about her life now was an utter failure.

CHAPTER 46

Anya sat looking over the translation which Ikasha had made of the local dialect. She was puzzling over the differences between the speech of the two local villages when she was startled half out of her chair.

“I don’t believe it! How the hell could those people be all the way out here?!”

“Ewoo. What is it Saaed?”

“Look, just look at this!” The man scowled as he swung his monitor over for her to see.

She peered closer and instantly her eyes grew into saucers. “Oibo, sound a general alarm. Emergency ipade!”

Instantly the red alarm sounded throughout the ship and everyone was called to stop whatever they were doing. She dragged Saaed to his feet and the two of them raced up the corridor to the common room.

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“Asi asi,o bughi eziokwu!” Rhumfa cursed the instant she walked in. “What on Earth is going on??”

Anya guessed that she had been doing something highly important for her to be so upset.

“Rhumfa, a huge group of natives are headed this way from higher up on the mountain. It looks big enough that it could be the whole damn village”

The pilot’s face twisted into an evil mask of rage, almost frightening in its intensity. “Buru aba! We never got around to finding the material for the thrusters! Those people are barely half a kilometer away.” She slammed her fist on the desk as if by physical force she might be somehow capable of turning the whole group of natives around. “I’m beginning to wonder if the lot of us aren’t cursed by Èṣù²¹ somehow.”

But then the pilot paused looking back at her and she must have seen all of the wide-eyed stares because she quickly lowered her tone.

“Alright Huso, I want you to get to the med bay on the double. Have Kotingre put you in disguise and go delay those people. Everyone else, batten down the hatches. We’re going to do our best keep those people away from here by any means possible. If Huso can buy us enough time then maybe we can find some possible plan for diverting them.”

“Rhumfa how in the world are we going to divert a whole team of natives away from the ship?”

“Manuel, can’t we come up with some kind of visual screen to disguise the ship?”

“Otele mbgeke eeeee!!²² Rhumfa, what am I, some kind of magical witch?”

“I know one thing. I’m going straight to the parts room to see if there isn’t *something* that I can use to get those thrusters working again.” Saaed rushed out of the room before she could utter another word.

“Alright. Let’s take our inspiration from that man and make all due progress to get us away from that group. Manuel, get working with Oibo to see if we can fabricate some kind of visual distraction. Huso, give us as much time as you can manage and we’ll hopefully meet you with equal effort.

21 Known as "The Trickster", he deals a hand of misfortune to those that do not offer tribute

22 Yoruba expression of angry bafflement

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Now let's get moving everyone!"

CHAPTER 47

"Gelfetia, I'm so cold." She looked back mournfully to see Mautida trembling and struggling to keep up. The woman was terribly scared and she clutched desperately at the thin cloth wrapped around her. The whole of the kinfolk were with terrible fraidness now, all except Truenye the vigrus warrior. Their strongest villager displayed the opposite now. She seemed utterly devoid of emotion as she stared ahead empty-eyed. Her movements were more like some kind of animated tool which had no smart-knowin of any kind to direct it.

Gelfetia slowed even more now offer support for her people. She was doing this so regularly that she was hardly moving forward at all. But even the hoomaas, who tended to be less vulnerable to the cold of the mountain were doing the strange rapid teeth biting thing by this point. She berated herself endlessly within her head. What could she have done differently to protect her kinsfolk. Could there have been any safer trail to use? Was there a better way to travel from where they were now? What prayer could she offer for guidance?

But she did not know what path to take, literally or figuratively. Every direction she went brought nothing but blinding white overhead and painfully cold underfoot.

She gathered her people together and spoke of the courage and vigrus which Gelf had shown in her trek to the mountain as she had searched for the magical hoomaas. She implored her people to have faith that Adeima would not allow harm to come to Her chosen people. But even as she spoke the words, her own assuredness was as meek as a jadzabean stalk. She knew by now that they were completely lost and the white flakes which had earlier seemed benign were now a thick blanket on the ground all around them. Ilhamet had not even blessed their group with a cave to rest in as He had done with Gelf in the beforetime.

"Gelfetia, I'm so tired. Just let me take a little sleep here. I'll catch up with you." She watched in horror as Lluchra sat on the ground letting the others walk past her.

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“Lluchra no! Please, we must all remain together. Aninniyi would you please walk with her. Lluchra a healer must at all times put the good of the other kinfolk above her own comfort. If you wish to continue in your studies then this lesson must dominate your thoughts.”

She watched for a tense timespan as the woman seemed to gaze blankly back at her, not showing guilt or fearfulness, or even anger to disturb her unmoving features. But finally, to her profound relief, the woman grudgingly stood up again with Aninniyi’s support and they all returned to the sorrowful trek. With her deep searching for an answer showing no hope at all, she had the fearfulness even more now, that the whole of Ubuntu might perish if some means of escape were not found, and quickly.

CHAPTER 48

“There’s not a single damn thing you can do?!” She slammed her fist futilely down on the control panel, a habit that was beginning to result in regular bruises.

“Kinfe, you can’t find anything at all to repair those thrusters with??”

“I’m sorry captain. I’ve gone through every molecule of the ship looking for systems that could be cannibalized. But the only area that uses Rhenium would be the main drive and we just can’t risk damaging that system, or we might never get home.”

She jammed her thumb angrily at the rear viewport. That hoard of locals were inching closer to the ship by the minute and here they were, like a sitting duck just waiting out in the open. She desperately wished that their ship had the invisibility screen that all anthropology ships were outfitted with. But who could imagine that a colony ship would find itself in such a ridiculous situation??

Once again she argued with Oibo for some means of jerryrigging any kind of device that might hide them from the natives. She even tried word match searches through the entire database. Her eyes stared intently at the screen as if through sheer willpower alone she could force it to print what she was so desperate to see. No emotion it seemed though, could move or hide the Boabab in any way.

“Manuel, isn’t there anything at all we can do to create a some kind of barrier?”

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Without saying a word, the sharp exhale that came across the communication console answered in the negative. “Rhumfa I’m sorry but we just don’t have the time, the tools, or the knowledge to change the refractive index on the entire ship. By the stars. She was ready to pull her hair out. *What was going on here?!* “Screw it” she spat. With rage in her eyes and all training out the window, she stomped to the airlock and turned off the forcefield. The cold struck her like a physical thing and her weight seemed to double in only a second. She reached in and grabbed for her jacket before trudging through the snow to the maintenance panel which, thankfully was near the one functional landing strut, eliminating her need to haul out an exoskeleton. Yanking off the security tabs, she peered at the plasma ducting with a critical eye. The whole assembly was folded around itself like an old discarded uniform. Tubes stuck out from the assembly like useless limbs, completely empty of fuel. “Otele mbgeke eeeee!!!” She wanted to scream across the entire planet. It felt as if any solution for getting the ship running again was a black hole surrounded by dark matter.

CHAPTER 49

Just when things were looking utterly hopeless for the kinfolk, a lone figure seemed magically to appear out of the mist. It reminded her of the hoomaas stories where departed ancestors could return to walk the land. She gave the sharp-eye, not quite believing what her see’in told her. Soon enough though, she saw the figure become whole, like the blessed Aye-yoobay reborn. The hoomaas from the sky solidified out of the whiteness and approached slowly towards them wrapped in a rough cloak. He was very scared, but until he actually reached their group, she could not tell what it was that caused the fraidness within him. “It is you! But how could you have made it all the way up here on Higsthon?” Kwandic had the funny wide-eyed stare that the hoomaas sometimes displayed. “Good people, pleasin to be see’in you. It seems that I have become lost here on the mountain-”

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“Instantly she could tell that the hoomaas was telling an untrue. It was then that she realized the thing which gave him the fraidness was that their group was approaching his magical boat.” She thought furiously. They were out in the open and so she could not meet with him alone in her shelterspace. But neither would it be kind to violate the man’s priyvasy.

Quickly she took hold of the hoomaas’ arm and prepared to draw him away from the group so that they could speak alone. The moment she touched him though, she received an incredible shock. They had discovered the ancient burial site of Sefi and Oomkwo! They had violated the ancient camp of the blessed ones!

All worry and fear went vanus, to be rplaced by irreconcilable fury. “How dare you! Grishneevit!” Without even thinking she physically lifted the hoomaas off of the ground in her rage. “If you were not of the magical ones Huso, know this well that I would send you to the realm of Pritlaxtl despite my oath!!”

Her see’n did not even register the shocked expressions of her people. Nor did she notice the kicking and writhing of the diminutive man. She could see only the utter terror etched into the face of the hoomaas as he spouted many untrues. Her glaring eyes told her nothing of value and she shook the poor runt in frustration. How could he. How could the ‘crew’ of these people from the sky violate the most holy place in all the land??

You horrible man! You will come with me! She snatched a more firm grip on the twisting arm of the magical hoomaas and half pulled, half dragged him away from the group, ignoring the futile protestations and untrues emanating from the sputtering mouth.

CHAPTER 50

The man was now wide-eyed and trembling with the fraidness. “If I have done anything to upset you please forgive me. I am merely lost.”

“You may cease with the pitiful untrue Huso! It is as clear as the horn on your face that your people have desecrated the camp of Oomkwo! You had absolutely no right to intrude on our holy ground! What, in all the land could have made you think that such a violation would be tolerated??”

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“Chi moo! You know about the Nneka?!”

She looked now at the pitiful man with fresh eyes. He was trembling with fraidness and pain. There was even the ‘whinsing’ thing that the hoomaas’ did when their body hurt. This was not how a healer should act. She was causing the exact opposite of healing and the shame of it finally penetrated through the haze of fury.

It took a great force of will, but she managed to force her hand to loosen it’s grip on the diminutive arm as she stared at the face sputtering the untrues. “Huso, I knew nothing of the magical camp of Oomkwo until seeing the mind-pictures from you. However if your tribe has any honor whatsoever you should have known what a violation it was to intrude upon the resting place of the blessed ones.” She kept her voice low, but her tone remained saturated with the unhappy. “Huso, you and your people will return the artifacts which your people stole and depart this land immediately or we will hold you in the village for all the remainder of your days.” She paused now and her voice was filled to saturation with the unhappy. “And do not think for a moment that I would hesitate to command it.”

But then she received her own shock when the man answered, as if he had a sense-readin of his own.

“Which direction would your village be then? Is it to the north? Or to the west?”

“You do not have the sense-readin hoomaas. What makes you think *you* can know such things?”

“Great healer, we humans may not be blessed with your talent, but-”

The longer she held onto the arm of the man, the more of the mind-pictures she was able to see. And what mind-pictures they were! These magical ones had found a vast history of her people in the far back beforetime. It was like... something teased at her smarati. It was like stories the hoomaas had mentioned called ‘beye-bull.’ These hoomaas had discovered the entire story of how Gelf the wise had found the hoomaas and how she had-”

“Not another word hoomaas!” She cut the man off like the stab of a spear. “Your people have found the ‘reekording’ of Gelf the wise and her blessed collaboration with the magical hoomaas.”

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Now that the heat of emotions was fading, she felt deeply torn within her kaba. It was a violation of her position to intrude purposefully into the smarati of this hoomaas. But at the same time these people had managed to discover the entire story of the long ago beforetime. They knew all about how Gelf and the magical hoomaas had led her people to this blessed land.

But. No she couldn't. No matter what the magical people had done, she would not lower herself to their level. She was given the honor of being a healer and that involved res-

Another incredible vision came to her so strongly that she was physically moved from the shock of it. These hoomaas had learned the means by which Gelf the wise received prophecy from Adiema! By Her blessed throne! The secret wisdom which had been hidden for hundreds of generations and these outsiders had uncovered the knowledge as quickly as she might throw a djengoard hull.

It had something to do with the tool that provided fuel for their magic, like wood was fuel for a fire. Gelf had been able to do this because of the sense-readin she was gifted with. But the hoomaas did not have the ability to experience Her great majesty.

Did that mean-?

No. It couldn't possibly-

Gelf was the greatest denisovian ever. She had been honored to hear the wisdom of Adiema directly from the Blessed Mother within the holy temple.

But how would she know if she did not make the attempt? Besides. Her people were lost and in danger of visiting the aftertime from so much coldness.

But what would it do to these hoomaas?? Gelf the wise had gained the trust and respect of the hoomaas through her kindness. She had not-

Another wordsong came to her. It was one of Oomkwo being full of the unhappy when Gelf the wise had subverted his 'awthowritee' by convincing another hoomaas to let her experience their magic crystal. Even though Gelf had not received permission from Oomkwo. There had been a deep sense of violation from the great leader when this had happened. But in the end the hoomaas had recognized the majesty of Adeima and there had been reconciliation.

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The last image finally settled things for her. She wished not to make the magical people angry. But her people were suffering and their magic boat offered both warmth and the chance to be connected once again to the Holy Mother after many untold generations apart.

She would have to risk it. And pray that Azeala be merciful with her kaba.

Very carefully, she peered into the thoughts of the hoomaas and learned about the magic boat and where the entrance was. She also learned the number of hoomaas on their boat and where the location of the magic crystal was.

The whole experience was terrifying for her. More frightening than anything the people beyond the morass could do. For these people had the magic to travel far up into the sky and even to transport someone from one place to another with a magic faery column.

She now understood what caused Gelf the wise to hold their people in such high regard. They were very much like Azealla in their magnificence. But then again, the hoomaas depended completely on their magic. Without it they were no more powerful than Kwandic or Regina.

She had to do it, though she cried within her kaba as Gelf the wise had done when she had violated the trust of the hoomaas. But she would have to do what was necessary to help her people and to rebuild the lost connection to the Holy Mother's wisdom.

Dragging Huso along with her, she made her way back to her kinsfolk. She gathered them together and spoke with all the seriousness which the situation warranted.

“My people. This is a momentous day indeed. For this day we are to bear witness to the magical hoomaas which Gelf the wise had the fortune to befriend. This man, Huso, is from a group who has visited us from the sky. They remain here with their magic boat just as the great Oomkwo and Aye-yoobay did in the beforetime. However these people have violated the sacred resting spot of our ancestors. They do not have the honor and respect for the full-true that the blessed ones defended so reverently. With your help, I believe it will be possible to reconnect once again with Adeima's wondrous prophecy and drink from the well of

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Her wisdom. I pray alongside all of you that the decision to take over their magic boat is an honorable and prosperous one.”

CHAPTER 51

Regina couldn't believe it at first. Could it really be true?

She thought back to the vision she had seen through the eye of Higsthon. Of the strange colored shimmer that rose from Higsthon and sped away behind its peak.

Could this scrawny person that Gelfetia held in her grasp, be a hoomaas in disguise? She had only the healer's word to go on and her own smarati. But the more that Gelfetia described the story of how their people had violated the resting place of the blessed ones in the middle of the night, the more she was sure that it hadn't been the fire water after all. Even the mere idea brought a great relief and vindication to her kaba. At last, to know that she had witnessed the violation which her people had guarded against for a thousand generations. Finally to know that she had provided a warning and a purpose for her kinfolk... Quickly, she shook herself out of her own thoughts. For the people all around her were shouting the unhappy now.

“...these hoomaas have violated our sacred land and we will now take shelter within their magic boat in the hopes that I may learn the wisdom of Adeima as Gelf the wise was able to.”

She watched the strange 'Huso' fellow wriggle like a wingsquirrel in Gelfetia's rigid grasp and his eyes grew very wide in the same way as her own people did when they were surprised or with the fright.

“Follow me and please be certain to take care in restraining their kind. These hoomaas are more fragile than our own kinfolk and it would very much displease Adeima if any of them were sent to Pritlaxtl.”

Obediently, she joined her people in following Gelfetia towards an enormous shadow which began to solidify as if by magic with each step across the cold white underfoot.

CHAPTER 52

He fought with all the strength he could muster. But her grip might as well have been a titanium clamp for all the use it did, he couldn't even reach around to access the waya. He wanted to smack himself for not having thought to wear the voice recorder in his mad rush to

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intercept these people. Now his attempt to divert them was instead going to lead them straight to the ship! How could he withstand the onslaught of a people who could simply pull the code for the force-field straight from his brain?!

Despite the cold, he found himself sweating both from the effort to free himself and from the terror of where this was leading. There was no way that this could end in anything but tragedy for every one of them. By the stars, these people might even disable the ship out of spite for the intrusion on a place which had apparently taken on religious meaning for them.

In a last-ditch effort, he tried to consciously envision banks of lasers and death rays mounted all over the ship. But it seemed to make no impact on the giantess hauling him along. She could see through him as easily as he could see through the portals lining the side of the ship. He could only imagine what Rhumfa would think when she saw him being dragged so unceremoniously along through the frigid snow toward the entrance hatch.

Chapter 53

Oibo sounded a code-red alarm which seemed to be turning into an everyday occurrence here. “Chi moo, what is it *this time*.”

She looked at the display and her eyes grew to the size of planets. “Intruder alert?! What the he-”

She switched to the lower camera and watched as one of the native people, dragging Huso along with them, was mounting the ramp to the ship.

What, in the entire galaxy, could have motivated these natives to try and invade the ship?!!

She hurriedly ordered Oibo to activate the force field, then watched the screen intently as one of them moved an arm out of view and went right past into the ship. She stabbed at the intercom and threw her loudest voice into the speaker. “Alert. This is not a drill. We are being attacked. I repeat, we are being attacked. All personnel, utilize defensive measures with the highest stun setting. This is not a drill!”

Throwing herself against the wall, she grabbed for the cabinet that she never in her life expected to use. Then she charged out of her quarters with her weapon at the ready. She glanced in each direction before randomly heading to the cockpit.

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It wasn't likely that the natives would have any more success than she did in moving the ship, but there was still a great deal of sensitive control equipment there. She hurried down the hall and thankfully didn't find any invaders as she grabbed for the emergency lock next to the door. Once that was sealed, she raced back to the cargo bay intending to restrict access to the jirgen-sama. Her feet pounded the deck halfway across the ship when she caught sight of a native heading toward her.

Though her combat experience was minimal, she had been required to take a year of JuJitsu in order to earn her position. She dove into the nearest room and stood by the door with her fingers tensely gripping the tranq-gun. But on impulse she paused and grabbed a spare carbon tube to hold with her other arm.

The wait dragged on for what seemed like an hour but was probably mere seconds. She saw the door open and briefly wondered how a Neolithic tribe could manage that, when an arm attached to a 2-meter high denisovian poked into the room. To save time she slammed the rod down on the nearest arm as a distraction before firing a tightly focused tranq-beam into the being's chest. She watched with satisfaction as the native expressed first pain and then shock as it slowly fell to the deck unconscious. Quickly she told Oibo to set up a containment field around the being with a voice-activated password.

With that complete, she thought next of the power bay. It seemed unlikely that a group of natives would have reason to seek that room, but she was too blinded by panic to think clearly at the moment.

She saw her next invader about 15 meters from the door. The being was holding a large flat object and showed not the slightest hesitation as it headed straight for her. She instantly raised her weapon and fired. But in half that time, the being held up the flat object and deflected the beam. For a moment she herself was stunned. These people couldn't have learned about apatas²³ so quickly. There wasn't even evidence of warfare on this planet.

She tried feigning to one side before firing at the other, again to no avail. Instead the being leaped upon her and held her limbs in a vice-like grip.

“We do not wish to harm you hoomaas. Please do not struggle.”

23 Apata - shield

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She was shaking with rage. What in all the world had gotten into these people?? They'd previously shown no interest in battle tactics, they revered her species like some kind of messiah. But now they come and invade the ship and this being tells her that they mean no harm. It made her want to shoot this native just from the frustration of it all.

CHAPTER 54

Regina made fast-steppins through the huge shelterspace with the many rooms. All the while she felt awed by the strange surroundings. The overhead which glowed with a light that seemed not to come from the Saülè, the passages that were completely smooth and the ground-force which did not pull as strongly as it did outside.

She traveled with Aninniysi given that her people were not as large as the denisovian kinfolk. Their progress felt strange not only for the peculiar surroundings, but also for the different way that she was able to move. Her entire body felt lighter and her movements more swift. She had to constantly make adjustments to her steppins to keep from smacking her head against the overhead surface and Aninniysi managed to fail at that once resulting in a painful yelp. Gelfetia had told her how few hoomaas there were in this place and she followed Aninniysi so as to be certain that all of the magical people were safely restrained without harm. Thus she had developed a careful strategy with her partner. Whenever they reached a doorway, Aninniysi punched a 'butt-ton' which Gelfetia had shown them how to use, and she would immediately leap inside to face down whoever might be within.

Most of the rooms were empty and she worried at becoming complacent in the many checking of unoccupied rooms. But this time a diminutive female was facing her in the process of leaping up from her seat. Though she sprang quite fast towards the magical hoomaas, the confusion of this strange place delayed her slightly and the hoomaas pointed an odd-looking device in her direction. Not fully understanding what the device was for, she was surprised when Aninniysi leapt towards the hoomaas only to be instantly knocked to the underfoot.

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By the spear of Prijnak! These beings really did have the power of gods! No wonder Gelf the wise had been so awestruck by them. They had no need to come within striking distance, or even maneuver a spear. They could simply point that magic tool and a person would be ushered to Pritlaxtl.

She had to act, and act fast or she might be the next one delivered to the aftertime along with Aninniyi. Barely an instant went by as she herself leapt at the being intending to avenge the destruction of her friend. She knocked the device away and had the visitor pinned to the underfoot before the woman could raise her deadly weapon.

“Grishneevit! I will repay you for stealing away dear Aninniyi!” Despite Gelfetia’s entreaty, Regina smacked her fist against the woman’s soft parts over and over until the red life-fluid began to stain the woman’s cloth covering. Only when she saw the red stain did she begin to understand that she was defying the explicit request of her leader. Instantly the shame once again blanketed her kaba and she adjusted her grip so that she could restrain the diminutive hoomaas without further injury. The latter task was very easy as the injured hoomaas was unable to offer any real resistance now.

So with nothing else to do but secure the woman, she began to think about the strange place they had forced their way into. It was like a village in some ways, but with many shelterspaces connected by fully enclosed pathways. The concept made much sense to her, especially in thinking of the cold time when her denisovian kinfolk walked about with many cloths in order to keep warm. If they spent some time making covered passages, then her kinfolk would be able to travel easily even in the cold time.

What she found herself puzzling over much more was the light which seemed to fill the entire overhead even without the Saülè anywhere in sight. There was also the ‘doors’ leading in to each of the entrances and how smoothly they swung aside. These things were very confusing to her. She imagined that if much work were put into it, a shelterspace could be made perfectly smooth. But she saw no real benefit in devoting so much work to create such a thing.

Her thoughts soon became interrupted by a strange voice coming from the top of the wallside which quickly took over her attention.

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CHAPTER 55

It took several minutes of being held down before she realized that the apata laying next to the native holding her, was in fact a titanium panel used in protecting the Gbowee's electronics. She did her best to inform the native that this piece of titanium was in fact hers, and an important part of the ship.

"Hoomaas, your lies and distraction will not do any good. None of your magic can withstand the power and skill of my training."

As if the mere circumstance of being held down by this native wasn't bad enough, now she found a vital component of the ship in the possession of this female who thought of it as a simple apata. She wanted to scream and beat on the native for all she was worth.

But there was nothing in the present moment that she could think of that could be used to overpower the [x]. So she racked her brain for any other strategy and finally settled on distraction.

"Can you at least tell me what it was that caused you to force your way into the ship to begin with?"

The woman gave a look which resembled a scowl as she answered. "That hoomaas is as clear as the imú on your face. Our great healer has discovered the treachery of your intrusion within the holy ring of stones. She gave wordsong of your theft of the ancient treasures inside. After such intransigence, you now have the audacity to demand the return of a simple apata from me? Ha! Your wordsong has more in common with one of Kwandic's jokes than with the real fulltrue."

If she were to live until the end of time, there was no way she would ever have an experience as absurdly inexplicable as this was proving to be. There just *had* to be some means of reasoning with the natives, or at least of overpowering them. But no such tactic seemed to manifest within her distraught mind. She wondered now if she would even escape this situation with her life.

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CHAPTER 56

“My people, please bring the magical hoomaas to the room of power which is named one-zero-one. I believe that it would be valuable for them to bear witness to this experience.”

The being holding her down obliged as if she were no more than the limb on someone else’s body.

Oneyda found herself physically lifted off the floor with barely an effort, and carried towards the power room like a piece of heavy luggage. She wondered what the UPC would make of a situation like this. It wasn’t like they could have prevented the natives from seeing their technology like the previous crew could have. But that didn’t mean she might not be blamed regardless.

Once inside though, she was distracted by the sight of a native pointing to several places on the control panel and speaking to a human native. Since she hadn’t gained much understanding of their language, she could only observe their body language and infer the crazy goings on from that. But language soon became trivial as she next saw the native move slowly towards the shielded column and stand rigidly in front of it before making a sign to her human companion. The next moment, she gasped in horror as the shield rose up, exposing the native to the full brunt of the energy crystal. What could that being possibly have in mind besides suicide? There had to be less horrifying ways to end one’s life than this?! What in the entire vast universe would motivate a primitive alien to expose herself to deadly levels of radiation?

CHAPTER 57

She instructed Muatide on the proper ‘but-tuns’ and their order before doing what the mind-pictures showed her that Gelf the wise had done in the far back beforetime. Through the whole process her body shivered at the thought that she would be the first healer to succeed in bringing the miracle of the holy prophecy to her people once again. She sang praises to the blessed ones as she made her way to the enormous circular wallside in the middle of their power room. Then when

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she was ready, she gave a nod to Muatide to raise the 'sheeyald' which would change their lives forever.

Instantly her body was flooded with pain. Not merely the usual kind of pain such as the hitting of a hand or foot against stone. This was an agony a thousand times more intense. This she could not ever have predicted. It was the most horrific experience she had ever felt since her kaba had first developed within this body. It was as if some force had made it's way beneath her skin and was ripping every bit of it from her in one instant. She sought to cry out and beg Muatide to close the device, but to her utter terror she found that she could not move any part of herself. Every limb was trapped in place and she was held prisoner within the shroud of pain that her life was become.

Just as she felt herself about to collapse, her vision began to blur and her eyes became drawn to focus on the one incredibly black crystal. It felt like this one tiny spot was engulfing her entire vision while the wallside and the rest of the room shrank to a blurry cloud. The experience was somewhat like gazing through the iran ologo, but a great deal more intense.

Soon it felt as if the blackness was being split in half, then in four parts, then eight and on further. A huge grid of lines was dividing the blackness as if she were trying to see through a woven cloth. Whichever of the lines she gazed upon felt like it was a whole world with it's own underfoot and it's own people.

Each one of the lines was a radical shift from anything she could understand. She saw through a countless multitude of eyes.

She listened to words in languages beyond number.

She felt terrifying cold and sweltering heat.

She felt a groundforce of crushing severity and she flew through the air with just a single step.

Every instant was a new and magnificent experience, saturating her very being. While she remained distracted by this, the grid of lines seemed to envelop her until she became surrounded by a vast multitude of different lands and different people. Finally then, she felt a voice. It was not a voice which could be heard, it was more like when a great wudfell smacked the underfoot and the impact of it

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could be felt nearby. The mind-pictures were making themselves known through her, and her mouth was speaking without her being the one to move it. She felt terrified, bewildered, and awed, all at the same time.

CHAPTER 58

“Goegeqoucoeqolleeiwwppqqq”

“Wtoxeozonyedeeeridoooo”

“One man accursed has dishonor reversed.”

“Heart of Twiklaryun evince purdue zinmarium.”

“Ojute ashirin da shida²⁴ intimation nanoscreen failure to Penreida.”

“Hatred fed, turns to insides of red.”

“Healers two, birthed far out of view, together by statue”

“Forst lies flat -preceding the attack.”

“Warrior brings shield against ourays²⁵ in the field.”

“Foreign seer, woli eke²⁶ of fear”

“Pritlaxtl does not tread where underfoot eats the legs”

“Kasawa nauyi²⁷ precipitate canza tunanin²⁸ ”

If anyone else had told her a story as ridiculous as this, she would never have believed it in a million years. The leader of the native people spoke some kind of rhyming gibberish before finally collapsing to the floor. As soon as that happened, one of the other natives, a human this time, managed to close the shield and then two of them crouched mournfully next to their fallen leader.

“Which of you is the healer for this magic boat?”

The audacity of the man! Did this worm actually think she could be convinced to help a group of people who’d just stormed onto her ship?! ‘Take a deep breath

24 Twenty-six in Hausa

25 Arrows

26 Yoruba term meaning false prophet

27 Failure of gravity

28 Hausa term meaning to change the way that one thinks

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Rhumfa.’ She had to repeat this several times, due to having to stare into the face of the native who was still holding her fast against the floor. But fury wouldn’t help here, neither would revenge. She had to consider this issue more deeply. She attempted to ponder the strange rhyming sentences, but most of it had been too confusing for her to devote the mental energy towards. But she was certain the woman had spoken of ‘nanoscreen’ and she was absolutely positive that there was not a single person on this planet who would know anything about the ship’s oxygen recycling system.

She mulled it over for several seconds and it did seem that the pieces of the puzzle were beginning to connect. She thought of how their healer managed to read Huso’s memories. That must have been how they knew to get inside the ship, and how to operate the controls for the forcefield. It might also be how this woman had known about the trouble her ship was experiencing. The woman must be concocting some kind of show or charade for her people using knowledge plucked right from the memories of the crew. Just the thought of such a thing brought indignation thundering back into her perception.

But now their healer was unconscious, or worse perhaps. This last gave her the opportunity extract victory from their current ridiculous stalemate. It was clear to her that without the mind-reading woman, their people were helpless against her own superior technology. This at last would allow her to employ the element of surprise. But that was of little solace while her limbs were pinned against the deck by the fourteen centimeter arms of an alien. There had to be some means of freeing herself. They might be out of danger from having their minds probed, but she still couldn’t counteract their physical strength.

She thought furiously. What tactic could she utilize that wouldn’t require pulling herself out of the grip of the monster holding her body solidly against the floor?

After a painful eternity, she caught onto a possible option. The floor itself would help. She used an obscure Earth language used long ago by the colonizers of Yorup. “Oibo, captains emergency orders. Increase grav-plating by 70%. Hold for 30 seconds and then reverse to zero-G.”

Instantly her body felt like mush and she struggled to get a breath. But she also heard the cries of confusion from the natives. After all, they knew nothing of

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differing gravity, or the ability to adjust it. The only beings who had experience with such things were her own crew.

When the gravity reversed, she sprang into the air surprising the native and pushed for the control panel. She ordered Oibo to execute an emergency code-red forcefield around each individual on the ship. This was a little safety measure which she'd programmed in when several of the colonists had gotten uppity about the distribution of luxury items going down to NewMali. She looked around in hopes that the other crew nearby had also seen the opportunity to escape the hold of the natives. For the most part this was true, except for Ikasha who's small frame was no match for the two native humans latched on to her. The odds were slightly less horrible now, but even one of the crewmembers under threat was more than she was willing to tolerate.

CHAPTER 59

Kwandic was terribly confused. He had the fraidness that Gelfetia had made a terrible mistake. On one hand he had been awed to witness her success in gaining a connection to the Blessed Mother's prophecy. But shortly afterwards the healer fell to the underfoot and it was clear that her wisdom would no longer be able to guide them in this place of the magical hoomaas. What was worse, this tribe's power was beyond anything he could imagine even in the most fearsome nightmares. One moment his body felt crushed down against the underfoot as if he were carrying the weight of another of the kinfolk on his back, and now he floated in the air with no ground-force at all. He found it impossible to move without the underfoot to push against.

But somehow he and Molayo were able to keep hold of the hoomaas when all the other kinfolk had been too confused to retain their advantage. He thought furiously for some strategy which would prevent them from being defeated. But unlike Truinye, he was no warrior and had never fought anyone except for the games from when he was a young'n.

He peeked around at his mate and spoke in softvoice to keep from alerting the leader of the magical people. "Molayo, what kind of magic is this?"

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But instead of his mate responding, the diminutive hoomaas interrupted with a grand declaration that they would not be hurt if they let her go and surrendered. He was momentarily taken aback that this tiny hoomaas could understand his language. But he quickly put that aside as he scrutinized the scene around him in search of a strategy. It was all so absurd and despite his advantage of size, he felt like a mere wingsqerl compared to these beings. They seemed able to control not only the warmth and the light overhead, but even the groundforce or lack of it. His only advantage lay in the hoomaas which he and Molayo were holding.

“What kind of magic is this hoomaas!” He spoke to the being showing the most unhappy that he could display in hopes of appearing more menacing than he felt in the moment. “Know this well, that we will follow and protect our leader and our people even to the last one of our kinfolk.”

The being clearly was with fraidness, but made a similarly valiant effort to display more courage than her small size would warrant. “Molayo, both of you, your people will not be harmed if you abandon this attack on our ship immediately. However if you attempt to harm me then I cannot guarantee your safety any further. Our pilot is a great deal less compassionate than I am, and as you can see she has the means to defeat you easily.”

He thought furiously now. It felt as if a dozen annums would be insufficient to invent a strategy which would free his people in this strange place where even down and up were completely meaningless. Gelfetia was in the sleep of unhealth, or worse, which meant that she could not offer wisdom. Truinye floated on the far side of the room struggling to escape from some invisible cloud which surrounded her. Worse yet the hoomaas in his grip understood the language of Ubuntu which meant that he could not secretly employ his mate’s cunning in this matter. It was all riding on him now, and he could not fail the kinsfolk.

He thought a moment longer and offered a short prayer to Prijnak before addressing the leader of these magical people. “Hoomaas leader. I propose a solution for both of our people. I will release your kinfolk on the condition that you return to us the sacred items you stole and allow us to peacefully leave this magic place unharmed.”

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Chapter 60

Fatima couldn't see straight. She was aware of periods of light and of blackness. But mostly she was aware of pain. Everything was pain. A whole world of all-encompassing agony. Even searching for the cause seemed to bring a torturous fire to her gut. It was an overarching sensation, drowning out any conscious thought. Movement of course was equally impossible. Strategizing was like pushing against the force of the Volta river. Wait. Something within her got the sense of a clue. There was a memory hiding deep within the recesses of her mind. But the effort to reach it was too much for her. Soon even conscious thought became too much for her.

The sunlight glinted blindingly off the water. Even the shelter of Bako trees could diminish it only sporadically and she went to hide in the shade of some boulders with Batutsi. The boy was like a two-sided dice. Sometimes he would be a miserable wretch, taunting her and embarrassing her in front of her friends. But then there were times where they would sit and play games in the shade and her brother was also a beloved friend.

He pointed out over the water and despite the blinding shimmer dancing on the surface, she could make out a figure moving toward them. At first there was no way to tell what it was or how it could travel so smoothly along the the water's surface. But soon those questions were secondary as she realized it was the Krischin devil swooping toward them. He was red-skinned and there were two horns right above his eyes. The body resembled a rooster, but faded from her attention as the head and face grew to dominate her horrified eyes. She yelled out to Batutsi to run, to get away. She tried to as well, but her legs wouldn't obey her. Every limb sat uselessly on the ground as the arrogant leering face moved closer and closer.

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Chapter 61

In all of her years running interstellar ships, this she could not ever have imagined, not even if she'd stayed conscious through the entire 90 year journey. Mutiny she'd been through. Mechanical problems she could deal with. Even the cold unrelenting vacuum of space offered little to intimidate her. But nothing in her entire experience was as fantastical as this. A native being, with no familiarity whatsoever of advanced technology holding his crew hostage while floating above her in the air and demanding the return of artifacts created by human visitors hundreds of years before either of them had been born? It wasn't the first time or the last that she wished this could be some kind of cryosleepmare. But she didn't have the luxury of that amount of time. She had a responsibility to keep her people and her ship safe from harm. Whatever it took, she had to remain focused on that goal. What she needed was something to distract the two natives. Some kind of-

No that wouldn't do anyway. She had specifically requested no tranq-guns be stored in the main power room after her last mission had ended up with one crewmember dead. She had to get to Huso's quarters. He was the only one who wouldn't have grabbed for his own emergency tranq-gun, having been taken by the healing woman first.

Finally the nexus of an idea came to her. Perhaps there could be the slightest chance of seeing a light at the end of this tunnel.

She turned back to the native floating several meters away and spoke as calmly as her situation allowed. "Very well. I agree to your proposal. Please give me a moment to pull them out of storage. I will return as quickly as I can."

"And hoomaas, you will restore the ground-force to it's normal function."

She thought quickly. This she hadn't agreed to and acquiescing would ruin her one advantage. She had to do what she could to keep the natives off-guard.

"I would very much like to do that. But it takes many hours to restore proper function to the gravity-plating. You experienced what happened when something isn't set properly and the 'ground-force' becomes too strong."

The native looked like he believed her, though it was hard to say what the alien face expressed. Still, she felt unusually proud of herself for this cunning, despite

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the incomplete victory so far. She hurried out through the door determined then to make the victory certain, no matter what the cost.

Chapter 62

She knew the captain was lying. She hoped with everything she had that none of the other native people could do that freaky mind-reading thing they had done to Huso. Obviously the humans couldn't, but she did her best to distract them anyway in hopes that the others would listen in. Cautiously, for the language was still new to her, she addressed the one holding her left hand.

“Can you tell me how you managed to get access into this ship? I'm very impressed that you managed it.”

The male who was holding her paid more attention to the door than to anything else. But the other one, a female, consented to showing her attention.

“It was the great Adeima who guided our healer to this great magic boat so that we might finally witness Her prophecy again after so many annums of ignorance and darkness.”

“But, was it your Adeima who helped you to make your way through all this egbon?”

“Egbon? What is?”

“Egbon, is... it's the white stuff that was falling all around the ship.”

Now the native woman's eyes became slightly wider. “You have seen this white rain before?” Then the woman's eyes suddenly became very very wide. “Is what Gelfetia said true?! You have seen it in the magical land of Urth? You have been to the village of Lagos where the wide ocean taps gently against the shores and the great shelterspaces rise high above the sky?”

It couldn't be. How could these people have retained stories of an Earth that none of them had seen in perhaps a thousand generations. There had only been a handful of people on the old research ship who could have even spoke of it. She was momentarily stunned even from the thought of such a thing.

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It was both a wondrous recognition, but also at the same time a terrible one. She was caught for a moment in time, unsure of what to say. “Um. How do you know about those stories?”

Now the woman furrowed her brow slightly. “How do I know?? It is where my people came from. Where all of the hoomaas are from. It is the land of Sefi, and Ayube. It is the land of Zion where peace and magic exist like kinfolk among the countless mass of hoomaas.”

At last she understood. Really understood. Rhumfa had been worried of course, and the UPC council had authored strongly worded laws for first-contact situations specifically to prevent this. But now she had the first-hand experience of what happened when something went wrong, terribly wrong. She was looking into the eyes of a being who had spent her entire life orbiting a star dozens of light years from Earth, yet who longed for it no less intensely than she herself did. The whole experience left her utterly stunned by their words. What must it be like to live one’s whole life with nothing more than legends of the great land that she herself had stood on just a few days before entering cryosleep?

Chapter 63

Her eyes fluttered slightly and even that was painful. One eye could only open halfway but the other, as if compensating grew to it’s full extent when she saw it. The nightmare was true! The devil’s face stared calmly down at her, but this one didn’t have sharp horns or skin of red. The horns were dull nubs that reminded her more of a giraffe and the skin was a light teal color. Nothing else on her body was able to move and the harsh brunt of the nightmare utterly consumed her consciousness.

She screamed. It wasn’t a scream for help or for any logical reason, no this was a primal scream. One fed by the most primitive part of her brain that could not see any thought or logic. She put all the force that remained under her control into that scream. And it worked.

Some small part of her that was able to recognize this vision as different from the dream, was also able to understand that the being staring down at her was in

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pain. That pain was important. If she could somehow keep it in pain, then it wouldn't steel away Batutsi to the depths of Hell. It wouldn't be able to hurt him the way she herself was hurting.

"Hoomaas please. If you can stop making that noise I will do whatever you wish." But there wasn't enough of her to recognize anything but the evil staring down at her and the obvious discomfort her screaming caused it. Only when she could no longer see or hear the demon was she finally able to close her eyes and lay in silent exhaustion.

Her victory this time brought her dreams at last to more peaceful times along the beloved Volta river.

CHAPTER 64

Rhumfa did her best to make the fastest progress that her zero-G experience allowed. But it felt like twenty minutes went by as she searched through the one room after another for a spare tranq-gun. It wasn't until the fifth try that she found one in the training room. She gave an audible sigh of relief at the sight of the small-handled 'pistol' as she sometimes called it (recalling her historic texts on colonial warfare).

She snatched up the gun and pushed off back to the corridor and through to the power room. But at the last second she hesitated. The tranq-guns were short-range defenses, designed for use within a single room or corridor. The power room was the largest on the ship and she couldn't be certain of making two separate shots quickly enough to keep them from hurting Ikasha. She also wasn't terribly confident in her ability to navigate the room so effectively without gravity.

In the end, she took a few seconds with Oibo to review the layout of the room and Ikasha's location relative to the other two before opening the door. But the instant it slid open she sprang directly toward the three people and made two shots which knocked them out in only a couple of seconds.

"Captain? How could you?!"

If there had been gravity, she might have collapsed to the ground just from the absurdity of the comment. It was, incredibly, from Ikasha. The one woman who

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had been the most in danger was reacting as if she these natives had actually been harmed in her valiant effort.

“Ikasha. What in the great expanse of Africa are you talking about?? They could’ve seriously hurt you.”

But the woman continued giving her a critical stare. “Captain, I was beginning to develop an understanding with that woman. And you just go off and shoot her.”

“Ikasha, they were holding you hostage!!” She was almost furious enough to shoot this woman merely from the insanity of it all. As it was she had to almost physically hold herself from reaching out to shake some sense into the woman.

“For cryingoutloud, this is not a science mission and we’re not anthropologists. I admit that I made a mistake in coming here. Woo boy did I ever.” She paused guiltily. “But at this point our goal is to repair the ship, get the Nneka off the planet’s surface, and get the bloody hell outa here.”

Ikasha folded her arms as she usually did when the woman was frustrated.

“Rhumfa, I don’t think that it will be possible to do that without the cooperation of these people. It may not have been *your* goal to build a connection with them, but we’re here now and we’re quickly running out of alternative methods for succeeding on our own.”

She just couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Sure, the woman was more interested in other cultures than the rest of the crew on the ship. That’s what made her so adept at helping the colonists. But the work was done now. It was time to go home.

On the other hand, she had no idea how much resentment her crew still held towards her. It certainly wouldn’t help to feed that animosity. She had learned, through difficult lessons that making enemies among her crewmates was never wise. But what kind of help could a primitive neolithic tribe offer with antiproton thrusters and zinnarium conduits? There seemed to be no end to arguments ‘on the other hand’ for her.

Well, she could bite off worries of animosity down the road. For now she just wanted the crew to be safe and free of anyone who didn’t belong on the ship.

“Alright Ikasha. I’ll tell you what. Once we get a line on how to repair the engines, I’ll free you from your responsibilities and you can spend time connecting

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with the people over there. Maybe you can help repair the catastrophe those scientists were responsible for.

She increased the gravity to 0.35 standard and with Ikasha's help gently guided each native, still held in a containment field, to the empty communal room. It took several minutes, but given that some of them were human, she couldn't be sure if Oibo would be capable of distinguishing their DNA from her own crew.

It took two solid hours before the whole group was set up together, largely due to the struggles and shouting of the natives who were still conscious. As soon as all of the native people were in one place though, she ordered Oibo to decrease O₂ levels by 40%. That would weaken them without causing any long term damage to their bodies. She watched in satisfaction as the group panted for breath before she closed the door and turned off all the rest of the force-fields.

"Oibo, would it be possible to use the kefatz to send these people back to the village at coordinates 57.01 x 127.34?"

The answer she received was not encouraging. It seemed that there was too much distance and rock strata separating them from the village. That meant that the only solution was loading them all into their one jirgin-sama and shipping them a few at a time. But that brought up a different issue, the shuttles didn't have any kind of force-field. There was generally no need for such protection on those small crafts. She gave a sigh and pulled out the tranq-gun before opening the door once again to the common room.

CHAPTER 65

Truinye couldn't imagine what kind of magic the hoomaas possessed but she not only found herself unable to move, she was having trouble even getting a breath. Her breath-hole pulsated in terror as she struggled to find the energy to even stand upright. But she felt so incredibly tired, even sitting up was difficult. Were these people going to sap the gudstrength from every one of her people in one vast stroke? Could they actually be more cruel and vengeful than even the people beyond the morass? She did not know, and found that even concentrating on

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anything but drawing another breath was near impossible. Her thinking was becoming fuzzy and she felt as if she was in some kind of waking nightmare. Every part of her kaba screamed to make an attack, to force the hoomaas into defeat. She struggled with every fibre of her being to lift a limb, but found that it was far too much effort, just as it had been when the hoomaas captain had made the ground force so strong.

Then, as if the lack of air wasn't horrific enough, she was left to gaze in terror when one of the hoomaas came into the room and shot each one of them with some kind of magic tool which sent them all to the realm of Pritlaxtl. In her panic she feared that her earlier prediction might come true, with her fated to watch helplessly as the cruel reality played out in front of her eyes. She stared dumbly as one after another of her companions closed their eyes, praying with all her might to Prijnak and Azeala for protection from the hoomaas' weapon. But soon the weapon was turned on her and everything went black.

CHAPTER 66

Though she had managed to keep her cool while the whole absurd event played itself out, her hands were still trembling half an hour later and she held on to Shadai's arm for the emotional support it gave her in dealing with the rest of the crew.

"Alright everyone. Now that the immediate threat is resolved, I would like to ask for your impressions of what happened and any ideas to ensure that we don't suffer a tragic repeat of this insanity."

Everyone from the ship sat around the commons table except for Ereeko who was shuttling the last of the natives back to their camp.

"Captain, how in the world did those people get in here?"

"These people are dangerous! We have to-"

"It's that healer of theirs, she-"

"We need to take stronger measures t-"

The room was a pandemonium of impulsive criticisms, until finally she smacked the table loudly and asked for quiet before turning to Huso for his thoughts. Given

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that he had experienced the most time with these people, she felt that his observations would be of enormous value to them all.

The man described what their healing woman had said about the stories from the original crew, and how furious she had been when she learned of the trip inside the Nneka. He didn't know what had caused the woman to decide that an attack was warranted, but it was clear that she had a very specific purpose.

"Yea, her purpose was to commit some insane form of suicide. These people are completely bonkers."

"Kinfe, as strange as it sounds, the native was not killed in her exposure to the energy crystal. I have her secured in the med bay where she may perhaps recover fully... or perhaps not so fully. There's no way to be sure as yet."

She turned to Kotingre in hopes provide more understanding of the native woman's biology. "Doctor, is there enough information to tell us what allowed her to survive the exposure and why she would choose to take such a terrible risk to her life?"

Kotingre looked back at them all blankly. "I'm sorry but there hasn't been anywhere near the time to examine the woman's physiology as yet. When the experience happened I was still being dragged, quite unceremoniously I might add, towards the power room. It's going to take some time and a number of tests before I can tell what happened to the woman. I've been going through the records from the logs of Dr. Ikpeba and-" The man paused briefly to look at his smartwatch.

"I'm sorry but I really must get back to that. Maybe there's something that the original crew learned which could help her."

"Very well doctor. Thank you for your input. I'll send the record of our ipade to your office."

"As for the rest of you, I would like to say that you all performed with exceptional skill given what an enormous surprise this was to us all. I'm even more sorry now for having made the decision to divert to this place-"

"Yes Rhumfa." Kinfe gave her a stare as cold as the glacier outside. "Why is it we simply don't pick up and move to the far side of the planet and work on ship

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repairs there? Let these mahaukaci²⁹ live out their ridiculous ‘prophecy’ without putting *our* lives at risk in the process.”

As stressed as she was, the woman was not someone who could accept criticism as gracefully as she threw it upon other people, and so it took a few seconds of counting before she could trust herself to reply in a manner that wouldn’t bring on a shouting match between them. “To be honest Kinfe. I would at this point be more than happy to cut our losses and do exactly that.” She turned to the only one of their crew who understood the ships’ propulsion systems better than she did. “Saaed, would you like to clarify the situation that we discussed earlier?”

“Not really captain.” The man looked down morosely. “The tubes that deliver regulator fluid to the engines were completely torn apart. The main cowling is bent into scrap zinmarium. And the plasma tubes are riddled with holes and tears. I don’t doubt that we could find primitive elements like iron here. But fabricating zinmarium or high-temperature lubolium is a whole different matter. We do know that the main power crystal and the reserve are both functional. But without parts or at least raw materials, we just can’t move the ship.” He gave a sigh like a balloon deflating. “I’m sorry, I wish that I had more to give you.”- “You and me both” she muttered under her breath.

“So you’re saying we’re stuck with these oloshi³⁰ until you figure out some way of fixing-” the woman looked at her smartwatch “134 crippled thrusters?! What if there’s nothing on this planet that we can use? We’d be stuck here forever!” There was a hint of panic in her voice.

“Oh come on, yu dey craze. It can’t be *that* difficult to find the materials.”

She wasn’t going to sit by and watch the two of them turn her meeting into a bout of sibling rivalry. Besides there was real concern for the stability of the crew if she didn’t. She had to do what she could to keep everyone stable and focused. “Very well Oneyda. If you think that it’s so easy, you’ve just volunteered yourself to assist Kinfe in diagnosing the problem.”

“What?! Rhumfa, I-” the look on the woman’s face was the only satisfying experience of the entire ipade.

29 Crazy people (hausa)

30 Fool

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“Everyone please. We need to get ourselves off of this rock, and fast. But until we do, we have to accept that there’s a group of potentially hostile natives who might once again find a way inside the ship. Now I’ve reprogrammed Oibo to accept emergency commands from my voice patterns only. That includes the force-field on the blown airlock. I assure you this is not intended to shut you out, but purely as a defensive measure against these mind-reading aliens. Beyond that, I’m asking all of you to spend time reviewing the logs from the Nneka and see if you can discover anything new, anything at all, that could help us deal with this insanity.” And if they couldn’t, she thought to herself, there was a very real fear that Kinfe could be right about the crew becoming stuck here forever. Just like the Nneka’s crew. This last point brought a cold sweat to bead along her hairline.

CHAPTER 67

Beljutil listened half-heartedly to the boistorous speech of their leader Nukremit as the great mass of warriors stood at the edge of their village ready to depart. The vigrusman spoke of how this wasn’t merely an act of revenge for the murder of Itroveep. It was the prophecy of Prijnak that the cursed people of the mountain be shown once and for all that Adeima and Azealla reside in the temple of Xenlaria only, and They would demonstrate Their majesty in a great victory for the familyland.

He wanted to believe. He wanted to join the others in cheering, to feel even a small spark of that excitement which glimmered in the eyes of the other warriors. But having known Imotren for so many annums, it was beyond doubt that this whole nonsense was just childish anger directed at a people who, for reasons that he could not understand, had stolen away the man’s grandfather along with the rest of their scouts. Or perhaps not. No single one of them knew what had happened all those annums in the beforetime.

If it *was* true, he couldn’t deny that he would have felt anger too. He might even have been willing to take revenge as well, were it his own ancestor. But the idea of pressuring Gjintruk to send an entire army against a village so far away. That was such a ridiculous waste of Xenlaria’s gudstrength.

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The insanity of such massive violence was a thing which he could not ever find graspable, not even were he to live for many lifespans. After all, what value was a reputation which was built on the foundation stones of anger and bitterness. It seemingly could not serve any purpose that he could conceive. Was any single man's life justification for such immense spitefulness?

Of course it was not. And the knowing became the reason that he could never look at the man with kindface again. He was certain that there would never be a time in his life that he would ever be able to forgive Imotren for taking part in this fool's errand, no matter how much he missed the man's beautiful body.

Nevertheless, he knew what it would look like if he did not join with the kinfolk in heading off for battle. And so he marched with the rest of them into the woods, taking almost a quarter of a day this time to reach the shelterspace of the healer who was standing out front and shouting words of encouragement.

He gazed at her sadly, wondering if there was some small chance that his feelings were wrong. After all it wasn't merely Gjintruk and Imotren who gave their support. The Oracle and Pretvuukra were also in favor of this great enterprise. Maybe Prijnak and Adeima really did consider this attack to be just. Maybe Xenlaria was destined to be victorious and to bring defeat to the strange people of the mountain.

Like the reason for Itroveep's disappearance, it was impossible to know. This whole experience felt so ridiculous and despite the need of camaraderie, his confusion brought him to travel somewhat apart from the kinfolk as they all marched through the forest on their way to battle.

CHAPTER 68

"Well now. It's nice to see your lovely eyes returning to us."

"How, the-- gawd it hurts."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Bututs- no. You... feel soo heavy. Why-"

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“Don’t worry about that. You just let the regenerative nanos do their work and you’ll be feeling better in a few days.”

“But I saw-”

“Easy there. You can tell me about what you saw when your lung and kidney are repaired. Can I put on some music for you in the meantime?”

Without waiting for a response he put on an instrumental by Akukwa while he went over to the terminal. There weren’t any other serious injuries from this crazy incident, which was a full-on miracle. But Fatima had needed three ribs, one lung, a kidney and a large piece of her pelvic wing regenerated. If Aminu hadn’t realized she was missing they might even have missed the slim opportunity for saving the woman’s life.

He reached over to open the line with Rhumfa who’d left the explicit request to be notified the moment Fatima gained any degree of consciousness.

“Doctor. Is she awake yet? Can she talk?” The pain in her voice told him all he needed to know about the pilot’s condition as well, and he didn’t like it.

“Easy now Rhumfa. She woke up for a minute or so, but she’s not coherent and she’s not out of the woods yet. I have no doubt that she’ll make a full recovery, but the lung had to be completely rebuilt and there was only enough kidney material to build a scaffolding for the nanos. I told you that I would let you know when-”

“Kotingre. How long. We need to figure out what happened to her and to understand what it was that caused this one single native to become so violent when the others were content merely to hold us down.”

“And as I told you before Rhumfa. The human body does not repair itself based on anyone’s designated schedule. I can make rough estimates according to the number of nanos and the experience of similar injuries back on Earth. But every person is unique and we won’t know for sure about Fatima until the rest of her organs become functional. I’m sorry.”

“No doctor. I should be the one to apologize. It’s not your fault that she was attacked. I’ll leave you to your work and hope to hear better news soon.”

“You’ll be the first to know.” He sighed with relief that she seemed more calm by the end of the conversation. Things were getting worisome and he had no small amount of anxiety that if Rhumfa succumbed to whatever was eating her up

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inside, it might compromise their options for returning home. If, that was, they could get the ship working at all.

CHAPTER 69

Ayoprij found himself confused, disoriented, and very cold. He looked around wondering how he could be cold if he was in aftertime. But then he opened his eyes and saw his own beautiful Ubuntu staring back at him. He tried to tell himself that this was some kind of elaborate joke of Kwandic. They must have walked for three days to reach the magic boat! How could he be in the village again without having any memory whatsoever of getting here. He searched desperately through his smarati for any clue to the unfathomable transition. The last thing he had seen was... Mautide! “Are you there Mautide? Truinye? Lluchra?”

For a panicked moment, there was only silence, but then he turned his head and saw his kinfolk laying all around the well, as if there had been a great drinking of Regina’s fire water by everyone in the village. He shook Aninniyi until the man became awake and questioned his friend as to what had happened. But sadly, the man could offer nothing further of the strange goings on. In fact, once everyone was finally awake, it became clear that not a single one of them had any clue as to what had happened. Truinye had been the last of their people to fall prey to the hoomaas’ weapon and could only describe how she had watched in horror as each of them collapsed one by one until she feared that the whole of her kinfolk would be sent to the aftertime.

“The magic of their people is absolutely beyond anything we have seen even from the Blessed Mother.”

“And yet they did not destroy us.”

“Why? There’s no doubt that they have the power even to reverse the ground force itself.”

“It must have been the prayers to Prijnak. Surely He has restrained the hoomaas from bringing harm to our people.

“But how did all of us get back here?”

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“How were we made to sleep the whole time”

“Where is Gelfetia?!”

Instantly the other questions were thrown to the side as the kinfolk gave the straight-eye all around with increasing terror and desperation.

“I saw her. She collapsed after she became overpowered by the magic of the hoomaas power device.”

“Does that mean she is in the realm of Pritlaxtl?”

“I could not tell, the hoomaas that I was restraining took too much of my attention.”

“One of the hoomaas looked terrified and screamed out when the cover for their power device opened.”

“No, she still was alive. I felt the life-force, though it was very weak-”

“Surely then the magical ones would not have rescued her after all that was done to them-”

“Could the healer have made a mistake to bring attack against their magic boat?”

“No, Gelfetia was right. I heard the-”

Whatever Adeewaya had been about to say was drowned out by the wailing for their beloved healer. The woman who had guided them for over thirty annums. The woman who had brought gudstrength to so many and who had supported his own sister when she had been with child.

But something else teased the edge of his hearing. At first he couldn't quite place the sound. “My kinfolk, please. Cease mourning for a timespan.”

“What is it Kwandic?”

“It is Sefin!” Aninniyi leaped up, but then fell back to his forelegs feeling overcome with dizziness as bright spots danced through his see'n. He had to reach his arm against the side of the well for a moment, but as soon as he was able, he rushed to their shelterspace followed by Kwandic and the rest of the kinsfolk.

CHAPTER 70

It was so gratifying to see her baby's father make fast steppins into the shelter after so many days of separation. But she was much more surprised to see what

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looked like the entirety of her kinfolk squeeze into their shelterspace or peer wide-eyed through the entranceway. Something momentous indeed must have happened during this holy pilgrimage.

“Sefin my beloved. You are safe!” Her mate embraced her and gave her a light kiss on the head. “But why are you not by the brook?”

As she lay on the sleeping mat cradling the new life which she had successfully brought, she shared the wordsong of her own small adventure.

“I was a foolish hoomaas, ihunanya m.³¹ There I sat by the brook, with all of my dear ones traveling to Higsthon for the offering of gratitude. But I had not kept enough fodiens for such a long stay. I found my belly making the noise of hunger and the waters making my mouth do the shivering of cold. With everyone gone, there was either the choice to stay and risk harm to us both, or to carefully make my way back here with little Ayozeala.”

When she had finished, Aninniyi wrapped his strong arms around her lovingly.

“You are so very brave ihunanya m. But it was such a very big risk for Ayozeala. Has she even made her first stepp’ins? She should be resting in the water until she is with gudstrength.”

Sefin patted his cheek affectionately. He was a sweet man, but he often underestimated her. “Oh Aninniyi you worry so. We may not be denisovian, but I am a strong hoomaas. I have the sureness that we will both survive and be a happy family together.”

Nobody noticed Regina slip out after hearing this. But they did find her the next day laying on her mat and still clutching her precious drinking flask.

With her own wordsong complete, it was time to learn what all the noise outside had been about. “Now what is it that brought you all to wailing like the visitation of Pritlaxtl? I swear, it sounded like fifteen meldabeasts mating.”

Barely had the words left her mouth before the whole shelterspace erupted with the various tellings of the confusing wordsong until she had to give strongvoice to ask for only one person to share the wordsong. But even so, there was much correction and many times she denied that such things were possible.

31 Igbo term of endearment - 'my love'

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The wordsong sounded like utter nonsense. Magical hoomaas living in a shelter on the far side of Higsthon? Weapons that could drop a denisovian with no spear or blade? The groundforce that simply went vanus like the Saülè when it became tired? There had been legends, sure. But their people had not been blessed to witness the magic of Aye-yoobay for countless generations. How could the magic such as the blessed ones had brought simply spring up out of the air? And if there *were* people who created enchantments, they should be generous and honorable, like Sefee and Oomkwo, not a people who would point weapons at her kinsfolk. “If it were not for all of you confirming the same wordsong, I would have believed you to be indulging in Regina’s fire water. How could such magic exist but in the place of the remembrance stones?”

“But Sefin. These people are from the sky as well. They came down in a magic boat just as Aye-yoobay and Seffee did.”

“My kinsfolk. I do not believe that you would speak an untrue. But still. This wordsong is very difficult to believe. Would you really swear on the throne of Adeima that you witnessed all of these things happening?”

Now a great many of her kinsfolk gave the swearing on the throne of Azealla and upon the spear of Prijnak.

Maybe.

Could it be?

Was it possible at long last that the time of Adeima’s silence might be finished. But if such a thing were really fulltrue, that was the most fabulous miracle they could ever experience. Even with her success in bringing a new hoomaas to the land, she still regretted being denied the joy of witnessing such a momentous occasion.

“But why so much crying then. This should be reason to celebrate the fulfillment of the prophecy of Gelf the wise.”

It was only when Kwandic mentioned the wordsong of Gelfetia’s collapse, that she saw the woman absent among her kinsfolk. He described how the healer had stood in front of a strange object which the magical people had warned to keep away from. She had bravely endured it’s strange power in order to share the first prophecy that their people had heard since before the founding of Ubuntu.

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Adeewaya then spoke of feeling Gelfetia's life-force and how very weak it was, and how the healer was not among them when he found himself awake here in the village.

As if to emphasize her words, she put her arm lightly on Kwandic's and spoke with soft voice. "I hear you Kwandic, and all of you my kinfolk. But why should we mourn? Our blessed Gelfetia has given her very kaba to share the prophecy of Adeima one last time. This will secure for her a place among our blessed founders. This wondrous event is a time for celebration, not for sadface. We should endeavor to bring a reverence stone along on the next journey up to the wallside of our great ancestors in order that she be honored for all our days."

At first he seemed confused by the idea. But whatever he had been about to say was interrupted by Truinye. "Sefin, I admire your optimism, as always. You are a beautiful hoomaas for your devotion to Adeima. Still, we do not know what has happened to our healer. We do not know why her body has not been returned to us. These hoomaas may have strong magic, but they are not invulnerable. I myself watched one of their people shoot me with their weapon. But I have learned to use a big flat thing which allowed me to defeat even the magical hoomaas." She lowered her voice then. "At least I was able to the first time."

You speak of them with so much unkindness Truinye. Could they really be so malicious if they are from the sky as Aye-yoobay was?"

She expected some disagreement, but was not in the least prepared for the onslaught of anger from her wonderful kinfolk. There was much repetition of the secretive desecration of the stones of remembrance, the removal of breath, and of the separation from Gelfetia.

"I hear you my kinfolk. It is you who have seen these magical ones and so I must take your wordsong as you say. But, query what is there for us to do about all this?"

She was not surprised when Truinye replied with her usual brash foolishness thinly disguised as courage. "I for one am going to travel back to their magic ship and force the hoomaas to return our healer. Whether her kaba is with Pritlaxtl or not."

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The room quickly exploded into a chorus of mutterings and entreaties. There was a great clasp of the woman's arms and a begging for her to choose a different strategy.

For herself she grew tears from her eyes in fear for the warrior. Even just the talk of the white rain that made all of the kinfolk lost, and of her friends being so terribly cold was frightening enough without the magic of controlling the ground-force or taking away everyone's breath. "Oh Truinye. Please do not risk yourself. You are my sister. You are my kinfolk. I beg of you to stay with all of us who respect you and care for you."

Now she watched the warrior show the tears as well. The woman moved next to her bed and gave her a long embrace. "I have the love for you too Sefin. But we cannot allow these magical ones to treat us like some meager wingsquirel. If they are of the same origin as Seffee and Oomkwo, then they should be taught to act like it! I for one, elect myself to be that person."

She tried many tactics to prevent the foolish woman from risking herself thus. She told of the meager fodiens remaining. She reminded the warrior of their wordsong that the white rain had covered the footfalls making it difficult to follow their steppins from the beforetime. But the woman remained just as irrational as ever. She even secretly implored Kwandic to try and restrain the woman. But he of course would have been utterly helpless against the Truinye's stubbornness. Instead of helping the situation, it seemed that their entreaties were only making Truinye become *more* steadfast in her determination. She was feeling utterly infuriated listening to the woman's impetuosity and felt, all the way to the depths of her kaba, that this was a very bad decision.

How could she be so helpless, so powerless to prevent what was sure to be a great tragedy for her dear friend.

CHAPTER 71

The trip back to the stones of remembrance was simple and uneventful. She of course had made the trip every annum since she had been able to walk and so it was no bother. She followed the well-worn path of footfalls between giant boulders

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and near the holy stream which had nourished both Gelf and Adewalay in the far-back beforetime.

Even though she had only spoken the supplication a few days before, she paused once more at the cave of Adewalay out of habit. Then she filled her water pouch again before making her way to the great wallside of remembrance. It always impressed her in gazing upon this place how the stones could lay so evenly compared to the rest of the land. It was such a vast feature, so high that she would not be able to put her hand on the top and long enough that she would need take many footfalls to travel from one side to the other. Looking at the immense mass, it was easy to believe that the story of her own ancestors laying down all these stones might be an untrue. But she chased away the distracting thoughts from her head as she stood before the stone of Truini. She paused there for a timespan in prayer to the powerful one. “You have always been the greatest warrior in the whole land. I implore you this day to share with me your wisdom and convince Prijnak the warrior to be my guide in this journey to recover our beloved healer. My honor and my strength flow *from* you and back *to* you for all the days that my kaba travels this land.” She bowed low and then searched among the stones for the pattern of footfalls which would tell her the path they had traveled during the time of the white rain.

The great multitude of impressions were easy to find as they showed a path not up the mountain or down to the valley, but along the shoulder of Higthon’s might. With the great field of white now gone vanus, she could relish in the wondrous view of the great river and the magnificent forst beyond it. The incredible beauty of Azealla lay before her like the most elaborate marriage cloth ever conceived. The sky was so clear and placid that even the far distant morass was faintly visible at the edge of her see’in. This gave her pause to stare reverently at the field of emptiness that Gelf the wise, and her alone, had found the means to traverse. It must have been an incredible time, she thought, to be in the presence of the great ones and to hear the holy prophecy. She was about to remind herself that she had in fact been blessed to listen to the same from Gelfetia when a faint movement caught her eye.

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She gave the sharp-eye towards the spot and saw a tiny patch of foliage disappear along the far end of the morass. Only a brief moment later there was a faint crashing sound like very distant thunder.

She did not know what this meant. Perhaps it was connected to this visit from the magical hoomaas. With all of their many wonders, she could easily believe that the outsiders might be involved in such things.

But regardless of that, one thing was certain. Whatever strange happenings had developed, the magical ones would be the most likely people to know more information. Thus she made fast-steppins along Higsthon's massive shoulder in hopes of discovering the fulltrue more quickly.

CHAPTER 72

The footfalls ended along a great field of white. This confused her, for it wasn't the white that fell from the overhead in the beforetime. It was more solid, and it felt slippery when she attempted to stand on it. Even the strange flat thing she had purchased was of no use here. She reached out to touch the substance and found it to be terribly cold. Colder even than the white rain had been. Now she grew worried. For the only way forward without walking on the slippery place was to travel downhill and away from her intended path.

She would never have admitted it, but now she had the beginnings of fraidness. Would she become lost as the healer had? Was it possible for her to still emerge victorious from this? She had come too far now to allow the shame of defeat to conquer her. The only option was to follow in the footsteps of Gelf the wise and let nothing prevent her from reaching the magic boat.

It was a short time farther along that she saw something strange in the distance. She gave the sharp-eye in that direction, but there was no iran ologo now to bring clarity and so she could only concentrate on the meager sense that something was different about the shape of the land ahead. She would have to be patient and travel on until the distance became smaller in order to gain more clarity for what had piqued her interest. In the meantime she sang one of the holy psalms to Aye-

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yubay in hopes that He would travel with her, as he had traveled with Gelf to the holy temple in the far back beforetime.

It was many footfalls later that she began to distinguish what had caught her eye. The place ahead did not have the natural rocky crags of Higsthon. There were many parts that were smooth, like clay vessels that were used to store jadzabeen. But there was no reason to figure why somebody might have large vessels way out here. Besides, the features would have to be very large in order to be viewed from so far.

She began to make fast-steppins as the anticipation took hold and she wondered if the magic boat of the hoomaas might cause such a thing. But as the distance closed, she became reminded again of how incredibly big the magic boat had been. Somehow her smarati had not been truthful and she had felt the belief that it would be a trivial matter to defeat the magical hoomaas, as she had with the help of the kinsfolk. If she *was* incorrect, it might bring her to the same end that Gelfetia had succumbed to.

Soon enough her see'n told her that she had in fact now reached the right place. The wondrous size of the thing soon towered over the land before her. With it's great vigrus wallsides glowing brilliantly with the light from the Saülè, she felt the fraidness like she had not ever felt in the beforetime. Even the walk of great cold was a huitzfly in comparison to this. She approached the place slowly and with many unconscious glances behind her. For now there was no great mass of kinsfolk to stand by her side, there was no wise healer to offer advice. She was utterly alone against a magic such as she and the people of Ubuntu had never witnessed before the pilgrimage.

As she made steppins around the great hulk it brought strong amazement to her that such a creation might descend out of the sky. For it was completely beyond her what force might enable such a thing. This immense mass could overshadow the entire village of Ubuntu within it and still have space leftover. It had many large protrusions sticking out in random places which were of some mysterious origin and it seemed that the thing leaned somewhat to the side, which made little sense to her.

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Looking up at the boat, it seemed that the entry which had been so obvious when Gelfetia had shown it to them, was now utterly vanus. The gigantic thing simply watched impassively with no reaction to her presence whatsoever. But then, as she rounded a strange protrusion, there was one hoomaas holding a tool against the wallside. He did not see her and she was far too clever to give up the advantage. She crept along beyond his see'in (for she had spent enough time around the hoomaas to know of their wider field of vision), and leapt upon him forcing him to the underfoot.

“What the-” The puny hoomaas struggled in vain, but he was even more fragile than her own hoomaas kinfolk in Ubuntu. “Emergency. Atta-”

She felt a strange vibration and saw a magical panel descend from the boat with one hoomaas making fast-steppins down it's face. The woman slowed quickly as she left the ship and seemed to struggle while pointing one arm straight out. But she knew that despite their magic, these hoomaas were very weak and she took barely a moment to grab her flat thing as protection. Then, instead of risking the chance of the hoomaas' weapon any further, she simply flung the man she was holding at the other hoomaas and watched with satisfaction as they fell upon each other.

She began making fast steppins towards the walking panel when someone shouted behind her and everything went black. Her last thought was of amazement for the magic of these strange people.

CHAPTER 73

“Chineke mee! What is with these people?! What in the world have we done to deserve such horrible luck?!”

Kotingre stared back morosely. “I don't know Rhumfa. Unfortunately this business with the natives is far beyond my area of expertise.”

She rubbed her temple which was beginning to throb unceasingly from the stress of all this nzuzu³². “Alright alright. Let's try something easier. How are Oneyda and Saaed?”

32 Crazy in Igbo (could it also mean craziness)

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Now thankfully, the doctor showed a brighter expression. “Oh I’m sure they’ll be fine. It will take some time and a little surgery. Oneyda has a broken radius and ulna, mild concussion, and two cracked vertebra. But Saaed fell against a rock and has some swelling along the hippocampus, plus a broken wrist, broken femur and some internal bleeding.” He glanced at the readout to check if there was anything else. “Rhumfa, you really should be careful about sending people out there. This gravity, it’s not something to toy with.”

She became blinded with fury at the comment and her face twisted itself into an expression of unbridled hatred “I’ll try to keep that in mind next time some alien attacks the ship doctor!” She couldn’t help herself now. Between the injuries, the attacks, and her migraine it was just too much. But the look on Kotingre’s face immediately reflected the severity of her emotions with his own shocked expression. She quickly recovered and apologized to the man for the outburst. It wasn’t his fault after all.

“I’m so sorry doctor. The situation just seems to keep deteriorating by the hour even and I just-” she semi-consciously struck at the counter in her frustration “just can’t seem to make any headway against it all.

Kotingre reached under the the medical display and handed her a small vial.

“Here Rhumfa. This should help you with the migraines that you’ve been experiencing. I can only imagine the kind of stress you’ve been dealing with since we landed on this rock. Be sure to limit yourself to one per day with these.” She began to speak, but the doctor wasn’t finished yet.

“And, I want you in your quarters sleeping for no less then 12 hours-”

“Twelve hours?? Doctor that’s ridiculous! I have to check on Oneyda and Saaed, plus figure out what the story is with those murderous natives-”

“And you will be an utter failure at that if you keep pushing yourself. Rhumfa you have got to properly relegate these things to the rest of the crew. If not for your own sanity, then for the sake of everyone else on this ship. Think about it my friend. How are you going to defuse a potential powderkeg with these natives if you’re on the edge pushing your emotions to the limit?”

Despite the pain, she saw the man with new eyes now. “Honestly doctor. I wonder if you haven’t contracted some of that native’s mind-reading abilities yourself.”

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The man smiled at the compliment and ushered her back to her quarters.

CHAPTER 74

She did at least feel somewhat refreshed after a good sleep. But that only took up ten hours, and as much as she was loathe to admit it, the doctor was among the best off-worlders she knew. Any further sleep beyond that was impossible though. Her mind kept spinning with worry over the situation with the crew and those native people in the strangely named village of Ubuntu. “Oibo what is the status of the two alien people in the med-bay?”

The ship AI responded that both of them were still recovering and neither was conscious yet.

That at least was a relief, she certainly wanted a highly-skilled person with them when they did come around. In the meantime she pulled out her pad and tapped at it absentmindedly in hopes of finding a distraction. There were the ship logs from the Nneka, crew reports, satellite data, and not least worrisome, the issue with the two invaders.

But that train of thought was interrupted when Oibo informed her that there was a high-priority message from Penreida. The woman had been doing chemical analysis of the geological samples in hopes that they could somehow manipulate some local metals to substitute for the damaged systems. But there had been no news from the woman since the recent break-in.

She prayed for something positive while putting on a uniform and heading over to the geology lab. But Penreida wasn't anywhere to be seen. Oibo informed her that the woman was in her quarters, which meant another five minutes of crawling through the passageways. “This better be worth the trouble, young lady” she thought to herself.

“Oh Rhumfa. I'm guessing you got my message.” The woman intended it to sound friendly, but there was a distinct undertone of tension and fear in her voice.

“What is it that you needed me to come down here for?” The woman's tone worried her some, but Penreida had a tendency to exaggerate problems, and so she told herself that it was only this and nothing more.

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There was a long pause which was typical of the woman. She often held conversations hostage while taking multiple periods to collect her thoughts.

“Rhumfa, do you remember the weird things that native woman was saying while she was in front of the dark-energy crystal?”

She sighed inwardly, as it wasn't an experience she relished thinking about. “No I'm sorry Penreida, I was too busy being held down by a couple of aliens and trying to regain control of the ship.”

“You don't have to get so defensive Rhumfa, I was just asking if you remembered what that being said.” There was another pause, but before she could interject, Penrieda continued. “Maybe we should check in later.”

Conversations with Penreida often tended to feel like a psychological military exercise for her. She honestly couldn't figure out how the woman had managed to be cleared for the mission, but there was no denying her skill when it came to rocks and obscure metals.

“It's alright, Penreida. Just tell me what you wanted to share with me.”

The woman still looked hurt, but after another short pause she acquiesced. “Well, you know how we often focus more intently on something when it involves us personally?”

She briefly turned her eyes to the ceiling and urged the woman to continue.

“Well, I heard the native say something about Ojute da shida and nanoscreen failure when she stared at the energy crystal. I didn't know what it meant, but I spoke with Ikasha about what she might know and she told me that 'da shida' was an archaic term from Hausa and it's a multiple of six, like twenty six, thirty six, forty-six-”

“I understand. Please continue.”

“You know, if you're in an unhappy mood, we could talk another-”

She had no interest in dragging this issue on through a second discussion.

Through long and painful experience she'd learned that it was more efficient to drag through the dialogue with Penrieda the first time.

“I'm fine. Please just share with me what this is about.”

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The woman gave her a dark look, but finally continued. “Well I couldn’t stop thinking about that saying and how the native had mentioned me specifically by name even without knowing who I was.”

“She probably plucked the knowledge from my head, the same way she got the code for the forcefield.”

“You know Rhumfa, I really don’t enjoy being interrupted so much. You could really benefit from learning more about diplomacy.”

She gritted her teeth and remembered why she always avoided the woman. “I understand Penreida. I’m sorry, please tell me what it is.

“Well, if you wont interrupt me.”

Instead of saying something, she just made a hand gesture to try and get the thing over with.

“Well, as I was saying. The idea that this native knew my name made me focus more on what she’d said in that trance-like thing. I didn’t know what Ojute-” She drifted off a bit then trying to remember where she’d heard that name, she searched fervently through her memory, but the clue remained stubbornly out of reach. So finally she returned her attention to Penreida.

“Not really paying attention to me are you? Maybe I should just run this by Huso instead.”

“I’m listening Penreida. It’s time to share what you know or we’ll just ignore the whole thing.”

Sounding even more hurt and frustrated, the woman finally continued her seemingly endless saga. “Well I was a little more determined to find out the truth than some other crew members.” The woman gave a long and dramatic pause before continuing. “I asked Oibo to open a general search through our files to see if the name Ojute came up, but that didn’t provide any answers. There was simply no record of the word in the database of information we brought. But then just this morning I was browsing through some titles that we found in that other professor’s library, it was... um”

“Umquo.”

“I was just getting to that.”

“Right.”

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“So he had this short section in his e-library that included the writings of some obscure krischin philosopher named Ojute.” The woman now looked at her expectantly.

“So.”

“So? How did that native person find out about this if she’d never looked at Umquo’s e-library?”

She took a deep breath and spoke slowly, as if she were speaking to a child.

“Because, Penreida, this native has the ability to pluck memories straight from our head. That’s how she found out about our incursion into the Nneka to begin with.” But this time it was Penreida who took on a frustrated tone. “But don’t you get it? *I hadn’t read the document until this morning.* How could the native woman know that in a couple days time I would happen to browse through that e-library? Hmm? She can’t foresee the future, can she?”

Finally. It seemed there was some tantalum in among all that clay. “Olódùmarè ò!” She ran what little she remembered of the experience over and over in her mind. Sure it was one thing for the native to see into her mind for knowledge of the plasma duct. But if what Penrieda said was true, then there was no way in the whole world the native could’ve known about some obscure document that would later be found in records from the Nneka.

Looking down, she saw her hands trembling and she forcefully willed herself to take a few deep breaths. The two natives were alive and totally safe in the med-bay. The ship was (hopefully) out of range from future visits, and she could interrogate their healing woman as soon as she was fully recovered.

These thoughts were only a small help to her, but it was the best she could hope for given the circumstances.

She took another deep breath in preparation for whatever shenanigans Penreida might have left. “Thank you for taking the time to bring this up. It was definitely worth the visit.”

The hint of a smile grew on the other woman’s face. “I’m glad to be able to help. Is there anything else that I can provide. Maybe I can be with you when the two natives wake up? I imagine that you would appreciate someone who can show

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them some empathy and dispel any conflict. Perhaps it would help us to develop a greater understanding with each other.”

This time she managed to resist the urge to raise her eyes to the ceiling. “I’m afraid, Penreida, that we aren’t at the point of conversing with those two yet. But if there *is* a way for you to contribute, I’ll be sure to keep you in the loop.”

The woman didn’t look entirely convinced, but she ignored that and reached for the door to signal that the conversation was done, not particularly concerned now whether the woman got the hint. “Rhumfa, I hope that you will think carefully about my offer.”

“Of course I will” she lied before returning to her quarters.

CHAPTER 75

She could think of little more than the terrifying agony she had endured. Staring at the hoomaas’ power crystal had been the most painful experience of her entire life. She had felt as if every bit of skin on her body was on fire and burning off somehow. There was little else to look back upon, for her thinking had been completely overwhelmed by something which she could find no wordsong for. Now apparently she was destined to meet Pritlaxtl and to experience the aftertime. For there was nothing but emptiness all around her. It felt as if she were floating bodyless and the world of the kinfolk was but a vague feeling in her smarati. She wondered what it would be like. If she would see her lost parents and the other kinfolk in the aftertime. She hoped, even more, that Gelf the wise and Ayube would be there to greet her and to share the bounty of ultimate knowledge with her.

Yet somehow, it felt as if there was something else pressing on the edge of her experience. It was not something that she could form into words, just a vague impression, much like the emotions of her kinfolk when they were upset.

Somehow, she heard a voice that did not sound familiar. It seemed to be coming from very far away and yet she felt some kind of vibration within her. Slowly, ever so slowly, the voice became more distinct and it was joined then by another more

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familiar voice. It sounded like someone who was very angry. Yet the feeling still remained of a huge gulf between them.

This brought within her the desire for healing of whatever was conducting the strange unhappy. She was not at first certain how to connect with the voice, but some force of will drove her to keep searching. The effort reminded her of a time when she had walked into the Juantaylib and attempted to swim against the water's current. There seemed to be some kind of barrier creating the separation, it was a force that was not quite solid but which felt very strong regardless.

With time and patience though, she seemed to develop a means to cause it to relent some small amount. The change was at first barely perceptible, but she continued to make progress until a strangely uniform light seemed to shine down from above her.

This confused her almost as much as the immaterial resistance, as this wasn't the brilliance of the Saülé, or even the shimmer of a fire. This light had the same brightness over a wide area. It convinced her all the more that this was the after-time and she might at last connect with her blessed ancestors.

CHAPTER 76

"That's it. Slow steps now. You're doing great."

The corners of her pert mouth drew down a few degrees more while she gritted her teeth trying to keep her patience. "Doctor, I am not an invalid. Please don't treat me as if a few small steps are an accomplishment. Your magnificent healing skills aside, it doesn't feel like this knife in my gut is ever going to let me walk properly again."

The man's frustration was only barely discernible, like the ghostly after-image when a hologram was shut down. "Fatima don't belittle this. You've shown splendid progress on this recovery. You remember Sim Park back on NewMali and the two weeks that man spent in recovery after the anti-grav coil he was carrying was jostled and he broke five ribs and his breastbone? Compared to that you're practically flying through your rehabilitation."

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She patted his hand resting on the steeprail. “Thank you doctor. It still feels like a teran year for me walking around here like a one year old child.” If she ever got her hands on that damn native, she’d put a stun beam to her and dump her in the nearest brook. The cursed woman had acted like one of the bullies she’d had at school, but one with the strength of a body builder. She’d never get over the image of the woman’s face contorted into a mask of rage while she rained her smashing fists down with terrifying effectiveness.

“Ow! Geez.” Every step was feeling like a regimen of forty situps and even though her organs were finished regenerating, the muscles and cartilage was still horribly sore and painful. Despite Kotingre’s optimism she couldn’t even imagine walking like a normal person. For that matter, she wondered if she *ever* would.

CHAPTER 77

Truinye woke up on a flat surface with a peculiar material facing her. It was bright, but not in the way that the Saülé was bright. This vision held no warmth at all, nor was there any contrast or color. But then she almost leapt out of her skin when one of the cursed hoomaas’ face appeared over her. At least she *tried* to leap. But somehow her entire body was bound with some kind of invisible restraint. She could move nothing but her head and her mouth.

“What have you done to me! Where am I! Where is our blessed healer! Am I to be a prisoner as well for the sake of your cruel malice?”

The hoomaas made the sign of peace, which of course was quite ironic given the situation these people had put her in. But then she spoke of how their people had only taken defensive measures and that neither she nor any of her people were harmed.

“I will not speak to you until I see what you have done to our blessed healer! I demand that you return Gelfetia to our people.”

She might be unable to move her body. But by the spear of Prijnak she would do everything in her power to get the fantastical hoomaas to reveal to her the fulltrue and resolve the unknowins about Gelfetia.

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The hoomaas said something about a sleep of recovery. She did not understand this, and the way things were going, she really did not care for any of their feeble excuses. But then, like the song of the first Gedelwix after the time of mists had passed, she heard Gelfetia's voice drifting towards her.

"What is going on? Where am I? Where is Pritlaxtl to greet me?"

Though she could not move to embrace the woman, she sang out her greeting nonetheless. "Oh Gelfetia, thank the creator you are still with us!"

"Truinye? Is that you? Why can I not move? Is this some punishment of the aftertime?"

"No Gelfetia. It is the cursed hoomaas. They have taken us prisoner."

"Please. Please Truinye. We are only restraining you to prevent you from causing harm to my crew. I promise you both that the two of you are completely safe."

"Your words are empty of meaning hoomaas-" She spat the words, but was soon interrupted by the healer.

"Truinye, please be silent a moment." There was a pause for a timespan before the woman spoke again. "The hoomaas speaks the truth. They are very fearful for what we have done. The two hoomaas that you attacked were severely damaged. But their magic is very strong and the people will recover."

"Well, it serves them right to imprison you like this."

"Truinye, how can we convince you that we are not your enemy?"

"How?! You can return our blessed healer to our peo-"

"Truinye, I beg of you to be silent. I cannot learn the fulltrue unless you allow space for me to give attention to the hoomaas' wordsong." The healer must have turned to address the hoomaas for she switched to the holy language, even though the hoomaas seemed able to speak both. "Rhumfa. I am deeply sorry for the attack on your ship. We never intended harm to your people or your magic boat." The healer paused as if searching for some specific wordsong of healing. "Pilut Rhumfa, I saw the mind-picture of how Gelf the wise was able to speak the prophecy of Adeima and I felt the strong sureness that such a thing was possible for me as well-"

"You did healer! You spoke of the forst lying flat, and the shield offering protectio-"

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She was interrupted by the cruel hoomaas then. “What do you mean? This is the same thing that your village founder was able to do? But it’s been hundreds of years, and this is a completely updated piece of technology. The whole thing is just nonsense!”

“Rhumfa, you have not reviewed the entire ‘reechor-ding’ from the time of blessings. There was much wisdom shared by Gelf the wise and by Adeima who guided Her people.”

“Gelfetia... those are nothing more than legends. Like the stories of dgews leaving Egypt or something.”

There was a pause and Gelfetia gave a thin sigh before explaining. “Hoomaas, I understand that you do not believe in the majesty of Adeima. But like the great Aye-yoobay, you will change your belief. It is the will of our Holy Mother that you were sent to this land.”

Neither of them heard the woman mutter ‘Like hell I will.’

CHAPTER 76

She had to leave the two natives to join ipade. But she asked Dr. Kotingre to do whatever he could to make the aliens as comfortable as possible to the extent that it posed no danger to the crew.

In the meantime they had to figure out how to keep these damned people from just magically showing up to attack the ship.

“Shadai, Huso, Anya, thank you for joining me today.” She did her best to keep her voice calm after the poor control she’d shown in front of the doctor the day before. It was bad enough that she was racked with guilt every day for the situation she had put them all into. It was all the more important now that she show better care in keeping their conversations as peaceful as possible if she wanted to stem further conflict. So very carefully, she described the situation as well as she could from what Oneyda, and Saaed had told her.

“-After what had already occurred, I wasn’t willing to risk any more of your lives. I just beamed to a spot behind the native and gave her a tranq-shot at close enough

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range to be sure I didn't miss. But not so close that she could've gotten ahold of me."

Shadai put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Rhumfa. I appreciate your courage. But don't forget that you're our best chance of getting back home, Saaed's repair skills notwithstanding of course."

She was gratified by the woman's kindness. Even if only for the sake of ensuring that they all got home. "Thank you Shadai. But it was my own foolhardy decision to steer us to this planet. It's my fault that we're in this situation and—"

"Rhumfa! Please." Huso waved his hand to interrupt her. "There's no question we were upset with you in the beginning. Hell I was ready come up to the bridge and give you a piece of my mind, before even getting into my outfit for that matter."

A smile made itself to her lips and she watched in amusement as her friend blushed in response.

"Anyway, look. You may have landed us here. But you didn't damage the air cycling system, you didn't deliver a group of angry aliens to our door. And you sure as hell didn't cause this crushing gravity." The man took a minute to take a breath and calm himself a bit. "Look Rhumfa, we're all in this together and passing blame either on ourselves or on others is going to accomplish absolutely nothing. We have to work on moving forward here."

"Rhumfa, he's right. You don't have to bear the weight of the entire ship on your own shoulders. We all appreciate how much effort it must have taken you to keep us alive and get the ship down in one piece. You're a great pilot."

Though she had hoped that her crew didn't harbor ill-will, it was another thing to actually hear the words spoken. She got up and gave Huso a warm embrace and whispered a thank you into his ear.

"My friends. I appreciate your support. More than ever given our current situation. But the fact remains. We *have got* to find some means of keeping these people away from the ship. Kaylan hasn't found evidence of Rhenium for the firing jets anywhere on the planet's surface and both Penreida and I have checked and verified his findings. So for the time being we can't just cut our losses with these natives." She paused and gave a sigh. "So, any ideas?"

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For at least a couple of minutes, all she received were blank stares from the others. Not that she should have expected much, but she was becoming ever more worried that if the rest of her crew couldn't help find a solution it might spell disaster for the whole lot of them.

Finally though, she saw Huso speak, and sadly she knew what he was going to say even before the words left his mouth.

“Rhumfa, why don't you just let me go and speak to them again. With their healer in the med-bay there won't be any danger of them reading my mind.”

She put a hand on his arm affectionately. “I'm sorry Huso. That's so valiant of you. But I just can't risk the safety of any of you on something like this. Look what happened to your wrist from just the slightest fall, not to mention what happened to Fatima and Saaed.”

“Captain, I know it's a long shot. But what if we used the Gbowee to head out of the planet's atmosphere and send a distress beacon? Maybe there's a chance that another ship would catch it.”

She looked at him sadly. “Manual, it took over five hundred years for me to find the signal from the Nneka, and that was while leaving the most distant human outpost in the Milky Way. Do you really think we could expect that someone would just happen to catch it sooner than we did?”

“Rhumfa.”

She looked over at Anya hoping for some better suggestions.

“I found the airlock door sitting right out near the forward landing strut. Do you know how it could have gotten all the way back here to the ship?”

“Oh, that was just another part of this tragedy. Somehow that woman who attacked us was-” Something stopped her just then. It teased her mind for a microsecond and she clutched haphazardly for the memory until it finally manifested itself. “Apata!” That's how the warrior had been able to defeat her. She must've seen the airlock door and saw the value of it as a shield. “I'd bet a week's rations that it was that native warrior who brought it here. She was planning to use it as a defensive weapon. This is exactly why we needed to leave

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this planet alone. Tsine!³³ How many more screw-ups are we gonna cause by our presence in this place!”

“Rhumfa, you’ve got to stop blaming yourself-”

She scowled at Manuel involuntarily. “And who am I supposed to blame? Adeema or whatever they call their god? Look. I was the one who diverted us here. I was the one who took the risk of landing on this forsaken place, I-”

The rest of her words became muffled as both Shadai and Huso wrapped their arms around her. She drew from their their support and it helped her to take control of her emotions again. She cried tears of frustration at the seemingly innumerable dead-ends that they kept slamming against with every attempt. But finally the support of her crew did it’s healing work.

“I’m sorry my friends. Thank you.” She patted them both on the shoulder and encouraged them to sit down again. “Okay, so I’ll make sure that the airlock door gets stowed in the cargo bay and the doctor can take care of the two natives. So except for those people recovering from these attacks, the rest of us should focus on figuring some way of troubleshooting a plan for getting off this rock.”

Clearly it was more then she could’ve hoped for that they would come up with some ingenious plan for escape, but despite her efforts and unbeknownst to the rest of them she was beginning to harbor fears that the lot of them might suffer the same fate as the crew of the Nneka. That thought remained lodged in her gut, a rotting sore that couldn’t be healed or removed.

Chapter 77

In her discussion with Truinye she had been thrilled to hear that the terrible risk had brought with it success. Though the pain had been incredibly severe, the warrior had described bits of prophecy that she had recited while standing in front of the hoomaas’ strange device. It was the most fabulous gift she could ever have dreamed of. To think that she alone had become the first of their people since the far back days of Gelf the wise, and share wisdom from the Holy Mother once again.

33 Damn in Hausa

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Sadly though, the knowledge so far was still hidden. She attempted to ask more from the magical ones and from Truinye of the wondrous prophecy. But there had simply been too much excitement for a clear recollection by her fellow prisoner. She could only hope that one of the hoomaas would permit her to see the mind-pictures within their smarati. She had enormous fraidness though, that they might be too upset over what she had done to comply. Given all that had occurred between their people, she had to admit to herself that it was understandable. It would be necessary to show patience and be most gracious in her dealings with the hoomaas visitors if she ever hoped to return the wondrous gift of smart-known to her kinfolk.

A strange flat panel opened up in the side of the room that she now shared with Truini and the 'pylut' of the huge magical boat slowly entered. "I hope that the three of us will be able to have a more calm discussion this time, *without* the use protective measures now. Gelfetia, Truinye, can I have your cooperation on that?" The mind-pictures that she was seeing were, sadly, not nearly as harmonious as she had been led to believe from the stories of Seffee and Aye-yoobay. Those reechord-ings from the far back beforetime caused her to expect reconciliation within a short timespan. There had been fighting between them once, but the blessed ones had found a way to work together and accept each other in the end. This hoomaas on the other hand, felt only a deep worry and distrust upon entering the room and she had even requested that another hoomaas stand by the entry with one of their magic weapons in case there was a problem. The fraidness seemed to radiate off of the woman like brightness from the Saülè at the height of His journey.

She did not know how to bring the healing with these magical people, but it seemed that apology would be the proper place to start. She even lowered herself to her forelegs to show the strength of her sincerity before offering her best effort. "Rhumfa, pylut. I apologize to you and to your people, with the whole of my kaba for the breaking of trust with you. Please understand that I was acting on the belief that you would react much as the great Oomkwo had during the time of blessings. It felt oh so very important to try and return for us the prophecy of

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Adeima from the far back beforetime. We have endured countless many annums without Her guidance-”

“Thank you Gelfetia. That means a great deal to me.” The woman allowed herself to relax, but only a small amount as she sat on one of the chairs in the room.

“As you may know from the... mind-pictures you experienced, we have a great deal of concern both from being injured by your people as well as from the fear of creating a harmful influence on your village.”

“Hoomaas it is not for you to decide what influence is harmful or not. That is for the Holy Mother Herself to judge, for She is the ruler of all. If you insist on keeping us here in your magic boat and not among our-”

“Truinye, I beg you to let me share wordsong with this hoomaas. The time now is for healing and not for battle.” She worried very much for how the leader of these people would react to the warrior’s short-tempered aggression. For the moment she sensed only a small reduction in the pylut’s patience. But Truinye on the other hand was filled with the fury and the unhappy. As understandable as those feelings were, they would only hamper her effort at restitution.

The warrior however, was not placated. She radiated unhappy like a stone which had spent much time baking beneath the Saülé’s heat. “Not the time? Gelfetia we are prisoners! We are held here against our will in this magic boat. Kept away from our kinsf-”

She put her mouth close to the warriors face and spoke the quietwords in hopes that the hoomaas would not discover her plan. “Truinye, our actions have brought about the deep unhappy for their leader. It should be clear to you that even though they have not the level of vigrus that we enjoy, their magic is very powerful.

Without the assistance of their leader, it is possible that we will never see Ubuntu again. You and I have a responsibility to our people not only to learn the fulltrue surrounding the prophecy of Adeima, but also to bring this fulltrue back to our people. Please understand Truinye, that just as I have helped to bring a healing for unhealth of the body, I am now attempting a healing within the kaba of this hoomaas.”

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Given her close proximity to the warrior, she now had the assurance that the woman would not interrupt further. She prayed to the depths of her kaba that she might finally be able to work on a most challenging healing now.

Thankfully, both her own sense of the hoomaas' emotions and her words reinforced a mutual desire for reparation, and she would commit herself fully to the expansion of that desire.

"Rhumfa, I apologize for the emotions of Truinye. She suffers much unhappy from the confusing situation that we find ourselves in. She came far out to this place under the belief that your people might have delivered me to the aftertime." She paused then, wondering if she wasn't moving the conversation along too quickly.

"It would greatly ease the distrust if you and your people would join us in Ubuntu so that the kinfolk will know that we have not been sent to Pritlaxtl.

"I'm sorry Truinye, but our people simply can't endure the gravity of your planet very easily. We stay here on our ship because we can reduce the severity of the 'ground-force' to something more tolerable for our people."

"What?" Were it not for the sense-readin, she might assume that the woman was speaking an untrue. How could such a thing be, when one of their own people had traveled into the village only a few days in the beforetime.

"Pylut Rhumfa, we already know that the great Umkwo, and Adewale, and Sefi were able to travel in this land and even to walk across the great morass. *They* were hoomaas too. So why is it that you claim to be unable to do this?"

There was some frustration in the hoomaas' voice. But she made a conscious effort to avoid peering into the woman's smarati in order to find out what was causing it.

"Gelfetia, you're right. The original crew did manage to get around on your planet. But both of you must understand, those people were anthropologists... um people who practice for many annums in order to learn about other cultures. Professor Umkwo and Adewale came here *intentionally*, and they trained for months before venturing outside. My word, they must have built up incredible strength to manage it. Their ship also didn't have grav-plating installed. They couldn't have returned to the Nneka for a break whenever they wanted as we can. It would have necessitated a constant vigilance for them to keep from breaking every bone in their bodies."

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The captain was certainly speaking the full truth. Yet it was such a strange concept. A people whose bodies were so fragile that they could not even withstand the ground force for a full day? This utterly contradicted all of the mind-pictures she had created of the great ones and of the hoomaas in that faraway land of Urth.

“Does that mean that your people back on your home planet do not require the long time of adjustment in the water when you are born? Are your people there as absent of the god strength as your ‘crew’ here?”

The woman paused for some time before offering a reply. There was a great taking in of breath and the woman briefly tapped on an object wrapped around her wrist before replying. “To be honest, there were some of us who wondered if it would even be possible for a ‘hoomaas’ to give birth in a world such as this. The concept of giving infants long periods of rest in the water explains a great deal.”

In order to help the woman understand, and also to assist in strengthening trust, she gave the pylut wordsongs of the many experiences shared with her hoomaas kinfolk in Ubuntu. Of how the mothers would spend most of each day bathing in the great brook and of Regina who had been without the vigor to bring new life to their village. She told of how she grieved for that woman very often, as the loss had brought so much melancholy to her kaba.

The pylut listened with great attention, only occasionally moving her eyes down to tap on the wrist object. It seemed that her wordsong was the right choice, for it brought about a noticeable relaxing of the woman’s expression. But would that be enough to bring a full healing though?

She could not have sureness of this just yet.

CHAPTER 78

It sounded like some kind of practical joke. If it were possible to imagine someone creating a joke that wouldn’t be exposed for hundreds of years. No. It wasn’t in any way possible.

She stared at the screen while the face of a long-dead anthropologist recounted standing in some primitive temple and experiencing -what. A dream? A hallucination? No description seemed to apply. But the incident had clearly

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changed the man. He stared with a serene expression, recanting his time in the native temple with reverence, as if he had stared directly into the face of God. The experience of reviewing the recording changed her own view of these natives as well, though surely not as much as it had changed the man Ayube's. Somehow that group of anthropologists had stepped into something far more momentous than any of them could've imagined not then or in the 500 years since. Instead of merely spending a year or two studying an ancient culture to learn more about how the people lived, they had been exposed to a philosophy so revolutionary that it had caused them to voluntarily abandon all efforts to repair the Nneka and return to Earth. This person claimed to have conversed with a being which was so close to omnipotent that it might have birthed all the primitive religions on Earth and perhaps those of other systems as well. If this was true, how could their puny human technology even dream of competing with that?

She hadn't realized that her hands were shaking until she moved a finger to stab at the communicator and missed on her first try. This was just too strange and terrifying to deal with alone. But sitting there with her finger vibrating five millimeters above the button, she wondered who on the ship might be sympathetic? Huso was competent but too close to Rhumfa. Fatima was still furious at the native who had put her in the sick room. Manuel was sweet, but certainly had no expertise in this area.

Finally she sent a message to Anya who at least had shown some interest in the beings' language. The woman answered, but was too preoccupied to meet in person. So instead she just summarized her thoughts for the woman, all the while hoping that some brilliant piece of logic would be shared would surface that might dismiss the mountainous shadow of her fears.

The woman at least didn't scoff at her the way Rhumfa surely would have. She was understandably critical, but also willing to entertain alternative views.

"So you think that this same 'god' or whatever could still be influencing their society here?" The woman gave her a steady gaze, which was drastically better than she had expected.

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“I don’t honestly know *what* to think Anya. According to the recording, this being claimed to cause not only the Nelson Mandela’s disappearance out here but also the discovery of dark energy in the first place.”

“Ikasha, that’s just ridiculous. The dark energy crystal was discovered by a team of several dozen people working for almost thirty years. What incentive would this being or whatever have to influence humanity’s development so drastically?”

“Well of course there’s nothing *I* can think of, but then again I’m not an immortal non-corporeal being.”

“Who said anything about, oh nevermind. Listen, why don’t you see if there’s anything from that native’s time standing in the power room. Maybe that-”

“Anya, there’s nothing at all. Every single one of us was preoccupied with fighting hostile aliens, or don’t you remember that.” She immediately regretted the outburst. The words were far too harsh for the fledgling discussion. But thankfully the woman seemed not to be phased.

“Well, I don’t know what else to suggest. I mean, sure it’s interesting. But if none of the rest of the crew are concerned, then I don’t see that it’s worth devoting much of our valuable time.”

She ended the conversation slightly bothered. It wasn’t anything she could put a finger on, but there was definitely some connection here. She just had to unravel how the whole thing was connected. The puzzle pieces were just too scattered for her to develop a clear picture.

CHAPTER 79

“Rhumfa, I’m sorry for the interruption, but I thought you should know that the satellite has picked up a shift in the thermal patterns from the farther village. There is a large portion gathered near the waterlogged region, and I believe we have movement in this direction.”

The hoomaas was annoyed at the interruption, but for her it was a great opportunity. For this information, along with the mind-pictures which she had briefly noticed, offered her some sense of what might be interpreted from the Holy Mother.

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“Truinye, what was that part of the prophecy which the blessed Mother shared through me? The one about trees?”

The warrior thought for a moment but her face projected the unhappy. “I’m sorry Gelfetia, all that I remember was trees and an attack.”

“Yes yes, and there was more. I feel that it might be incredibly important.”

Despite her self control, she perceived that the hoomaas was experiencing the strong emotions of bewilderment and some annoyance as well.

“So you’re telling me that when you become exposed to the energy crystal, you’re suddenly able to predict the future? I’m sorry Gelfetia, but despite all of the other things we’ve experienced on this world, that’s just too much to swallow.”

The pylut had many questions now regarding what had happened in the beforetime. But for her, the possible harm to her kinfolk became a great deal more important right now. Something about this situation gave her a cold feeling inside. The fact that she could not exactly say what caused her feel this way only intensified her unease.

“Roomfa. I think that it is something else, but I cannot be certain. May I ask permission to look into your smarati of the time that I was staring at your magic crystal.”

The moment she said it, she sensed very dark anger from the hoomaas and she knew before the woman even spoke that it was far too early to ask such a thing from the pylut. The woman made a ‘v’ with her eye hair and her mouth turned down severely before the leader even spoke a word.

“My permission?? You ask my permission?! Why on earth do you even need to ask. Can’t you just pluck whatever you wish right from my damn head?” It was almost amusing the way their people waved the arms around when they were excited. But she held control and did not allow the smile to break upon her face. Now was not the time for amusement. This was going to have to be dealt with most carefully if she had any hope of repairing the unhappy with these people. She held her head down and once again stooped to her forelegs. “Pylut Roomfa. Please understand how very, deeply sorry I am. It is considered a great violation of your peoples’ privacy to look into the smarati of a hoomaas without permission. I acted most foolishly and had the strong desperation to know how our people could once again

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be blessed with the wisdom of Adeima. I swear to you on the blessed throne of Azealla that this viyolayshun will not happen again. I will be certain to treat your people with the same honor and care as I would treat the blessed ones from the far back beforetime.”

The woman’s face relaxed, however the frown remained in its place. “Thank you Gelfetia, but no. I am not the least bit comfortable with you peaking into my brain. You do not have my permission. And that is final.”

As disappointed as she was, it was not completely unexpected. She had often dealt with disagreements among the hoomaas in her village and she had come to understand the challenging path that was required when one of their people had felt the viyolayshun with another. So she instead addressed the strange machine of the hoomaas that spoke with a voice but was not in fact alive.

“Oibo, would you display the most recent picture of the morass with your orbiting machine next to a picture from seven days ago?”

“Now just wait a damn-”

The captain’s eyes did the thing where they became large when their people were surprised. She saw, without meaning to, that the hoomaas had set controls for their restraining fields to be only used by the voice of their captain, but the hoomaas had not thought to do so with the talking machine. Thus her request was granted the moment she said it and the pictures from very far above were shown on a flat wallside near Truinye.

All three of them leapt up and studied the pictures, but it was the warrior who saw the implications first. “That’s it! The prophecy was, ‘trees fall flat preceding the attack.’ That must mean that the evil ones are planning a siege on our beloved Ubuntu!”

“But Truinye, how would they get across the great field of emptiness. They are not Gelf the wise, nor do they possess any of the hoomaas’ magic.”

Now she felt some new understanding from the pylut that spoke of the woman’s blossoming intrigue. “I think that I see it. Oibo, can you superimpose a water saturation layer on top of the more recent image?”

As soon as she saw the image, Truinye nearly shouted the wordsong of what she experienced in the beforetime traveling to the magic boat. “If the prophecy was

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that trees would fall flat, then they must be cutting down the wondrous creations of Azeala to make a path across the place of the sinking underfoot.

“What a horrible insult to the majesty of the creator! These magnificent trees have existed along the morass since the time of Gelf the wise.”

“Okay look, we need to stay focused here. Let’s not get distracted by-”

Sadly, the warrior was not able to keep her exclamations held back any longer.

“Distracted?! Roomfa, you call this destruction of our land and a possible attack on my kinfolk a distraction?! There is nothing of greater importance then to discover a way of protecting the kinfolk of Ubuntu from this enormous tragedy.”

“Truinye, please. Let me work with the hoomaas.”

She paused as she felt the strong emotions of doubt from both Truinye and the hoomaas both. But she pressed on anyway in hopes of bringing the healing. After all Truinye wasn’t the only one who cared for and worried over their kinfolk. She raised a desperate plea to gain some clue that might save the people of Ubuntu. Pylut, I understand that you wish to protect against the condemnays. However you must by now realize that our people have lived with hoomaas for countless generations. These people are kinfolk, are they not? You cannot deny assistance to at least support your fellow hoomaas who are so much like you.” She hoped that by expressing a connection between the woman and the hoomaas in Ubuntu, a greater level of empathy might develop. But then she caught on an even more effective means of persuasion. “Besides, if these people attack Ubuntu and discover the hoomaas then it would spread the condemnays to their village as well. This is the tragedy that my people have guarded against for as long as Ubuntu has existed.

CHAPTER 80

Despite the seemingly herculean effort she was putting to keep her emotions in check and to remain patient with the two natives, she had to stop several times to take a deep breath to avoid losing her temper entirely. The warrior made her especially wary and she was tempted to keep a forcefield around that one. But she reminded herself that Saaed was standing right outside with a tranq-gun and, without looking exceedingly paranoid, that would have to be enough.

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Taking a deep breath, she dived right in. “Gelfetia, Truinye you must understand something very important. This ‘condemnays’ which your people have protected for so long. It is not merely the knowledge that my people exist which we strive to prevent. It’s the knowledge of all this ‘magic’ which you see around you. That is what made Huso and I so very upset when we learned what had happened with Professor Umquo. The crew of the Nneka had sworn an oath to keep from exposing you to both their existence *and* the awareness of this technology, of the land of Earth, and of the many planets between. They were supposed to take any and all steps necessary to prevent your people from knowing that any of this existed *at all*. Those men and women swore that they would protect against this contamination, with their lives if need be. Otherwise the UPC would never have permitted them to land a ship here.” She did her best not to shout, but the cauldron of emotions from all this bungling among the original crew was more than just infuriating, it was an absolute disaster.

She stood up to pace the room, subconsciously waving her arms to work off some of her tension. “All of this, the ship, the grav-plates, the room of healing, the knowledge of all of it contaminates your culture in ways that none of us at this moment in time can possibly predict.”

Just think, Gelfetia, you had mentioned that the crew of the Nneka had as much importance to you as the religious figures like Muhammed. But what you don’t realize is that our people fought horrific wars, wars that killed *millions* of our people simply because of differences in belief for these ‘revered’ ancestors.” She paused and looked closely at both of them for a moment. “And now, there is another village a few dozen kilometers away who believe that Gelf was some kind of malevolent influence.”

“No!”

“Truinye please. Understand that this is not our own belief. It is simply what we picked up from listening to their ‘wordsongs.’ Both of you, it is *this exact situation* which our culture does everything in our power to protect against. If we used our ‘magic’ to help your people in any way, it would bring the same condemnays that the crew of the Nneka allowed to happen.”

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Despite her attempt to explain the situation in a reasonable way, without anger saturating her words, the look on the face of the warrior woman gave Rhumfa the distinct feeling that smashing her head against the table would bring the native warrior enormous satisfaction. It made her once again wish that she hadn't turned off the restraining field on that one.

CHAPTER 81

The hoomaas used the word differently then she was accustomed to. But it was clear that the condemnays was at the center of this very challenging debate. Despite her doubt that the hoomaas would be sympathetic, she had to at least make the attempt to enlighten the woman regarding Adeima's wisdom and kindness. The hoomaas was very cynical and still retained much of the unhappy. She thus took several moments to carefully choose her words. "But Roomfa, please understand that it was the will of Adeima. It was the Holy Mother Herself who brought Gelf the wise and the blessed ones together. The prophecy in the far back beforetime told her of the stone face that would reveal the unknown. The Holy Mother shared Her wisdom that the foreign people would become unexpected allies." She paused then, wondering if this speaking of the beforetime could have any success in bringing empathy from the pylut. "I would be not at all surprised to learn that the blessed mother has brought your own crew here to us so that we could also share in alliance."

She noticed now that the captain's face suddenly became *very* pale. Like the spark of a fire igniting, the fraidness instantly saturated the hoomaas so much that she did the wide eye-opening thing. The woman opened her mouth to share wordsong, but then closed it silently. It seemed that a great struggle had developed. Despite her own strong worry for her people and the impending threat, she briefly now became more concerned for this fragile hoomaas. She reminded herself again that any assistance from these strange visitors would require enormous patience in helping the captain to recognize the majesty of the Holy Mother. This one was not at all ready to accept the awareness that there were forces even beyond the incredible magic of the hoomaas.

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The pylut's state brought with it a great storm within her own kaba, because she was so dominated by the worry for prophecy and the nagging within her that the unraveling of the prophecy held enormous importance for the kinfolk. Struggling to balance the two opposing needs, she took a deep breath and managed to remain focused on the present moment.

"Pylut Roomfa. What is it that brings the strong fraidness to your face?" She had to be careful and clarify that she had read the woman's 'ekspreshun' and had not used the sense-read'n.

CHAPTER 82

It couldn't be. This kind of thing absolutely defied all the laws of science as she knew them. Even if the being had plucked some of the memories from her own head, the knowledge of the e-book was completely hidden until yesterday. What kind of technology could exist which only manifests when an alien being exposes herself to deadly levels of dark radiation *and* which somehow knows things that nobody else would know until days or weeks-

Her thoughts immediately switched to what Huso's recording had picked up. Their people had said something about a ship changing course. Their healing woman had repeated it as some kind of cultural memory. But that recitation hadn't required any deadly radiation. So what the hell was going on? Something enormously important and perhaps equally dangerous hovered in the air between them, just centimeters beyond her grasp. She just didn't know what force she could apply to bring any greater clarity to the mysterious explanation floating about in pitch darkness. The natives, not surprisingly attributed everything to their strange gods. But those were just stories, myths. She needed... She needed Huso. He had been down in their village and he would have a slightly better understanding of their culture. At least she prayed that he did.

She took a brief second to send out a message before returning her attention to the two natives. She hoped to the very core of her being that he could help her to figure this insanity out. Preferably before she pulled out the last of her hair in frustration.

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CHAPTER 83

“Huso, please join me in the forward deck common room at your earliest convenience.”

He knew immediately what the captain meant by the message. The forward common room was where the two native beings were being temporarily held. But he had no idea what he might be able to offer that Rhumfa wouldn't have thought about already. After all, she had access to the same information within Oibo's records as the rest of the crew.

With a sigh, he turned off the holo-wall and headed down the corridor wondering all the while how this whole nightmare with the natives would play out. It had to be the craziest mess that any UPC ship had encountered in the history of FTL travel.

Barely had he walked in the door before the question was thrown at him. “Huso. What do you remember Gelfetia talking about when you went to Ubuntu? Something about ‘spark sends ship’ or whatever.”

“Well hello yourself.” He was pretty surprised by her abruptness, as he considered the pilot to be a close personal friend. But he was even more surprised when the woman leaned in and whispered in his ear. Such a move would have seemed alluring back on Earth. But obviously this was neither the time nor the place. Especially when the words reached his ears.

“Huso, just between the two of us, I'm having a hard time keeping it together here. I think, and I pray to all the ancient gods that I'm wrong. But it feels like there's some enormous untapped, and perhaps dangerous power here on this planet. There's something going on that just screams out at me to get the hell off this rock at light speed. So I really need your support right now. Got it?”

He'd known the woman a long time, and though she sometimes found herself overcome with emotion (which he could totally understand at this point) he had never seen an instance where Rhumfa's professionalism became compromised like this. He began to worry himself just how bad this situation could have gotten for his friend to be so traumatized.

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He put a comforting arm around her shoulder and whispered back that he would give her whatever support she needed. Then he turned to the computer's wallscreen. "Oibo, please replay the last fifteen minutes of the recording from my excursion to the village of Ubuntu."

It took quite some time and he watched the surprise on the natives faces as the exact conversation was repeated for all of them. But finally Rhumfa ordered Oibo to stop the recording.

"That's it. Gelfetia you specifically said 'last spark from crystal source sends ship to change course.'

"But of course. It was the final prophecy from our blessed Gelf before Oomkwo's power source was lost to them."

"That's absolutely insane though!" The captain stared at the native and her shoulder was now a titanium bar underneath his hand. "*I'm the one who decided to change course.* It was ME who fulfilled that, that... saying." She angrily brushed off the supporting arm as she gesticulated her hands around. "Then you stand in front of the dark crystal three days ago and say something about Ojute when nobody on this ship has even heard that name before. By the stars! Penrieda only found that man's book yesterday. There's no way in this world you could have plucked some kind of prophecy out of my head *when I wasn't even aware of it myself.*" He hadn't thought it possible, but her expression became even more sinister as she stared intently at the native healing woman. "But I will tell you this. There is something **very** strange going on, and to the extent that it affects *this* ship and *this* crew I will do whatever is necessary in order to protect our people!"

He wasn't sure how Rhumfa might react, but he considered that perhaps the healer could find the answer if they gave permission for the alien to look in their memories. But when he brought this up to her it only managed to make her even more furious.

"Dammit Huso! That's just what these crazy natives said. I want to make this clear to you, to you, hell even to Oibo. I will do whatever it takes, EXCEPT for that. I will not allow that woman into my head."

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He really was becoming worried for her. He gave her shoulder a gentle rubbing and shushed her with as much kindness and serenity as he could display.

“Rhumfa. What if I volunteered to allow Gelfetia to look at *my* memories. Would that help to resolve this?”

The woman continued frowning, but he could see her thinking a bit which meant she was at least willing to give the idea some consideration. She did seem to calm down by small degrees which brought all of them no small level of relief. “Thank you Huso. That is so generous of you. But you have to understand. It’s not just a matter of my personal discomfort. We need to protect these people. Think of what would happen if they learn about the inner workings of this ship.”

He wanted to remind her that the healer had already done this and the captain had defeated them anyway but clearly this was not the time. Surprisingly he found himself rescued instead by the native herself.

“Roomfa. Please understand that our people have had many generations since the time of Oomkwo to learn more about how the sense-readin affects you hoomaas. I promise you that I will not intentionally cause the harm to your priyvasy from now on. It was so very wrong of me to to allow my emotions to overshadow my compassion in the beforetime. You can be assured that I am willing to take great care to look at only one specific part of a hoomaas’ smarati.”

Now Rhumfa began gesticulating so wildly that he thought she was trying to fly right out of the room. “Alright. Alright dammit. I’ll let you and Huso work together. BUT! I want you to look no further then the memory of when you stared at our power crystal. That’s it.”

Chapter 84

She felt very worried for the hoomaas pylut now. It was clear to her that a great struggle waged within the woman’s kaba. For her of course, the majesty of Adeima was as clear as the peak of Higsthon. But the hoomaas still refused to believe it. There was much unhappy dominating the woman’s emotions, which unfortunately was not within her ability to provide healing for. If however, she were careful with Huso’s smarati and respectful to their people’s fragility, perhaps there was a

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chance that they could succeed in at least reducing the friction between their people. “Pylut Rhumfa, I will be certain to honor your wishes and show utmost care.”

She then peered carefully within the great field of ‘doorways’ within the hoomaas’ smarati and watched with amazement how she herself had stood in front of the strange device and spoke the prophecy of Adeima. She then carefully repeated the whole experience for all of them.

Though obviously disturbed, the man did not have the shaky voice as he spoke to the one that was not alive. “Oibo. Please record and flag this information and share it with the rest of the crew.” It was gratifying to notice that the pylut’s friend showed less of the unhappy in this conflict which she assumed had something to do with what the pylut had said about being the one who fulfilled the prophecy. It was more understandable to her now what a great change in the think’n was necessary for the hoomaas to accept that the Holy Mother had been the cause of them bringing their magic boat here.

“Gelfetia, it’s difficult enough for me to digest the concept of a people who can pull memories straight out of someone’s head. But to be able to predict the future when you stare at our power system, that... I’m sorry to say but it just seems ridiculous. I don’t know what this is between you and our dark energy crystal, but-” The pylut now was making no effort to hide the struggle on her face, “well it’s clearly something that none of us understand yet.”

She smiled now, for the hoomaas was finally gaining the smallest hint of acceptance for the glory of the Holy Mother. “Pylut Rhumfa, you are most blessed this day to begin your journey toward a great basking in the majesty of Adeima.” However the captain frowned in response. “Now just hold on one minute healer. I’m not converting to your religion here. Our people don’t believe in that stuff. I’m just, well confused.”

“Roomfa, please take all the time that you like. I can imagine that this must be a very challenging concept for your people.”

The woman told them that she wanted time to think through all the ‘crazy stuff’ that was happening and she prayed to Azealla that the woman would find success.

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But when she left, Gelfetia became more impressed by the eye-opening words of Truinye.

CHAPTER 85

Freetlak strained to keep his arms positioned against the massive wudfell as the group of them hauled it slowly along the narrow path created from the other fallen trees. It occurred to him that if they could put the same effort into their own village as they had put into building this silly pathway across the morass, the kinfolk could have a vigrus structure to protect Xenlaria against meldabeast or any hostile people who might send attacking warriors. He made a point to bring it up with Imotren after they had won this victory against the people of Higsthon. But the idea was soon chased from his think'n by one of the many wordsongs for bolstering the group.

“Great warriors, I am deeply gratified and impressed by the gudstrength you are showing in bringing us ever forward through such an inhospitable place. Our monumental efforts this day will be shared with pride for many annums.” He looked up to see Beljutil passing along among the group and offering words of encouragement as he had been doing for many days. Freetlak considered that it was a great deal less work than actually lifting and carrying the wudfells, but he supposed that somebody must perform this role for the sake of their mutually waning fortitude.

That brought him to the many ponderings he had felt within his kaba. There was a deeply distressing sensation which could not be understood clearly but neither could it be ignored. It was a battle within him more fierce and heated even than the upcoming campaign was predicted to be. But in this particular case, it was a battle viewed as if through a heavy mist. He found it impossible to feel both a trust in his own feelings and a trust in the leadership of Imotren. The two seemed as opposed to each other as day and night. No matter how thoroughly he searched, there was no means that he could find to bring resolution of the two.

While mulling over his tangled emotions, he suddenly noticed that his foot somehow did not touch the pathway beneath and he momentarily was confused as

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it pushed against empty space with no purchase. He groped around blindly before losing hold of the great treefell and landing several handsbreaths below in the mud.

“Freetlak! We are all putting our gudstrength most fervently to create this pathway. You bring shame upon yourself by acting so foolishly! It is vitally important that our group work together if we wish to reach the far side of this cursed place.”

His breath hole pulsed with shame as he looked up and viewed two dozen of his kinfolk struggling to support the woodfell as they stared down, each one giving him the straight-eye. With all of his strength, he lifted himself up and back into position against the massive wudfell while the disappointed men and women quickly turned away from him. Then at last the whole group began moving forward again towards the empty space at the far end of the path. The warriors had been doing this for so long that he was incapable of knowing how many wudfells had been carried in the time since they began crossing this courtyard of Pritlaxtl. Once the distance to carry freshly fallen trees along the full length of the pathway had been found to be too excruciating, Nukremit had ordered a change in tactics and the warriors would instead lift the rearmost wudfell before carrying it along the whole length and setting it to the front of their path. In this way the pathway continued to move, with agonizingly sluggishness, towards a barely discernible forst up ahead.

The only relief which he felt was in dropping one of the wudfells at last into the mud, allowing their group to move forward by several footfalls. However he wondered for the thousandth time how many more risings of the Saülé he would see before their group at last sat upon the solid underfoot again. Or, if they would be cursed to march slowly across the path of wudfells until their supplies were exhausted and they succumbed to the clutches of Pritlaxtl after all. This last thought, once manifested within his think’n refused to be extinguished by any means of distraction.

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CHAPTER 86

She waited until the healer addressed her now, out of deference to the woman's great wisdom.

"Thank you for your patience warrior. I only asked you to be silent around the pylut because of the delicacy of the hoomaas' feelings. I will be happy to entertain your thoughts now."

It wasn't until the end of their discussion that she recognized how much her own impatience might have compromised the stranger's fledgling consideration of Adeima's majesty. It was clear now more than ever how valuable Gelfetia was to the whole of Ubuntu. She noticed then that the hoomaas' friend was about to leave and asked him to remain in hopes that he might offer some perspective as well on a different challenge.

With the healer and the hoomaas giving her attention, she described again what she had seen from the mountain and how she believed it to be true that the prophecy telling of the trees falling might foretell great danger to the kinfolk, including the hoomaas of Ubuntu. She was certain to emphasize to Hoosoh that the hoomaas Sefin had recently given birth and that they were both in a time of great fragility.

She was most disturbed then to hear the man describe how they had heard through one of their 'spy machines' of some people in the other village comparing the number of spears they could carve. She was very disturbed by how much this information confirmed both the prophecy and what little she had seen on her way out to the great magic boat. It was a tenuous hope for her that with all their magic, these new hoomas might be willing to offer help. For even with her own great skill, she saw little chance for her people to be safe otherwise. The only hope for her people lay in building some kind of alliance with these magical ones, much as the thought of such an effort nauseated her.

"What do you propose as a strategy for helping us to overcome this threat Hoosoh?" The face of the male hoomaas, which showed a calm interest, showed that he was at least willing to take her wordsong seriously. She had felt the fraidness that he might dismiss it all as part of a 'reelijyon' that he did not yet share.

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Gelfetia gave the man wise council which she prayed would be helpful in convincing them to offer their smart-know'n. "Huso it would be most valuable in the short term, for you to release us both so that we can warn the kinfolk of this potential tragedy."

"And you must return to me the large flat weapon which was stolen when your people took me prisoner."

She saw that the hoomaas was confused until a more elaborate wordsong was given for what it looked like. That was when Huso spoke his own amazing wordsong of how the flat thing had been part of their magic boat which fell off during the time of his peoples' arrival. He stated that it was a most essential piece of 'teknowledgy' and not merely an apata. He was not at all willing to agree to her demand, which only brought back her own anger toward the magical people.

"How can you say that hoomaas?! *I* am the one who brought that 'apata' here. I traded three days worth of fodiens for it. If you claim to be an honorable people, how could you conspire to seize a tool that is of such value to me in defending my people? You bring shame upon yourself and your companions by doing so!"

The hoomaas' eye-hair briefly formed into a 'v' displaying his unhappy. But the male hoomaas recovered his calm more quickly than the pylut had. "I'm sorry Truinye. But we just can't interfere with your culture like that. Think of how it would look to the attacking army to see one of your people equipped with an apata made of advanced honeycombed titanium. Something nobody else on this planet has seen or will see for hundreds of generations. It would bring exactly the same type of contamination that Rhumfa described earlier."

In only an eyeblink it was confirmed for her that these people were not on the side of the righteous. "That is a pitiful untrue hoomaas! How can you claim that this 'apata' which was found many days travel from Higsthon belongs to your boat which sits unmoving all the way up here? You insult my smart-know'n so blatantly with your pitiful excuses."

Despite the teknowledgy of their people and the entreaties of Gelfetia, she was becoming ever more focused on violent wishes for the puny hoomaas'. There had to be some means of breaking through the great wallside of their stubborn resolve.

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The moment she was able to find it, there would be a great spilling of life-fluid for sure.

CHAPTER 87

Lluchra stared furiously at Mautide. “We cannot! The whole concept is an insult to our beloved healer. How could you even suggest it?”

Her kinfolk sat together with her by the well and each one of them showed the look of resolute determination. It was so painful. These people, who she had known since the days of young’n were willing to tread all over the blessed one’s memory. The unwavering stubbornness of her kinfolk though only reinforced her own self-assurance that they could not at all be showing honorable intent.

“Lluchra, we cannot remain without a healer forever. We have been without Gelfetia’s leadership for at least six days now. We have no word from Truinye, and it is possible that both are with Pritlaxtl. Even if she were still alive after standing in front of the stone of power, there is no way to believe that the evil hoomaas would help her, or even offer fodiens. It remains your place to fulfill the role of healer for the kinsfolk of Ubuntu.

Deep within her kaba she began to consider that Mautide was right. But she was so very saturated with the fraidness, and the unhappy. She wasn’t ready! By the stars, she had only bathed in the waters of Gelfetia’s vast knowledge for seven annums. There was still so much smart-know’n that she was certain the great healer had not yet shared with her. How in all the land could she provide healing and leadership for the kinfolk when she felt as little more than a young’n herself? She offered further rebuttal and excuse to the full extend that she was able, and yet Kwandic, Sefin, and even Mautide remained steadfast that she take the healer’s shelterspace as her own. It was a sacrilege of the lowest sort, she felt certain of it. The great healer could not possibly have been stolen by Pritlaxtl this easily. She was far too gracious and loved by the Holy Mother. Gelfetia just *had* to be safe. She had to be.

Yet the tiny wordsong within her mind asked the question of how they could ever possibly learn the fulltrue for sure.

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She could see from the faces of her kinfolk that to continue offering refusal would only feed the flames of worry and doubt in the familyland. This of course would saturate Ubuntu with the unhappy. ‘A healer must at all times put the good of the other kinfolk above her own comfort.’ Those were the last words that Gelfetia had shared with her before the interference of the cruel hoomaas. The wordsong echoed in her mind with the force of the midday Saülè, a lesson too profound to ignore.

After a long timespan of contemplation, she realized that her feelings were too focused on her personal wishes rather than the comfort of the kinfolk. Her own want for Gelfetia to be of gudstrength could not be allowed to supersede the gudstrength of Ubuntu. Wishing for what she did not have was in no way endemic of Gelf the wise’s unbroken selflessness. At the same time, there was no reason to look upon this debate as purely win or lose. She had to provide some kind of middle-ground with her kinfolk.

“My friends, my kinfolk. I will take on the role of healer as a temporary measure only. I feel the sureness within my kaba that we will be graced by Gelfetia’s presence once again. But for the good of Ubuntu, I will provide service only and continue to dwell in my own shelterspace.”

There was still much doubt and insistence, however she made it clear to them that she would not budge any further on the matter. She also prayed deeply, for at least the hundredth time, that her fragile hope would be recognized as fulltrue sometime soon.

CHAPTER 88

“Truinye. May I speak to the hoomaas?”

The warrior motioned her consent without question now. She had definitely learned her lesson in speaking over the healer when diplomacy was apparently a more effective strategy. She thought back to the truce which Gelfetia had negotiated between Truinye and her friend Molayo when there had been much unhappy over the man’s injury during a donga battle. The woman held great smart-know’n in the making of peace. And as tenuous as the chances were, she

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hoped that it would be possible for Gelfetia to navigate this issue with similar prowess that she had displayed in the beforetime.

Gelfetia gave Huso the straight-eye and sought to clarify things with the man. “Hoomaas, may I ask you if your resistance is mainly focused on what material which the apata that Truinye brought is made of, or is the mere concept of helping us considered problematic?”

This gave the man pause and she held herself back from using the sense-readin, giving the man time to reach his own conclusions.

“I would have to say that it’s a little of both.” The man paused as he was seeming to struggle with forming his wordsong. “To be honest, this really isn’t my specialty. Very few of us aside from Ikasha would have had reason to study a situation like this.” She got a brief sense of the hoomaas’ concern for his crewmate. But she did her best to focus only on what could be seen and heard out of respect for him.

“On one hand of course you can imagine what would happen if these attackers saw you defending yourselves with titanium weapons that nobody had ever seen before. Then in addition, you have this group of outsiders who are being asked to choose one side over another in a conflict which doesn’t involve us. These things just aren’t moral among our people.” The hoomaas paused and she sensed a new insight come to him. “It would be as if you were deliberating between two people in your village over a conflict and you used that ‘sense-readin’ of yours to see into the thoughts of one person but not the other.”

If she had not understood before, the issue was much more clear to her now. The hoomaas’ wordsong expressed a high level of concern not only for Ubuntu, but for all denisovians and it helped her to recognize that they were not intentionally looking to deprive her people of kindness.

“Hoomaas, I cannot and would not dispute the morality of your wordsong. It is well spoken and your sincerity is most obvious.” But her voice fell as she continued. On the other hand I wish that there was some way that we could work together to protect the people of Ubuntu, both denisovian *and* hoomaas. It would bring great catastrophe if the cruel people across the morass were to force their way to the village and witness your people among us.”

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“You’re absolutely right Gelfetia. But I cannot allow you to keep a part of our technology which serves a vital function for us.”

“So you would simply remain here, safe in your magic boat, while the kinfolk are sent in waves to the aftertime without any sadface whatsoever?!”

It was lucky for her that the sense-read’n gave her half a moment’ notice of Truinye’s fury. The stormcloud of the unhappy had been growing within the woman and their confinement only fortified the woman’s anger. Thus she had the briefest moment of warning when the warrior moved to swing her fist into the unsuspecting hoomaas.

CHAPTER 89

Her hopes crashed to the underfoot as she recognized how much she had allowed herself to pin her expectations on Gelfetia and the magical hoomaas to work out a means of helping their people. Of course she was not Gelf the wise who managed to convince the great ones to offer help with healing and she did not possess the great wisdom of Adeima. But the idea that the hoomaas would so continuously bring the unhappy, it was worse even than the evil villagers across the morass. These ‘people’ (if they could even be called such) were worse than any kinfolk she had ever met. Clearly the faith in Gelfetia had been overly optimistic and the time for wordsong was past. She moved with swift motion to use her own form of coercion to bring about acquiescence from the hoomaas.

Strangely though, her motion was halted by the healer. The surprise was so abrupt that she barely registered the woman’s movement before realizing that her arms were held fast. Nevertheless she stared at the hoomaas with the unhappy, realizing that Gelfetia would not allow more than wordsong.

“It is quite clear to me hoomaas” she spat the words like verbal spears “that your magic boat has not collapsed from the lack of this ‘apata,’ so clearly you are telling an untrue as to why you would refuse to return it to me as it’s rightful owner. I am the one who traded for it, and I am the one who brought it here. You speak of your people’s devotion to some hidden moral code, yet when an entire village including some of your own people is threatened with attack you decide that the such things

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are beneath your concern! You bring shame not only upon your ‘crew,’ but also on the Holy Mother who has brought you here.”

She paused as a new thought occurred to her. “Besides, we have already learned of the foreigners’ invasion, where they are coming from, and how they are able to cross the place of the sinking underfoot. So unless you were to travel down to the great morass and provide similar benefit to their people, it would be impossible to return the situation to what existed ten days ago. Your return of an item that I have already traded for would very much improve your standing not only with my people but with the Holy Mother as well.”

She paused again, deciding to close with a particularly vindictive barb. “Or, perhaps your people are simply so filled with the fraidness that your cowardice does the speaking of your wordsong *for* you.”

CHAPTER 90

Huso rested his head in his palm. The woman’s fury had left a particularly sour feeling within him. Not that he actually thought of the crew as cowardly of course. But how could he make it clear to her that the airlock door was essential to the ship only when it left the planet’s atmosphere? He couldn’t possibly imagine a means of describing for such a stubborn neolithic woman the need for two sets of airlock panels on a ship traveling through the vacuum of interstellar space. By the stars, they didn’t even have anti-grav vehicles here. Obviously he couldn’t deny her legitimate claim to the thing, but what could he offer that might be satisfactory?

But then it struck him, like a boulder. The idea of using an apata was not a concept that the crew was introducing to these people. The woman had come up with the idea of using the door as an apata without their help. *She* had invented that.

The woman was only looking for something that would *function* as an apata. They wouldn’t need a 38 millimeter panel of honeycombed titanium. He could offer her

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something which would provide comparable function yet appear completely normal to the natives.

He offered exactly such a trade to the woman, but he saw with some amusement that she mimicked her human companions by folding her arms across her chest. “Hoomaas, you must think me to be a very ignorant denisovian. It would be clear even to a young’n that this ‘door’ has very high value to your people and that you seek to offer an inferior trade. We may not have the level of magic that you have, but that does not mean we will allow you to take advantage of our smaller ability. If you truly wish for your people to be seen with honor then you would offer apatas for our whole village so that we may protect our hoomaas kinfolk from the condemnays of the invaders.”

For a minute he was speechless. The tenacity of this woman seemed boundless. If she had been part of a capitalist culture back on Earth one could only imagine the damage that she might have inflicted there. With his studies of the history of Yorup, he worried for the influence this woman might have on even such a simple economy as existed on this planet.

But all that was beside the point. For now it was important to help resolve things with the two women as quickly as possible. And given that replicating one apata or thirty made little difference, it was reasonable to offer the woman a more equitable trade for the time being.

“Very well Truinye. Your reputation as a woman of great cunning is well founded. I will provide apatas for thirty of your warriors as an exchange for returning our precious door.”

CHAPTER 91

Saaed looked ready to spit fire despite his position lying prone on Dr. Kotingre’s recovery bed. “That oloshi is still sitting on this ship?! Chineke ekwela ngwere gbaa aji! Oooo gini di ihea? Are we giving her a couch and a bowl of fu-fu as well? I mean, we wouldn’t want the [asshole] that broke my ribs to be *uncomfortable*, now would we.”

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Her emotions were already in an uproar without having to deal with crap like this. But she also had to consider what Saaed was going through. The man had required almost as much recovery time as Fatima after that native had casually flung him like a palmfruit onto the access ramp. If things didn't get under control soon she was going to end up as spiteful as Saeed. She took a few seconds to take deep breaths and focus on helping to placate the man before his emotions compromised all the work that Kotingre had done with repairing his chest. "Easy there my friend. You have every right to be furious at her. No one on this ship would hold that against you."

"Rhumfa, we should transport that oloshi to the middle of those other attacking natives. Let *them* show her what this kind of pain feels like."

She gently put both of her hands on the other man's shoulders and put all the strength she could muster into keeping both her face *and* her voice calm. Clearly this was going to require more effort than she had the energy for right now.

"Saaed, please understand that we're trying to work with these people to prevent exactly this type of tragedy from happening again. The first time those natives broke in here it was easy to believe that it was just a fluke. But with the second intrusion that you were sadly victim to, well, I've got to figure out what's going on with this craziness so that we can keep them from threatening us any more." She thought for a second and chose a more personal touch as she continued. "My friend listen, we just have no precedent for bringing restitution for a crime committed by a tribe which should never have known we exist in the first place. I'm afraid that we're all flying blind here and I'm doing the best that I can to help keep everyone safe."

The man's shoulders remained taught as springs beneath her fingers. "Not a very effective shield, are you?"

The comment struck her like one of those antique bullets in the museum. It felt like she was holding the anchor chain for a boat being pulled over a waterfall. Despite her titanic effort to keep her emotions calm, the snarl exposed itself on her face briefly before she managed to squelch it. "Please Saeed. I'm not asking you to forgive her, or me either for that matter. I'm not even asking you to interact with them. Just... let Huso and I get what information we can about all this

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ridiculousness before the opportunity for restitution is lost completely.” She did a little massaging of the man’s shoulders and there was finally a just-perceptible easing of the chords beneath. “I promise you that I’m doing everything humanly possible to get us as far away from them as we can possibly get.”

“Yeah, preferably measured in light-years.”

Her voice was barely above a whisper. “From your mouth to God’s ears Saeed.”

CHAPTER 92

Each day here struggling with the wudfells seemed to last a full lifetime, and despite Gjintruk’s grandiose wordsongs calling for strength and tenacity it was beginning to feel as if they would never manage to reach solid underfoot again. Beljutil had made all the entreaties that he dared with Imotren, but the last attempt had found him demoted to the mud where he would help lift the rearmost wudfell for the other warriors to carry forward. He felt overcome by depression every time he thought of the peaceful life all of them had enjoyed before embarking on this foolhardy campaign. The number of trees taken down to reach across the morass was beyond count and his every limb screamed in protest from the effort of lifting the massive weight. After so many days even Nukremit had been forced to admit that the exertion was causing a barely survivable drain on their vigrus army. The only small relief they had, came when the trunk was passed to the next group and all the way to the front of the line again. He was spending all of his gudstrength working himself to exhaustion. And for what purpose? Simply for the sake of satisfying Imotren’s grand ego it seemed.

It was becoming more and more difficult to think of the man with any degree of kindness now. Instead he came to despise his former mate. He considered Imotren to be an enemy of the kinfolk, but he also knew that such opinions must be kept carefully hidden from his fellow warriors. It would take very little now for Nukremit, or even Gjintruk to simply banish him to Pritlaxtl rather than risk any talk which might threaten their stature. He seethed inwardly at the futility of the whole thing. There was seemingly no alternative for him other than this endless despondency in the mud.

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CHAPTER 93

She stared at the screen just mystified as to it's meaning. Then she switched back to the e-book by Ojute. She read over the sixteenth page three times and then switched back to the prophecy again. One line from Ojute seemed to stare back at her in dazzling contrast. It was a quote which the man had written from some ancient krischin book. 'If you have two shirts in your closet, one belongs to you and the other to the man with no shirt.' It was a beautiful sentiment for sure, but she could not conceptualize what this had to do with their situation.

Suddenly the bolt of lightning flamed it's way through her mind. The last statement from the native said something about agbara, or power. And their ship carried two energy crystals. Was that really what these people were proposing?? The mere concept was utterly insane!

"Chi moo, anwuoo moo!"

Now frantically, she skimmed through the logs from the Nneka. She'd seen the account from Ayube of having spoken with a sort of noncorporeal being, but had dismissed it as some kind of hallucination stemming from the harsh environment out there. But as she looked over it again, that section talking about the entity ensuring that the Nneka's crew left the power crystal under a temple in one of the villages closely aligned with the situation she was dealing with.

"If those natives think they can trick me into leaving our most advanced power system on a planet full of primitive aliens, they might as well move their village to one of the planet's moons for all it'll help!"

She threw down her chair leaping up (noticing now that the increased gravity was getting easier to deal with) and immediately stalked off to confront the two natives. Fatima tried to get her attention in a corridor but she quickly blew the woman off. If her hunch was right, then this- whatever it was that the natives worshiped, was asking something so unthinkable that it was beyond ludicrous.

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CHAPTER 94

The moment that the door opened she was already seeing red. So it didn't help to see Huso standing there and telling the native warrior that he would acquiesce to her demands. Clearly the warrior was a direct challenge to any semblance of progress for the whole damned mission.

"Oibo, transport the woman in front of me to the planet's surface 5 meters from the ship."

"What in th-"

That was the last that she was forced to listen to from that oloshi before the woman was transformed into an energy beam and removed from the ship.

"Rhumfa you ca-"

"Not now Huso!" As much as she cared about the man, he was at the very bottom of her list of priorities for that particular moment.

Instead she told Oibo to set up a triple-screen and display the text from the current 'prophecy' on one, the quote from Ojute on the next screen, and the account from Ayube on the last.

Then she faced the native healing woman with daggers shooting from her eyes.

"Alright, I want to know just what kind of ridiculous joke this is! And don't you DARE go digging around my mind for anything!"

Like some ancient Thai priest, the native managed to remain unusually calm which for the moment was no less frustrating than the argument she had been expecting. "Pylut Roomfa, without using the sense-read'n I cannot understand what it is you request knowledge of."

"I'm talking about THIS!" She stabbed her finger at the screens as if it were a lance capable of shattering the very fabric of spacetime. "It sounds to me like you want me to just *give* our spare power crystal to your people!" She was almost shaking with anger now. "I'll jump right off a damn cliff before I do such a ridiculous thing! I mean, what in the world is anybody on this planet going to *do* with a power crystal anyway?? You don't have a single piece of technology that would in any way be able to draw from it!"

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The woman continued to show little outward emotion as she looked at each of the screens in turn. “Hoomaas, I cannot interpret the prophesy of the holy mother. The words only came *through* me, they were not of my own creation.”

“So... what. This ‘holy being’ is prophesying that we remove our only spare power crystal and just leave it here in the middle of some neolithic backwater planet? Well you can forget about that, because if I have a choice between upholding the standards of the United Planetary Council or cowtowing to some ‘magic force’ in the sky then I will absolutely show my allegiance to the UPC.”

“Pylut Rhumfa. I understand that this is difficult for you to consider. Please accept that nobody is asking you to give devotion to Her majesty right at this moment. All that I ask is for you to take some time doing the meditayshun and consider this from all sides. Perhaps there is something that you have not yet considered.”

The peaceful serenity which the healing woman displayed worked no small degree of magic on her own mood. By the time the woman was finished, she found herself able to respond a great deal more calmly than she had when she’d first walked in. “Gelfetia, I appreciate the devotion that you have to your people and to this religion which you hold in such high regard. But believe me completely when I tell you that any decisions about the use of our technology will be made by myself and this crew, NOT by some invisible woman in the sky.”

With that she stalked out of the room no less confounded by the whole mess than she had been in her own quarters. She then took the long way around the ship, both to burn off some energy and give herself some time to think. As much as these people prophesied allegiance to the truth, there was absolutely no way to explain any of it except that one of them was lying. Either the ‘prophecy’ *was* invented by their leader, or she had taken the knowledge of the crystal during her forced entry to the ship. Or... no, she didn’t even want to consider the last possibility.

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CHAPTER 95

He stared in shock at the closing door. Never, in all the time that he'd known Rhumfa had the pilot acted so irrationally. Just subjecting a native being to the kefatz was enough to have her stripped of her position. But to insult Gelfetia so blatantly, that was completely unlike her.

On the other hand though, as he stared at the screens he could at least understand *why* she had let her emotions overwhelm her sense of reason. It was completely out of the question to leave humanity's most advanced stardrive fuel in the hands of a neolithic culture dozens of light years from Earth. Not to mention the fact that these people would have no conceivable use for such a device without many centuries of technological progress.

He turned to the healing woman and did his best to apologize for Rhumfa's actions. Though his words felt as empty as the broken plasma lines beneath their ship. That was probably because he couldn't himself believe the absurd notions that were being suggested, any more than Rhumfa had.

"Gelfetia," he began and paused twice more before he could manage the words. I cannot begin to understand what Rhumfa is going through, but... well there is absolutely no excuse for the way she treated you and your warrior friend-

It was a start, but the words still felt like they were tumbling about haphazardly like grains of sand in a dust devil.

"Hoomaas. I thank you for your compassion. But I must ask, what has happened to the warrior Truenye? Where has Roomfa's magic taken her? Is she in any danger?"

"Gelfetia. I'm certain that your friend is safe. It sounded like she was delivered to the surface next to the ship-

"So she is banished?! Why can she not be here with me? What is to happen with her?" The woman began now to reveal some of the emotion which her serene facade had previously shrouded.

"Gelfetia, I would be more than happy to provide her a safe place on the ship while we work all of this out with you. But... well, after what happened before I can't imagine anyone of the crew would have the guts to be out there next to her. We don't have a geo-locator attached to her at the moment, and so it would be

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dangerous to attempt a remote recovery.”

“But-”

“Gelfetia, you both have wanted to be back with your people. The most logical place for your friend to go from here, would be to your village. Personally, I think it’s best that we leave her to do just that.”

A cloud of unhappiness remained on the woman’s face for several seconds and he could almost see the gears turning beneath her expression. But it wasn’t clear yet if she would accept his opinion or not.

CHAPTER 96

Bewilderment saturated every part of her. First she had been on the magic boat of the hoomaas. Then a great curtain of faery dust seemed to obscure her vision on all sides. Momentarily she felt like an uncountable number of huiltzflies were buzzing over her whole body until she was ready to scream in agony. Then in the span of an eyeblink, she found herself standing safely on the underfoot with the vast bulk of the magic boat towering over her.

It took many times of repeating the events leading up to this for her to even get a sense of the formidable magnificence of this place. The leader of the hoomaas had been very angry, but it had not been clear who she had been angry *at*. Roomfa spoke to someone ‘Oibo’ and said something like ‘transport,’ and now she found herself standing outside and completely unharmed. It was a powerful and terrifying magic. Even with all of her skill at the donga, there was nothing in all of her experience which could be a defense against such things.

The fraidness was coming to her now far more regularly than ever before in her life. It was a thoroughly discomfoting feeling and she prayed fervently to Prijnak for a way to make it stop, but as the moments passed, and the shadow of the enormous magic boat loomed above her, it felt as if no amount of entreaties would bring relief from the unfamiliar dread.

She stared up at the massive hoomaas shelterspace which overshadowed everything but the great mountain itself and she wondered now why their people

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had not merely sent her to Pritlaxtl instead of delivering her out here. They seemed to be as powerful in every way as the One who oversees the after-time. Soon enough though, the cold began to be felt and she realized that a decision needed to be made. Either she tried to negotiate again with these beings to supply her village with apatas or she put her focus on warning her village of the danger. It took only an instant of gazing up at the great immutable bulk of their flying boat to convince her that these magical hoomaas were not on the side of the righteous. Her efforts would have greater chance of success if she focused on preparations to stem off the oncoming attack without any hope of support from these cruel foreigners.

That gave her the thought briefly that perhaps they had already chosen a side, and were supporting the invading warriors. Even merely considering this brought the fraidness flooding through her again. If that proved true, then there would be no force in all the land to protect the kinfolk from Pritlaxtl.

CHAPTER 97

Through the whole extent of her life providing for the kinfolk, there had been few events which she was unable to face with the calm tranquility that her position required. However this time dealing with the fantastic hoomaas from the stars was creating upset that even the meditayshun couldn't relieve. First she was visited by a hoomaas with the disgize of a denisovian. Then there was the magic boat that was larger then all of Ubuntu, then the power device of the hoomaas which gave her the very power of Gelf the wise, and now she was witness to the very same prophecy foretold so many generations ago. One moment Truinye was there next to her, and the next she went 'vanus surrounded by faeries.' The prophecy was known by every young'n almost from the time that they could carry a food bowl.

The male hoomaas had promised her that the woman was not likely to be hurt and he said that he would talk with the rest of his people before visiting her again. But despite the man's words, she found herself hard pressed to believe that her friend remained with gudstrength.

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Whether this was a test of the Holy Mother, or a punishment for some wrongdoing, she did not know.

‘Stop it Gelfetia, you have been honored to be the first one since the time of Gelf to share prophecy for the kinfolk.’ But even speaking the words aloud to herself were not enough to bring peace to her kaba. With Truinye now vanus, she would have absolutely no means of escaping the magic boat of the hoomaas on her own. She knew of no means by which she could warn the kinfolk of the coming attack and every path that she considered seemed destined for failure. As wondrous as it had been to share the prophecy of the Holy Mother, it felt now equally horrible to be so helpless when the kinfolk needed her now more than ever.

CHAPTER 98

The cold was already sinking into her skin as she finally made her way slowly around the big white field, but at least she was making progress and there were many stone shapes that she remembered from the traveling with the kinfolk in the beforetime.

She thought again about the amazing thing that happened when she was delivered away from their boat, and of other things like making the ground force change.

Instantly, as if she had struck some invisible wallside, she came to a stop.

“It was just like the stories of old where Gelf would disappear surrounded by faery-dust!”

The shock of that thought held her rigid for many moments as she considered the ancient wordsongs of the blessed ones, the hoomaas wearing the disgize, and many other signs and wonders which they performed.

But this only brought greater confusion in her kaba. The stories Gelfetia told of Aye-yoobay and Seffee were of a people who cared for and respected her people. Yet these new hoomaas were more frustrating than any being she had met in her life, even Regina was a mere hutzfly in comparison. She could no more imagine those magical ones aiding the kinfolk of Ubuntu than she could expect to see Gelf the wise standing right in the middle of the frozen expanse next to her. This again brought her to wonder why the hoomaas leader had not simply delivered her to

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Pritlaxtl. It was clear to anyone with eyes that they possessed the ability. Why would they go through such trouble to not harm the kinfolk when they otherwise brought so much of the unhappy?

She shook her head and continued on, realizing that the mysteries of the outsiders were far beyond her own understanding. Meanwhile there was a very real threat to her village, and this was one which she *could* understand and prepare for.

Assuming she was able to warn her people in time.

CHAPTER 99

The hoomaas had brought her a wonderful sleeping device which was like a mat, but with a ‘met-tul’ support that held it above the underfoot. After a long nap, she found herself with gratitude that her sleep had not been interrupted by dream, for the reality itself in this magic place was far more disturbing than any dreams she might have.

After eating some strange fodiens that resembled a less sweet type of jadzabean, she had a powerful thought. When the two hoomaas were in the room, she had been able to make requests of the strange being that was not alive but which spoke with a voice nevertheless. A realization came to her now that a great many questions might be resolved through this being. She opened her breathing hole deeply to build courage and finally gave query to the one that the hoomaas called ‘Oibo.’

“Oibo, please tell me about Urth and what it is like.”

The voice did provide an answer, but it did not make sense. It sounded something about parameter and broad, which she did not understand. So instead she tried a different path. “Oibo, are there wordsongs from the ‘humans’ of the land of Lagos?”

The voice did not understand ‘wordsong’ but with a little explaining, she was able to find a similar term in the hoomaas language. Then a series of words showed on the screen and she picked one randomly.

Akwala is just a word

‘we be no-avoidin disaster if the nature of our peril’ mayhaps Pleasin to be see'in you. Deedins Saülé – drummed her fingers on the desk, a habit as old as time itself – exotic –the unspoken [conclusion] hung in air btwn them like a... smile dissolved into a pinched, half-starved look .. he just stood, staring after her the constant force both of gravity and the realization of what she'd done was like a [x] dragging her shoulders down to the floor Kinfe sat bolt-upright suddenly. Realizing she didn't remember getting into the airlock she felt queezy with nerves, as if a poisoned ocean sloshed within her belly The ship seemed different now, it's meaning altered, before at NewMali everything had had a feeling of purpose, now it felt more like a tomb

Djuloya a name scarce uttered
images by the thousands lost to the winds
of time and war and blissful ignorance

but the soaring djangwali communities
and the jirgin-samas fleeting between
the lovely bronze skin of the men in the street
a powerful river running in haste to the sea
is food enough for the eyes,
and nourishment for the soul

The wordsong was written by a woman named Oloriya Chukwunye in the year
2612

For a moment she merely stared at the words and marveled at the gift of wordsong
which these people were capable of. This was very much different from the cold
'diploma-see' of the hoomaas on this boat. It motivated her to try other wordsongs
in anticipation of enjoying similar beauty. The next one that she chose was much
older, and only parts of it was known to the being.

Some days know
the secret leaning of the heart

their auricles are acres of clay
watered by the kindest dew

their music the beat of every pulse...

flowers drape them
in their rarest fragrance

for them tenderness is no treason....

are not allergic to softness

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fingers on the desk, a habit as old as time itself – exotic -the unspoken [conclusion] hung in air btwn them like a... smile
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some days
are not afraid of being human³⁴

This wordsong was more confusing to her. There were many words which she did not understand, perhaps because this one was spoken so long ago in the beforetime that its clarity had been lost. So instead of this, she asked the Oibo being to share more about some of the words. She learned that 'heart' was a name not only for part of the inside of their people but also for emotions and even had connection to their mating. There were also pictures that she could see of different parts of their home and so she asked for more of those in the hopes that it would be less confusing than the strange words.

The smart-know'n now was incredible. With the help of Oibo she gained awareness of the enormous wealth this being possessed. She became able to see pictures of different hoomaas, or 'humans' as they called themselves. She could see the small boxes which they traveled in called jirgin-sama. There were even pictures of Lagos, with enormous stretches of trees carpeting the landscape between tall shelterspaces which had three gigantic legs stretching down beneath the strangely colored forest. Then there was another picture of the coastline and a shimmering sea with something called 'waves' making a rhythm against the underfoot.

The experience was like nothing she had ever witnessed before. Even the blessed time of sharing prophecy did not compare to this experience of seeing all the innumerable sights from the far distant home of the humans. It was as if she had spent many days high along the slope of Higsthon and was now relishing in the warmth of a great fire.

Where before she had wanted nothing but to escape the magic boat and bring help to the kinfolk in anticipation of the evil ones' attack. Now even that was but a dim memory as she sat bathed in the smart-knowin of these magical visitors. That

34 'Some Days' (to Akawu) - Poem by Dr. Niyi Osundare

'we be no-avoidin disaster if the nature of our peril' mayhaps Pleasin to be see'in you. Deedins Saülé – drummed her fingers on the desk, a habit as old as time itself – exotic –the unspoken [conclusion] hung in air btwn them like a... smile dissolved into a pinched, half-starved look .. he just stood, staring after her the constant force both of gravity and the realization of what she'd done was like a [x] dragging her shoulders down to the floor Kinfe sat bolt-upright suddenly. Realizing she didn't remember getting into the airlock she felt queezy with nerves, as if a poisoned ocean sloshed within her belly The ship seemed different now, its meaning altered, before at NewMali everything had had a feeling of purpose, now it felt more like a tomb

was at least until she saw one very disturbing picture. It was a stark and brutal landscape of rocky crags, lifeless underfoot, and a bleak dull gray sky. Only one tiny rivulet of water meandered through a deep canyon with a few twisted and struggling plants haphazardly clinging to its edge. She asked the Oibo being to tell her what it was, for it appeared to be a completely lifeless place, much as the morass was described to look like. Here, the being stated that the picture was of a place called 'Eye-oh-wah' in 'Amehrika.'

This terrible image blanketed her in a cloak of sorrow. For when she asked if this was a small place like their morass, the Oibo being told her about the very large wars and the 'kontinentz' lost to the desert in this Amehrika place.

"Oibo, this Lagos place couldn't be the only part of Urth with plants and trees. Could you show a picture of what it looks like from farther away?" She had of course heard the wordsong passed down from the blessed ones, that the land of the hoomaas was not flat, but was actually a very large ball. This was something that she had always secretly doubted and she saw this as her opportunity to learn the fulltrue once and for all.

But just as the wordsongs had said, the picture that she saw was of a big round ball sitting against a dark night sky with patterns of green, brown and blue partly covered by white shapes. It was, to her, a supremely beautiful site and it gave her more of the understanding for why the hoomaas missed this place so deeply.

CHAPTER 100

Rhumfa felt somewhat better after a drug induced nap, but the doctor was right about the danger of that shot. She started to feel lightheaded if she took more than one in a single earth day (which was confusing given the length of the days on *this* planet).

The blinking indicator on her room interface distracted her from such trivial things though. There were two messages waiting for her attention. So she half-heartedly slapped her hand on the panel next to the bed and began reading through her still fuzzy eyes.

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The first was from Huso and she punched it up, thinking affectionately of her dear friend.

Rhumfa. You know that I care for you very much.

However yesterday's outburst was quite out of character and deeply harmful to our mission.

"We don't really have a mission on this forsaken rock." But she kept reading nevertheless.

I did what little I was able to in order to smooth things over with the native healer, but the woman was quite emotional after seeing her companion disappear into thin air."

Now she was fully awake as the implications hit her. "Chi moo. I did that." She smacked her forehead in frustration. "How could I be so stupid as to let myself get out of hand like that."

I do understand where you're coming from Rhumfa.

When I caught on to what you were referring to... well I almost went off the handle too. But please understand that the crew and I are going to have to deal with this.

We've called for ipade a few hours from now and I will do what I can to lighten the blow on you.

Alright, now on to other things. Once I had gotten past Gelfetia's shock at how we could do the same thing that Umquo's crew had done to their 'revered ancestor' I was able to work out a compromise with her. I will have Oibo fabricate 30 apatas for their village-

"What?!" She had to read over the line twice more to get over the shock of it.

"Huso, how could you?" But she read on hoping for some kind of reasonable justification.

"for their village out of respect for the warrior's lost possession. Now I'm sure that you wont like this, but please consider that it was *their* people who came up with the idea of using it as an apata. They were just using

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what was nearby already. So once the discovery was made, it would be a simple matter for them to make the same thing themselves. Except that the approaching army is practically at the end of that marsh area and it won't be long before those people reach Ubuntu. I can't help but feel that it was our presence that delayed their ability to prepare for such a disaster. That we should take some small action to reduce the suffering. Don't worry, I'll make sure that what we give them is made of local materials and roughly finished to appear domestic.

She moved on to the second message which was a great deal more upsetting. Rhumfa, after a lengthy discussion with the crew it has been decided that the lack of control shown recently must be dealt with. Therefore voice commands for ship systems will no longer be accessible to you until such time that either we get the thrusters operational or there is a communal agreement to change this decision. "Kò jé jé béè!"³⁵ She slammed her fist against the counter. After all the work we've done to get the colonists in place, to ensure everyone's safety through stasis and get the ship down on the surface of this planet in one piece, *this* is the thanks I get?? She threw a uniform on herself and lunged for the door, ready to tear into every living one of them when she was stopped with her hand only 9cm from the sensor. THIS was exactly what they were talking about. She was letting her emotions supersede her common sense. If she wanted to continue being a part of any resolution, it wouldn't do to go running off with daggers in her eyes. She sat back on the bed and worried to herself over why she was allowing herself to fly off the handle this way. Sure the situation was upsetting, but the thing was, it was upsetting for *all of them*. Yet Saaed and Ikasha weren't letting their emotions control them. Something was setting her apart from the rest of the crew. Something was nestled deep in her mind like a wasp, stirring up her emotions even as she fought to keep her cool. Whatever it was seemed to be as hidden as their dark energy crystal, locked behind a zenium shield.

35 Yoruba expression roughly translated as 'I don't believe it'

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No matter how much she spun the issue around in her mind, there seemed to be no easy answers. The only thing she could do was to spend more time each day on yoga practice. Maybe that would ease her mind enough to deal with this insanity with some greater degree of control.

CHAPTER 101

Her legs were screaming in agony and she almost tripped for the third time now. The great rocky crags of Higsthon were ripping away the last vestiges of her gudstrength leaving her as fragile as the magic hoomaas that she had only just escaped from. The landscape was little more than a blur so early in the morning and she had only managed to get this far thanks to the glow of Twiklaryun shining brilliantly down on her path. Now with the early glow of the Saülé creeping up the very farthest shelterspaces, she finally succumbed to exhaustion only a few footfalls beyond her precious Ubuntu. Her last thought was a prayer to Ilhamet that one of her kinfolk spotted her quickly. For there was not the tiniest thread of gudstrength left within her for remaining on her feet.

The next vision she saw was the beautiful face of Aninniyi looking down on her. There was a strange feeling on her face that she couldn't at first understand until the blessed cool water found it's way to her mouth and she sucked it like Gelf the wise discovering a hotzfruit.

“My word Truinye, how long have you been traveling? You look completely wasted.” Though her limbs were still no more than monstrous stones held flat against the underfoot, the water did help her in forming the briefest of wordsongs. “Aninniyi it's a blessing from Adeima to see you. Go quickly and tell the kinfolk that there is an approaching attack by the ones beyond the morass.”

The woman showed the large eye expression of the hoomaas and her mouth fell open. “The evil ones? But they cannot reach here. Besides, your own nna nna defeated them mightily-”

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“Aninniyi believe me when I say that something has changed. I..” She was finding it difficult to create wordsong now and her kinfolk dribbled more water into her mouth. But that was the last thing she felt before everything went black.

CHAPTER 102

A light knock roused her from the meager nap that she had succumbed to. The place of the magic hoomaas was vast in it’s wonders, but despite the comforts of the hoomaas’ sleeping mat, her sleep was hampered by some kind of vibration nearby making sleep a sporadic companion.

The door opened to reveal a hoomaas that she did not recognize from the beforetime. It was a female judging by the smaller height and strange protrusion of the chest. Unlike the other two hoomaas she had met, this woman had many strange long ropes extending from her head. The ropes had many colored things tied into them and the whole effect was like nothing that she had seen before. But when the hoomaas spoke, her thoughts of superficial things were quickly extinguished.

“Is it really true that you can see the future?” The hoomaas held an expression of cautious awe that Gelfetia found amusing in such a powerful tribe.

She assumed that the woman was asking about her wondrous time in front of their tribe’s power crystal. “Hoomaas, I do not know what knowledge is of the later-time and what is of the now. I have only expressed what the magnificence of Adeima chooses to reveal.”

The hoomaas pondered that for a moment. “But even just the fact that you can withstand the energy crystal. That represents an unbelievable strength that your people have.”

“Hoomaas, the-”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I never introduced myself. I am called Ikasha.” The woman put her hand straight out in an unfamiliar way. Then a moment later the hoomaas appeared slightly uncomfortable and changed her mind.”

“Very well. Eekashah. You may not realize this, but one of the fundamental elements of Ubuntu is that we have hoomaas and denisovians living together as

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one kinfolk. We recognize that each of us have different strengths. Truinye for example is most skilled as a warrior and practices the donga with strength and courage. Kwandic has a kind humor that we all find most entertaining. Sefin shows great skill in making vessels to store fodiens. Each of our people are different and we all contribute in valuable ways.”

From the way that the hoomaas responded, it was clear that she was impressed. “That’s a wise and beautiful sentiment Gelfetia. Certainly each of us on the ship have different strengths as you describe. But all of us are the same species and so we all have similar limitations. Not a single human can withstand the radiant energy from the dark crystal without being killed... um, sent to the aftertime.” This was a new and fascinating wordsong for her. When she had seen the mind-pictures from Huso in the beforetime, she had experienced much fraidness of these people for their magic. So the mere thought that she could endure something that would send them to Pritlaxtl was quite surprising to her.

“Gelfetia?” The hoomaas was again feeling the discomfort, and it was not clear for the moment what was the cause.

“Yes hoomaas?”

The woman moved her hands many times in her forming of the request. “I... well, I wonder if you would be willing to stand in front of the crystal once more. I would be very interested to see what ‘prophecy’ is revealed to you a second time.”

The statement left her filled with astonishment. For the only way in which she had been able to bring the wisdom of Adieme in the beforetime was through force, which resulted only in the hoomaas’ keeping her within their magic camp and away from her people.

“I truly do not know what to say hoomaas. Being an oracle was the highest honor in the whole land for our people in the beforetime. That was until the trial of Gelf resulted in banishment from the land by the evil ones and separation from the holy temple. Until your peoples’ arrival we had not been blessed with the wisdom of Adeima for countless annums. But at the same time, this dwelling here among your people separates me from the kinfolk who will need me even more in this time of approaching warriors.”

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The hoomaas pondered this for a time before seeming to reach a conclusion.

“Gelfetia, I can’t say for certain if I can convince the rest of the crew, but I will do my best to encourage the decision to bring you back to the kinfolk if you would be willing to allow me to witness this ‘prophecy.’ Oh, and you wont have to worry about Rhumfa getting in the way. After her last outburst, she has little standing among the crew. Her command interface with Oibo has been revoked.”

The last part was not something that she understood, but the mere suggestion that one of the magical hoomaas could be punished so, merely because of a thing as wondrous as commanding the magic faery column was at least as extraordinary as the woman’s other statements. These hoomaas were most perplexing in their reaction to her and to the majesty of Adeima.

She thought back to the beforetime, seeing their magic power device and how unique it had been. That however also reminded her of the agonizing pain and the difficult process to keep Pritlaxtl from stealing her kaba.

Was it really fair to her people in this time of crisis to risk tempting Pritlaxtl so blatantly? What if she succumbed this time, leaving nobody to guide the kinsfolk against the attacking warriors? She shared her concerns with Eekashah who lowered her head as the sadface took over. “I am sorry Gelfetia. It was wrong of me to suggest it. I should have been more conscious of how much your ‘kinsfolk’ depend on you. We should respect your peoples’ autonomy more.”

She could sense from the hoomaas the blaming of the self that she often felt with Lluchra and Regina. It was a profound moment for her to experience similar emotions from these magical hoomaas as she encountered among her own people. With all of the ‘teknowlegy’ that they commanded, it was often difficult to remember that they were of the same type of people as her own hoomaas kinfolk. The fragility which this person displayed gave her the sense that she might provide a similar role for them as she provided for the brothers and sisters of the familyland.

“Hoomaas, please do not allow sadface to dominate your feelings. Just as the djengoard vine pushes up against the stone, but does not cease in it’s growing so do we use our mistakes to build a more full and diverse kaba which will serve us throughout the rest of our days. I am deeply gratified that you show a respect for

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our culture and a receptivity to ideas which must contrast strongly with your own expectations.”

She immediately experienced a sense from the hoomaas which felt like reverence, or at least a deep respect. This satisfied her in feeling that she had been correct in her assumption. It gave her much gratitude to Azealla for the gift of wisdom and kindness which had been bestowed upon her.”

“Gelfetia.” The woman’s tone gave added reinforcement to the veneration the hoomaas was feeling. “I can really understand now the reason that your people hold you in such high regard. As much as your company is a great joy for me personally, it really is selfish for us to keep you away from your own people. I intend to do what I can to help provide for you a return to your ‘kinsfolk’ in Ubuntu.”

CHAPTER 103

A great chorus of cheers erupted from the exhausted assembly. Now that they were only a few steppins from the end of the morass, the kinfolk joyously slogged through the bit of saturated ground to relish in the wondrous feel of the solid underfoot. By now there was no leader in all the land who could convince them to lift a single limb in the carrying of woodfells, and Gjintruk was wise enough to make no such attempt.

There was initially a great collapse and a profound silence while each of them endeavored to find gudstrength even for wordsong. The breath holes continued to pulsate from the final joyous effort of reaching this spot. The men and woman had more resemblance to those stolen away by Pritlaxtl for their utter lack of gudstrength. But soon enough the more boisterous of the warriors began to laugh, to congratulate each other, and in short order to drink the celebratory cup of meed which he and Beljutil passed around to the whole group. It had been the one container that he had guarded most carefully as there was good reason to believe that the warriors would need more than simply inspiring wordsong for such an enormous undertaking.

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He then announced to the assembled kinfolk that they should enjoy a few days of rest before the march continued towards their grand victory. He made sure to emphasize the glory and rewards that the men and women would enjoy when the evil ones were defeated. While doing so, he gave the straight-eye to each one in turn, seeking to ascertain their mood and degree of loyalty. It had come as a surprise, even to him, just how excruciating the trip across the morass was for the kinfolk. Only now that the whole group could rest on the solid underfoot was he willing to admit, even to himself, the scope of his relief that the warriors had stayed true to the cause. For even the morass was not a greater threat than the possibility of mutiny or desertion. If only a few were to seek independence, it would set a dangerous precedent for the rest of the assembled kinsfolk. He would be a poor leader indeed if he allowed the campaign which was intended as a distraction from the dangerous whisperings regarding the oracle, to instead cause him to lose the very influence which ensured his position as leader of Xenlaria.

CHAPTER 104

“But how can our people succeed Truinye? The hoomaas have captured Gelfetia, they have stolen your wonderful apata, and we do not even know which path these warriors will take or how much time there is to prepare for their arrival?”

She wanted to tell them to not be so cynical and to show gudstrength. For there was no prophecy needed in order to see what would become of them if they merely wailed of the hardships while the evil ones approached. She even came close to speaking thus to Regina who was the least dependable of them all. But the time spent in the hoomaas magic place with Gelfetia was still fresh in her smarati. She was reminded of the many times that the healer used the kindface to help dispel troubles among the kinsfolk. Thus she rethought the situation and considered how she could build up the gudstrength of her people's kaba.

“My kinsfolk, I would never bring harsh word on Gelfetia or make any attempt to fill her role. But as you know, the great healer is a peacemaker. She holds amazing skill in the easing of disputes which she has demonstrated to each of us in

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the beforetime. Yet this is not the time for the making of peace. The evil ones are moving towards us and they are strongfocused only on the causing of harm. This is a time for fabricating weapons and preparing for defense. In this role, I believe that it will be possible for us to succeed, even with our blessed healer absent.” With limbs still screaming every time they were lifted, she shared with them the wordsong for a plan which she prayed to Prijnak would bring her people victory despite the many hardships wrought by the evil hoomaas.

CHAPTER 105

Mautide wove his way carefully down towards the great flowing brook. He was tired, but not as exhausted as Truinye had been. He had never before seen the great warrior falter even once in the beforetime. She was easily the most powerful of any kinfolk in the land. But then again he had never known someone to make fast-steppins along the rough terrain of Higsthon for such an enormous distance. She must have not stopped for even the smallest timespan through the entire trip back to Ubuntu, which had taken the kinfolk the better part of two days. There was no mistaking that the strength of Prijnak flowed through her more powerfully than himself or anyone else that he knew.

A small movement just beyond the brook returned his attention to the moment and he dove for the shelter of a bush. But the sight of the dejeeyr gave him a sigh of relief as he berated himself for being that easily fooled. If he was to prove successful in discovering the location of the invaders, then he would have to be a great deal more cautious and not let the worries of home fill his thinkin.

The Saülè was nearly at the high part of His daily journey and Mautide was finding that the rushing torrent of the Juantaylib was destroying any effort to hear signs of attacking warriors. If knowledge of the evil ones were to be learned at all, it would require traveling across the powerful brook and getting close enough to them that this rush of water did not overwhelm his hear'n. It would not be easy at all, since the only wudfell that spanned across the water was many steppins behind him. The crossing would require not only keeping the sharp-eye for warriors here, but also for a place to cross the brook safely. He gave the staighteye

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many times as the awesome power of Nejtowil thrust the waters past in a great tangled current. It caused within him an equally vexing convulsion to keep from allowing the fraidness to dominate his think'n. For if his mission did not succeed, then it was likely that Ubuntu would not either.

CHAPTER 106

'Aminu, I need you to come down to the geology lab as soon as possible.' If this data was right, then their situation might very quickly go from merely bad to absolutely horrible. Kaylan stared at the feedback from the satellite with his hands clenched against his thighs. Even in a best case scenario, it was hard to imagine their ship staying in one piece if these scans proved accurate. He looked back over the data from a week before and cursed himself for not seeing this earlier. The chronometer ticked another minute by and he began drumming his long and slender fingers next to the interface, impatiently waiting for an answer to the message. But it never came. Instead there was a chime and Aminu strode through with a confused expression.

"You called for me Kaylan?" The tall man unfolded a chair from it's wall nook and sat down, tilting his head quizzically.

Kaylan let out a small sigh of relief, though he wasn't sure what the science expert might be able to offer. "Yes yes Aminu. Please. I need to ask your advice on this subterranean cross-section I got through Oibo." He shifted aside giving the man room to look at the subsurface scans which he'd been staring nervously at for the better part of an hour.

"Is this a section of ground beneath that large morass? It looks-"

"No, dammit. That's the thing. This is right below us."

The man's head whipped around fast enough that it looked as though he might break something. "What?!" Aminu turned back more slowly, leaning in closer to the screen, as if the smaller distance might bring out some hidden detail in the subsurface image. "That's impossible. These areas here are pockmarked with holes and acidic groundwater. If that is really calcite beneath the surface here then we're basically sitting on top of a giant sponge." Once again the man swung

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his head back to face Kaylan. “I’m beginning to wonder if our pilot shouldn’t be replaced, immediately.”

“I can’t believe Rhumfa would have set the ship down in such a place.” Huso sent commands for Oibo to display the subsurface data at the moment of touchdown. The earlier one showed a vast subterranean field of calcite, but one without any voids at all. Both of them stared aghast at the two images in disbelief.

“Aminu, please tell me you’ve seen this happen on other planets.” He was beginning to sympathize with the many comments Rhumfa would make of how this detour was somehow cursed by the Ajogun.³⁶

The man collapsed into a chair without moving his eyes from the screen. “I would swear on the grave of my father that I haven’t seen a thing like this in any extra-solar geological scan.” He stabbed his finger at the screen like it was some kind of magic wand. “A process like this typically occurs over the course of decades, if not centuries. The speed of this sublimation is completely unprecedented.”

Knowing it was futile, he nevertheless messaged the pilot to join them, if only to prove to himself that he wasn’t imagining the whole thing.

It took little time for the woman to show up and Kaylan guessed that she was probably bored out of her skull without an endless task list to be occupied with. “What is it you two?” The pilot barely seemed to notice Aminu and glanced absentmindedly at the screen.

They both watched her face carefully as the subject was breached and the shock that eclipsed her earlier calm clarified for Kaylan that she couldn’t have overlooked such a glaring mistake.

“So you’re saying that in the..” she counted on her fingers for a second, “three weeks since I landed us here, almost three thousand cubic meters of subsurface rock simply got eaten away? That’s absolutely impossible. You must have taken this scan incorrectly. Even if I had been stinking drunk during the landing, and the lack of oxygen sure made it feel that way, Oibo would have automatically warned me of any instability beneath a landing site.”

36 Name for supernatural forces believed to be responsible for various types of evil

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Now Aminu made the unwise decision to exhume the torment of the whole crew. “And I still haven’t seen evidence of niobium, molybdenum, or rhenium on any of the scans from our satellite.”

The pilot finally seemed to really notice his presence, but it was a darkness neither of them expected. “Aminu, there’s 140 *billion* hectares of surface to examine. Do you really expect me to believe that you people have checked *every single* square kilometer of it? Both on the surface and down half a kilometer below?” The woman pointed her finger at him accusingly. “Listen, I may not have the authority or control of Oibo for the time being. But I will tell you for certain that we are not going to move a single millimeter unless you people scan this planet at least twice over. So I would get yourselves away from this distraction and focus on what’s really important here. Before we really find ourselves in a hole that we can’t ever pull out of!”

“Hey, it’s not Aminu’s fault Rhumfa. It’s not as if we fabricated this data just to make things more interesting around here. Every single one of us has been pouring over the satellite feed like ravenous dogs.”

The man’s expression must have made an impression on her. After several seconds of staring at each other, she finally backtracked. “Dammit. I’m sorry both of you. This situation is so unbelievably frustrating. And learning that not only can we not lift off from the surface, but that the very surface beneath us has about as much fusion as a ring of cosmic dust is just terrifying. What in the world are we going to do if the ship starts sinking?”

CHAPTER 107

Truinye repeated many parts of the strange wordsong from her time in the huge place of the magical hoomaas. She told of the crashing that she had seen along the edge of the forst, and how Gelfetia had somehow learned how to direct the strange voice of the hoomaas that wasn’t alive in order to find out how the evil ones were able to travel across the morass. She then spoke of the massive effort which would be needed by all of the kinfolk to create spears and apatas to defend against these evil ones. And though Lluchra was taking over the role of their missing healer, she

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herself would have to lead the tasks of searching among the wudfells for the straightest branches. Both the carving spears and building copies of the apata which had been stolen from her would require several days work by the kinsfolk. The providing of leadership would be enormously challenging through this terrible ordeal. Neither she nor Lluchra could ever match the kindness, wisdom, and serenity which Gelfetia possessed. But with a great unknown mass of warriors making the fast-steppins toward them, the lot of them would have to get by with the resources that were available. It had been of little comfort to the kinfolk merely learning that Gelfetia was not with Pritlaxtl. The worry for how they would defend Ubuntu and the frustration with the evil hoomaas created a very large disturbance with much bickering and insults even among close friends these days. It was not something that Truinye had ever seen much less been forced to supervise.

She supported Lluchra to the extent that she could, but all too often the sluggishness of the kinfolk brought her the unhappy as well, and it was easier to focus on discussions with Mautide regarding strategies for their defense. In front of him, and in front of Lluchra she displayed the confidence and strongface that she hoped would inspire them to maintain their focus and resolve. But when she was by herself she was filled with the same fraidness as they were. It reminded her of the unsettling experience when she stood outside of the magical hoomaas boat. The fraidness turned around within her like some fodiens that was spoiled. There were mornings when she awoke feeling almost physically sick from the great danger threatening them all. She was finding upset in every part of her routine now. Sleep did not come to her properly, fodiens tasted bland, even the practice of donga had come to feel more like a chore than a respite.

She took a short break from her worries to make an offering of prayers to Ilhumut before seeking along the slope of Higsthon for some kind of wood that might have the strength enough for apata, yet light enough to carry. As she gave the straight-eye towards the peak of Higsthon, something strange caught her attention. It was partly hidden behind a few trees, and so she had to convince her still tired legs to bring her up the slope to get a closer look.

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It was a great blessing from Ilhamet! There were many apatas built of wood sitting in a pile not far from the iran ologo. She did not know how it came to be, but a gift such as this was not a thing which she would question. Instead she quickly lifted one up in order to test it's weight and feel. The construction was perfect, the wood was light, and there were woven straps to hold it against her arm. She quickly flew back to the village to share the wonderful news, paying little notice now of the dull ache in her limbs.

CHAPTER 108

He gave the sharp-eye to each of the warriors laying asleep along the underfoot. His concern for them now was greatly reduced, but like the buzzing of a huitzfly it could not be completely eliminated. The crossing of the great morass had been longer and more exhausting then he could have ever predicted. There had even been a short time when he'd felt the fraidness that some of the warriors might turn against his leadership. He was reminded again of what a political gamble this campaign was. He was risking a great deal in the satisfying of Imotren's wild lust for revenge, and if it weren't for the murmurings surrounding the oracle he would have never given the plutarch more then two or three warriors to command. But seeing how his own position was intricately connected to the temple, and his peoples' unwavering belief in it, he could see little alternative but to distract them with an easy victory. At least it had seemed to be an effortless conquest when Imotren had discussed it with him in the beforetime.

Now his warriors were exhausted and they were low on fodiens as well. The prospect of bringing the kinfolk a swift victory was looking very much less certain then his discussions with the oracle had caused him to believe. It would be necessary to push the warriors as much as they would tolerate in order to keep low the number of days traveling on rations. The reward of spoils and fodiens taken would be worth the long march only if the group remained with gudstrength until then.

Most importantly, none of the kinsfolk knew how far it would be or what further obstacles might lay ahead. It would be necessary to encourage his warriors to keep

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the straight-eye for a meldabeast or other trophy until such time as the target for their aggression provided the much-needed distraction that the kinsfolk needed.

CHAPTER 109

Cold, wet, and with barely a hint of gudstrength left, he dragged himself up the slope to the flat underfoot. The Juantaylib had been more powerful than even the wordsongs of Gelf the wise had suggested. The wudfell stretching halfway across the water had seemed easily graspable when viewed from the shore. It had seemed to be a simple matter of pushing through some of the brook in order to reach it. However Nejtowil was not so easily placated and he had been thrown beneath the rushing water where the wudfell could no longer be reached. The great and powerful stream had flooded his mouth and his breath hole until he could no longer manage to draw any air at all. The powerful waters had thrown him about like he was a mere wingsqerl until there wasn't a single part of him that was not with pain. It was a near miracle that he had survived to reach the other side of the great churning water with all of his limbs intact. He offered prayers of gratitude to Prijnak in thanks for saving his kaba from Pritlaxtl and allowing him the chance to continue serving his kinsfolk out here in the wilderness.

In thinking of this, he realized how much lower the Saülè had fallen, and he still had not managed to raise himself from the underfoot to catch sight of the evil ones. How wasteful it would be for him to travel so far and to risk his gudstrength without having any smartknowin to show for it. So without further delay, he forced his battered legs underneath him and made careful steppins towards the forst. It took much looking at the underfoot before a dejeeyr path was found which would lead him back to the brook and not to some other part of the forst. For there was precious little time for the kinfolk to put Truiny's plan into action and nobody knew how far away the evil ones were or how much time there was to prepare. They did not even have smartknowin as to the number of warriors bearing down on them all. It felt briefly as if the entire gudstrength of Ubuntu rested on his shoulders and on the wordsong that he might bring back to the kinsfolk.

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CHAPTER 110

Regina glanced up at the small patch of sky from her vantage point far below the underfoot and rested her exhausted limbs. The light of the Saülè now was greatly reduced, and the dim illumination mirrored her own dim hopes for the future. The screaming within her for the fire water was barely diminished from the day before and she suffered the constant fraidness that if she were to give in to the siren call of her flask, the barely glowing spark of hope for her plan would collapse like a huitzfly at night. Many times during the day her kaba screamed for the drink and it was only through the intense work that she managed to distract herself from the constant thoughts of drowning the great unhappy. Any time that she paused in her digging, the shame of how she was seen by her kinsfolk and the trust that she had destroyed would eat it's way back into her think'n. All that she was and all that she attempted seemed to be destined for failure. If anyone had asked her in that moment what pushed her on, even when her limbs were utterly drained of the vigrus, she would be without any kind of practical answer.

With so little faith in herself and so much quietwords whispered among the kinfolk, she made a promise to herself that she would say nothing until it was absolutely complete. For there was no hope whatsoever that Truinye would see any greater value then the kinfolk saw in her other contributions. The best that she could do was to devote all of her free time towards finishing as quickly as possible, with prayers to Ilhamet that her plan would hold some very small value to the people of the familyland. Even while she continued to doubt that her standing among the kinfolk might ever change.

CHAPTER 111

Something was different. Mautide could sense it, but he could not quite put it into conscious thought. There was something teasing in his senses which would not cease to infect his think'n. It was several long moments before he became distracted by something else though. Voices! Yes there were definitely voices

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nearby. He dove quickly but quietly into some shrubs in hopes that he hadn't yet been discovered.

Then listening intently, he crept towards the sound seeking the quietest underfoot and staying carefully in the shadows. Soon enough he was able to bring himself up to the edge of a large wudfell and the voices grew distinctly louder. There were brief glimpses through the trees of shadowy figures, but he could not get a sense of how many warriors made up the group. The variety of voices though, suggested a great many which brought the dread within him now both for his own safety and for Ubuntu's survival.

One particular voice sounded as if it were traveling straight towards him and he listened carefully while the fraidness of being discovered brought a shaking that seemed to envelop him. Soon there was the sound of steps from nearby and he crouched as low as possible within the bushes watching a vigrus woman make her way along the trail towards the gathered people.

Soon there were greetings and shouts of familiarity which prompted him to take discrete steppins in the same direction. By now he was practically flat along the underfoot, vigilantly giving the straight-eye towards a large group of warriors. He even managed to grasp a few intermittent pieces of their wordsong which told him of a trade between the new woman and the evil ones. There was mention of a certain kind of metal, and the trading for information about the land nearby. But who could this woman be? And why would anyone from the land offer wordsong to these evil warriors? If he were ever to find the answers to these questions, most certainly the first one, it was certain that Truenye would be more than happy to demonstrate her warrior skills to such a betrayer as this. He did not in that moment have a plan, but some path toward greater undersanding would have to be gained. It would require much cunning and he gave prayer to Prijnak to be blessed with such. The unknowns burned within him as he attempted to tease out the fulltrue from the faint wordsong, there were still far too many gaps in what could be grasped that he began to feel the fraidness that this task was a futile one.

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CHAPTER 112

The door opened and she was mildly surprised to see the hoomaas 'Eekasha' enter with much unhappy and uncertainty. "I'm afraid that I wasn't able to convince the others Gelfetia." The hoomaas paused and stared at her hands for a moment.

"But, I just can't ignore my... intuition that this 'prophecy' of yours has some kind of-" the woman paused for a long time now. "Well, it feels important to me. I guess that's the best way to put it. After all, there was the tale about the ship changing course, and the trees which were felled by that group of Xenlarian warriors. It just seems too... coincidental." The hoomaas stared at the underfoot, this time for such a long while that it was hard to decide if she intended to continue at all. The hoomaas was searching for something, but it was not clear what that obscure thing was until she at last managed to find the words to continue. "Anyway, I think that it's time for a little experiment to see if another one of these predictions will come true. But I need you to remember that this would have to remain between you and I alone. This won't be as dangerous as going near the energy crystal... at least not for you. But for me it means violating several regulations which I am duty bound to abide by."

Curiosity brought her the temptation to discover what the hoomaas was planning. But she had to remind herself yet again to respect their peoples' priyvasi, and so she merely helped the woman draw out her plan the slow way. "What do you propose, hoomaas?"

Once again the woman faltered and she sensed the woman's thinking that this was not really a wise idea. But it was eventually put aside and the visitor continued. "Well, one of the things you said in the power room was, 'healers together by statue.' There is only one place that we've seen statues constructed, and that's within a large temple in the village across the morass-"

"The great temple of Adeima!" Her kaba swelled merely in thinking of the place. To not only provide prophecy to the kinfolk, but to have the chance of seeing the lost temple of Gelf the wise. This was all too good to be true. In the whole history of their diaspora, not a single person had been blessed to witness the great temple of the Holy Mother. She couldn't at all imagine how she might be worthy of such generosity.

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“I didn’t know that you were familiar with it. So anyway, I was thinking that we bring you there and see if another healer shows up. That would give more certainty as to whether these... omens might be true.”

“Hoomaas, it would be my greatest honor to join you in such an expedition. I am ready to depart at any time.”

But immediately the woman put her hands in front of her and made a strange face.

“Ho ho. I’m glad to know that you’re willing to participate, but-”

“There is still the problem of what you were not able to convince the others about?”

The woman turned her gaze to the underfoot. “Yes, that’s true. If we do this, it means that I risk very strong punishment if this is discovered. Nobody can know about it and it will only be the two of us in the Gbowee.”

Despite the woman’s warning, there was nothing in all the land that would keep her from the opportunity to witness the Holy Temple of her ancestors. As much as her kaba now cried out to rush with this woman straight out of the room, it was clearly necessary that she hold her patience. This was simply another test of her strength by Azealla. “I understand your situation Eekasha. Please take all the time that you need, and know that I will happily wait until the moment is right.”

“Thank you Gelfetia. I spent quite a bit of time listening to various conversations among the people in that village, and it seems that there is a particular time of day when it is appropriate to visit the temple. Now normally we wouldn’t dare take the Gbowee to a village during the day, but with more than half those people off struggling through the distant morass, I believe that the risk is quite low. This will also be safer for you, as the visit will not raise too many eyebrows.”

She had to ask the hoomaas what was meant by the raising of eyebrows, but once the meaning was explained, then the ekspreshun of their people was more clear.

The hoomaas left to work on something she called ‘lodjistiks’ and Gelfetia now found herself even more ill at ease. For even the hint that she might at long last witness the lost temple to the Holy Mother brought her think’n into a vast churning as tempestuous as the swift-flowing Juantaylib.

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CHAPTER 113

She could see the warrior coming at her with fury and hatred. Her spear was held ready for attack and she slowed not the slightest as she made fast-steppins to within a few handsbreaths away. She then raised the spear back in preparation for a deadly thrust when her foot sunk down beneath her and then the other collapsed until her waist was level with the underfoot.

Truini saw how the whole thing would work and she grinned exultantly. “Regina this is the most wonderful invention. We will have great victory over the evil ones thanks in no small part to your smart-know’n.”

Her face must have been as red as the tryepflowr as she beamed with pride at having finally discovered something that was seen to be of value to the kinfolk. “Thank you Truinye. I’m so grateful that you approve.” With so many failures behind her, it had taken every bit of determination within her to hold onto the faintest shred of hope that this idea would be seen as anything more than a silly waste of effort by the kinsfolk.

“Oh I don’t just approve Regina. I would like to ask you to lead a group of our people to create these all around the village so that we may enjoy more success in defeating the evil ones.”

The words reached her large hoomaas ears, but she still could hardly believe it. The greatest warrior in the land was asking *her* to be the leader of a task?? It was more than she could ever imagine. She almost asked Truinye to repeat the statement, but then had the fraidness that she might have misheard.

“Really? You actually mean it?” Her imu sniffled then as tracks of water dribbled liberally from her overflowing eyes.

Now Truinye understood how fragile the hoomaas was. There had been so many failures, so many lost young’ns, and so much time with her fire water that the woman had no faith at all in herself. But if they wanted to survive, if they wanted to protect Ubuntu, then everyone would need to play a part, even Regina. Thus she bent down slightly and put a hand on the smaller woman’s shoulder. “My friend, I have no doubt in your ability to help the kinfolk in this task. I’m sure

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that you will display the vigrus, and impress Prijnak most highly with your cunning.”

She was rewarded in her kindness with the largest smile she had ever seen gracing the hoomaas’ face since the woman’s last pregnancy. It brought a swelling to her own kaba to imagine Regina finally healing from her many annums full of the sadface.

CHAPTER 114

She did not know how it happened, but she awoke to find herself in an ornate plaza. There was a wide pathway to one side, with an underfoot covered entirely with flat rectangles of clay leading to an open space covered in larger flat stones and three rows of massive columns leading into the distance. The columns alone were awe-inspiring in their scale and beauty. Huge tree trunks of stone reaching toward the overhead with ornate wooden flowers topping each one. Her mouth hung open merely in trying to absorb the majesty of it all.

Without conscious direction, she found herself meandering between the great columns and staring at each of them in awe.

Her steppins remained slow and cautious as she struggled with feelings of inadequacy beneath such grandeur. It was a long timespan of unceasing astonishment until she almost tripped when her foot struck the beginning of a wide stairway carved also of some unusual silver hued stone blocks. The stairway drew her eye upward at last to the wondrous temple of Adeima.

For a long moment she simply stared reverently at the exceptional beauty of the place. It towered above all else on a massive zaqāru which seemed far too immense to have been constructed by mere mortals (except maybe the magical hoomaas). Then at the very top was the enchanted temple itself which only became more awe-inspiring with each step that she climbed.

At first only the roof was visible, with it’s ornate pattern of Acadja branches carved in relief upon the front. But as she drew higher and closer, she observed a massive wall of compacted clay thrusting upward and outward beneath the roof as well. The huge wall was divided into even spaces by pillars and between these were

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marvelous reliefs of the Gods, the great Saülé, Higsthon, and a river meandering through it all. To her, it would take little convincing to imagine that Adeima Herself was the crafter of such delicate beauty as she saw in this Holy place.

Finally she passed through a grand entrance and into a dimly lit interior. On each side was a row of enormous statues depicting each of the Gods with a crown on their heads lit up by a shaft of light from the Saülé above. She stood mesmerized as her head swung from one statue to another, struggling to take in such awesome splendor. It was as if all the great power which the hoomaas device described was cast materially within these hollowed walls.

She began saying the holy prayers to each statue as the legend of Gelf the wise had directed. However her prayers were interrupted by a voice which she assumed was the oracle. “Our great leader, Gjintruk the powerful is trustworthy. He leads the kinfolk in assured victory against those who would wish harm to our great familyland. Much celebration with song and bowls of jadzabeen will be shared upon our warriors’ return.”

For a moment she was confused. This sounded very different from the prophecy which she had experienced in the place of the magical hoomaas. Was this the great wisdom offered by the Holy Mother to the people of this land?

She moved closer to the Oracle and experienced an even greater shock. The Oracle was saturated with fraudness of the untrue! Could it be? The holy woman herself? What, in all the land could bring such emotions to the great Oracle, here within the very bosom of the Holy temple?

“Who are you? What brings you to enter into the great temple of Adeima? Only a healer is permitted within these walls.”

The voice caused her to spin wildly around where she saw the shadowy outline of a figure moving purposefully towards her and the confusion was replaced with feelings of great unhappiness from the newcomer.

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CHAPTER 115

Saeed half-heartedly sipped from a meager ration of synthpalm-wine. Staring at the same old ship diagnostics was becoming as monotonous as a two week trek through the Sahara. And without providing anything but dead-ends at every turn. He wasn't normally a man to let an impasse drag him into despair, but lately Rhumfa's frustration and irritability were becoming much more understandable these days. Nothing that they did seemed to bring any hope of escape from the clutches of this planet. Whether it was Fatima's endless analysis of the satellite data, Ereeko's examination of the O₂ scrubbers, or Manuel's constant sifting through the logs from the Nneka. Not a single one of the crew were managing to uncover any real answers for how to escape this cursed place. He thought about Ikasha's interest in the native people and gave a perfunctory glance through some of the recordings, not really because he considered them to be relevant but more just for a distraction from the endless volume of mission data.

There was little which stood out as noteworthy and he was beginning to accept that he was wasting time when a recording labeled 'Conversation Describing Local Legends' appeared on the screen. He called for Oibo to play it. If nothing else, it could at least relieve the boredom of dealing with their ruined ship.

Immediately he had the eerie experience of sitting in a brightly lit room surrounded by computer systems while listening to the far-off voices of a primitive tribe living several dozen kilometers away below the mountain.

"Mmemme, why do we have the shimmeri all around us up there?"

"Oh, you are so inquisitive this evening my dear one." There was a short pause before the voice continued. "Alright, sit here and I will tell you about it. Many long annums ago, after Azealla created the world, Adeima pointed out that the land was too dark for the many animals and people to see. And so the two of them discussed what would be done and finally they built an enormous bonfire, out of which came the Saülè. But the great Saülè was so aggressive that He burned the whole land with the heat of His flame. Soon all the water dried up and there were no plants that could grow and feed everyone. Azealla became worried for Her creations and so she set out to build a gigantic cloth that would hide the Saülè for part of the day. But then Adeima stated that this defeated the whole purpose of

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the Saülé if it only brought darkness back to the land. And so Azealla created Ijutliquen and Twiklaryun which would...”

“Oibo pause recording.” Something teased at his mind on hearing this. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but he felt sure that he’d already heard one of those terms before. He thought back to everything Ikasha had talked about, but kept drawing a blank. “Oibo, display all known recordings of Ijutliquen and Twiklayryun in sequential order.”

The screen only showed two entries. One was the recording he’d been listening to, and the other was the vaticination that the native healer had spoken of back in the power room. “Oibo, play second recording.”

“Heart of Twiklaryun evince purdue zinmarium.”

Zinmarium was the metal that was needed to get the thrusters working. But, how could a native person who didn’t even know about basic blacksmithing be aware of something as robust as Zinmarium, especially when they’d found no evidence of it on the entire planet? Unless...

“Ikasha, I need to speak with you immediately.” He wasn’t sure if his hunch was right, but even the faint possibility was enough to bring his hands to shaking. He played the first recording of the two natives three more times hoping to figure out what ‘heart of twiklayryun’ meant. But there just wasn’t enough in the conversation to provide any clarity.

He drummed his fingers on the panel waiting impatiently for the woman to send a response. But as the seconds ticked by, his anger soon engulfed the mild unease that he’d been feeling so far.

“Oibo, where the heck is Ikasha?” And why in the hell didn’t she answer? He wanted to smack at the AI’s interface in frustration, more at himself than at the other woman.

Oibo stated that she wasn’t on the ship, which only made things worse for him.

How could she be anywhere but inside the ship where they were safe...

The blaring of an alarm however, shattered whatever thoughts he might have had next.

He rushed out to the common room where he found Rhumfa, Anya, Huso, and Aminu already searching the data feed for answers. But it was Aminu not

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surprisingly, who announced the situation. “Saeed, thank goodness you made it here. The ground underneath us is sinking.”

Even having heard the rumors, he couldn't believe such nonsense could really be true. He unwisely said as much to Rhumfa who merely ignored him and addressed the AI instead. “Oibo, display a cross-sectional diagram of the ship and the ground beneath us.”

For several seconds nothing happened.

“Chineke ekwela ngwere gbaa aji! Oooogini di ihea?³⁷ Huso, will YOU ask the damn AI to do it? Please!”

Huso did so and they all stared at the image of their ship sitting at a 10 degree angle with giant voids in the ground beneath them. Of them all, Huso was the only person who somehow managed to find a silver lining to their calamity.

“Thank goodness there's no tectonic activity so far.”

“Good one Huso. But you have to realize that we wouldn't need an earthquake to do us in if this keeps up.” Aminu turned away from him and back to the interface.

“Oibo, please display a prediction of this going forward several days.”

Now the screen showed the ship continuing to list at an increasing angle until it was more than halfway buried.

“Buru aba! If we don't get those thrusters working soon, it wont be possible to get out of here at all.”

Saeed wanted to share what he'd discovered. But news of Rhumfa's irritability had made them all a bit cautious with controversial news around her. So instead he merely asked if anybody had seen Ikasha recently.

“I haven't seen her since yesterday.”

“Oibo says that she isn't on the ship, and that worries me.”

This time Rhumfa simply motioned for Huso to state the obvious question for them. “Oibo. What was the last known location of Ikasha?”

The AI reported that she was most recently in the jirgin-sama room.

“So she's left the ship?? Why in all the world would she do such a thing?!” He couldn't imagine a single treasure, short of zinmarium of course, that might convince him to venture out in that agonizing gravity.

37 Igbo expression of fury

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Her best friend took his usual task of helping to quell the pilot's emotions and he was increasingly sad for the amount of effort that Huso was having to put in keeping the woman from flying off the handle. "Now Rhumfa. Why don't we just set up an alert for her return and then we can find out."

But the pilot slapped his hand away. "Dammit Huso. What if she's in danger? We don't know where she's gone or for how long."

"Rhumfa, Huso. What if we send a couple of the drones. We could watch the two villages and see if there's any sign of her."

"Dammit, those drones have been battered every which way by this planet. I doubt they'd even survive more than four kilometers, at least of the two that've survived. You'll just have to get by with the satellite feed."

CHAPTER 116

Mautide was so engrossed with trying to discern the wordsong of the newcomer that he made the fatal mistake of ignoring the steppins closer by. It wasn't until the person was practically next to him that he understood his grievous error.

"Are you worried about the trustworthiness of that nomad too?" Despite his fraidness that discovery would mean banishment to Pritlaxtl, the other person spoke in hushed tones as if he too were gathering information, or perhaps the man had some other unkown reason for stealth. Mautide was momentarily taken aback. Who was this person if he wasn't one of the attacking warriors.

With his thoughts spinning, he chose careful words in hopes that the other wouldn't suspect him as an enemy. "It is fulltrue, I do not feel a trust for the woman. Do you think she will bring disaster?"

Now the man gave him the straighteye, and his whole being was flooded with the fraidness. "Strange, the words you speak sound different. Do you live in another part of the village?"

The situation was becoming more precarious with each moment and he briefly pretended to notice some winsquerl until he could show calm face to the man. But the bigger question was, what could he say to the man? He did not know their village or their customs. Could there be any explanat- Of course! Gelfetia had

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spoken of the magical hoomaas spying on another village located near a river and she thought those might be the people from the lost village of Gelf the wise. After a brief consideration, he decided that an untrue was better than the risk of the after-time.

“You are right. I lived along the great river and spent little time among the kinfolk.”

His response seemed at last to satisfy the man. “Ah, then you have perhaps not been subjected to so many of Gjintruk’s speeches. What a very lucky man you are.” Hoping to take advantage of the other’s assumption, he probed for more information which might help his own kinfolk. “Why? Are they boring?”

The other man gave a snort through his breath hole before continuing. “Boring isn’t even the worst of it. He-” But the man gave him the straighteye first. “Wait. If you have not been hearing the speeches calling for attack against the evil magic-makers on the mountain, then why are you here at all?”

Once again he was forced to do the quick-think’n to come up with something that would sound innocent to the man. So he gave a casual shrug to dispel the man’s suspicion “I don’t know. Everyone was marching off into the forest with weapons, so I grew curious and joined the group.”

The man’s eyes grew wider and he at first worried that his ruse had been exposed. But instead the man put a hand on his shoulder affectionately. “Could it be? Are you also in disagreement of attacking a people who we don’t even know?”

“Opé o!³⁸ Now he at last it seemed that there was someone among the group of evil ones who he could speak to as an ally. Perhaps this person would be willing to share greater wordsong of this strange attack. But he knew that discretion would still be necessary and so he remained cautious. “Well of course I would not agree with such a thing. There seems no point in traveling all this way across that dreadful morass just to attack a bunch of people that have never harmed any of us.”

The other man seemed impressed, but spoke in quietvoice. “You would show smartknowin to keep those words to yourself. The vast majority of kinfolk here would follow Gjintruk through all manner of hardships for the honor and glory of

38 Yoruba expression roughly translating to ‘Eureka!’

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victory which he promises with his grand proclamations. I have not heard a single one of the kinfolk so far speak as you do.”

Here now Mautide could see a critical moment present itself. The time was not right to reveal his true origins, but if he were able to create a bond with this man, then a great deal of smart-knowin might be discovered. He put an arm on the other’s shoulder and spoke also in quietvoice. “My friend, you can be sure that I will take your advice and keep your own words tightly to myself. I am grateful for your wise council.”

He spoke with the other man, who was named Freetlak, about a great many things and learned more then he could have ever dreamed. Praise be to Prijnak for His kindness.

CHAPTER 117

“But, I *am* a healer. I am the healer for the kinfolk of Ubuntu.”

“Another healer? The woman appeared to be as surprised as she herself was.

“You are a healer as well?” Her mouth hung open in astonishment. “Then it has come to pass. Praise Adeima. The prophecy IS true!”

The other healer gave her the straight-eye quizzically. “What prophecy?”

With even greater reverence, she repeated the holy words of the Blessed Mother.

“Healers two, birthed far out of view, together by statue.”

“What kind of prophecy is that?? I have never heard the Oracle speak thus.”

She had to show caution here, for she was all alone in the village of the evil ones and despite the hoomaas promise that she would be able to hear their wordsong, it was clear even to her that the woman would not be able to help if something went wrong. If this was- But no. This woman was not saturated with the fraidness as their oracle was.

Thus she gave a brief and carefully obscured wordsong to the other woman of the place high on the slope of Higsthon where she was blessed to experience the prophecy of the Holy Mother. But instead of reverence, she was met with skepticism both by the healer and the oracle together.

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“Impossible! There is no other place where the wisdom of Adeima may be received. How dare you speak such profane wordsong!” She noted that the oracle was filled now with both fraidness and a great hostility. It brought her to show more caution in her words, for both of the others were likely to be with the sense-readin and she was in a village far away from her own kinfolk.

“I understand that this must sound very exceptional to you, but surely you can sense that I speak the full-true.”

“And how in all the land would I do that?”

Her eyes must have bulged as widely as a hoomaas on hearing this. “Do you not have the sense-readin? For as long as our people have existed it’s been known that the gift allows the knowing of the full-true. It is part of what aids us in providing healing.”

Now the other healer gave her the straight-eye most intensely. “So you’re saying that you know when either of us are telling an untrue? That’s impossible.”

She quickly sensed not only the fraidness coming off of the oracle, but also a strong unhappy from the other healer. It was obvious that nobody had ever thought to question the fulltrue of the oracle’s prophecy before. She wondered how the very temple to the Holy Mother could become so saturated with this great profanity? However the unhappy showing on the healer’s face reminded her that there was a far more immediate concern at this moment. If she wished to survive this day, it was imperative that she foster the bringing of trust with this other healer. After all, she wasn’t guiding a simple hoomaas now, she was one single person surrounded, potentially, by a great many hostile people. Even with only a small number of their kinfolk still in the village, she still could be brought to great harm by them.

It was obvious to her that she must either convert the other healer to see the validity of what she said, or make fast-steppins away from this place. The question was, how? What could she say that the other woman might not simply dismiss as an untrue? If she did not have a strong enough sense-read’n...

“Healer, if you can truly know when a person speaks the fulltrue, then tell me which of these wordsongs be an untrue. I went out this morning to pick wardbreath leaves to heal one of the kinfolk, then I had a late breakfast of dried

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wingsquerl meat, and after that I visited Arleatuuk, then from there I passed by the well on the way here to the temple.”

She had to quickly overcome her shock at the casual acceptance to consume the wondrous creations of Azealla before answering. “It was the statement that you visited Arleatuuk. I have the sense that you do not look kindly upon her. However I must tell you that Azealla prohibits the kil-”

“Pretvuukra! You can’t seriously believe this outsider. We have not any wordsong of how trustworthy she is or what her intentions are.”

“Oracle, I speak the fulltrue in everything that is shared. I have traveled from the village of Ubuntu to witness the holy temple of Adeima. Thanks to you both, I will now be able to prove to my traveling companion that the prophecy of Adeima always foretells what is to be.”

Now the other healer grew the look of disbelief again. “Now wait just a moment. Are you saying that the prophecy which you hear has *always* come true? That is impossible. We have never experienced such a thing since Xenlaria was created.” She was about to inform the woman that it had happened during the time of Gelf the wise. But in her smarati was the information from the hoomaas that these people did not look kindly on Ubuntu’s founding mother. Instead she merely described for the healer that many prophecies in the beforetime had come true including the legend of the wanderers who suffered loss of smarati and the meeting of both healers by the temple statues.

That’s amazing. I bet that Gjintruk would be most pleased to have you among the plutolatri-”

“No he would not. I have spoken many times with our faithful ruler and he would not want an outsider like you interfering-”

She needed no sense-read’n to recognize the intense unhappy radiating from the oracle. It was obvious that nobody had ever thought to question the fulltrue of the oracle’s wordsong in the beforetime. But how could things have changed so dramatically? How could the very heart of their devotion to the Holy Mother become this tarnished? More importantly for her, how could things be made right between the people and Azealla? What magic could be implemented that might heal this vast gulf?

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For better or worse, the only tool that she had available was the fulltrue. Thus she shared as much of the wordsong as she was able to, about prophecies that the hoomaas had allowed her to recover, and of the earlier prophecies in the far back beforetime of the seekers who suffered a loss to their smarati. It was a highly challenging wordsong as she struggled through the pitfalls of not sharing the hoomaas' magic or Gelf's wondrous deedins. The wordsong was most challenging, but after several moments she got the sense that the other healer was no longer fully confident in the situation as it existed here. That meant at least a chance of repairing the harm for them all. And so, with a hurried prayer to Azealla, she decided to share the most damning prophecy from the Holy Mother. "Healer, it is now clear what was meant by another of Adeima's prophecies. 'Foreign seer, woli eke of fear.' I believe that the oracle which your people have believed in for so long is actually a false prophet."

"This great temple is a refuge and a place of reverence to the Holy Mother. You will leave this place at once! Or I will be forced to call upon the kinfolk to force you out!" There had never been stories in the beforetime of any kinfolk speaking ill of an oracle and she did not know what might happen if her claims were dismissed. She gave the other healer the straighteye, realizing now that the future for these people and for her own kaba, lay in the decision this woman made right now.

CHAPTER 118

Fretlack mulled over the conversation he'd had with the unusual man from the river. It had been such a blessing to learn that he was not the only one who did not believe this campaign was a righteous one. Was it possible then to believe that there were others? If there were, how many. More important than that, how might he discover them without Imotren deciding that he was a traitor? He had not seen the stranger even once since their encounter and therefore he considered that the man had likely been forced to march among different kinfolk. Perhaps someone had overheard them and warned Nukremit of their murmurings. If so, he might easily have decided to separate them in order to keep the wordsong from spreading.

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If such a thing were the case, then it only reinforced his own resolve that there was a fraidness growing like a harmful sore among the leadership of their group. For if they truly were following the path of the righteous, then what reason was there for stifling the concerns of a few kinfolk?

In his own experience, whenever he traveled with honorable purpose he did so knowing that Prijnak the warrior or Adeima made steppins alongside. The thoughts he was developing on the other hand were becoming more and more out of line with that certainty. If he was not careful, some kinfolk might discover his own doubts. Then merely being separated from another person would undoubtedly be the least of his troubles.

CHAPTER 119

“I wish to hear from you the whole fulltrue and the full extent of prophecy which you have witnessed. For either you bring smart-know’n of great importance, or the whisperings of Pritlaxtl to infest the kaba of our remaining kinsfolk.

If it is really smart-know’n that you bring, then the ramifications for the kinsfolk here will cause a great deal more upset then either of us can imagine. Speak the fulltrue and speak it completely.

The woman spoke wisely which brought both respect and relief to Gelfetia’s own kaba. The emotions which she was sensing from the oracle might still be dangerous, but despite her influence, the oracle was only one person. Mayhaps the people of Xenlaria could be coaxed through this with the help of Pretvuukra. At least she prayed that such a thing might be true.

“Of course she brings the whisperings of subversion! Pretvuukra why would you even give this stranger, who is clearly not kinfolk, an opportunity to spoil your devotion like time and heat will spoil the kulmelon?” Turning toward the oracle, she saw the woman surrounded by an odd-colored smoke with the dancing light bringing harsh shadows to flitter across the edges of her face. The experience of seeing a person so was deeply unnerving. However the other healing woman did not show the emotions of being intimidated.

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“Oracle please understand that I do not hold full confidence in the words of the stranger quite yet. However we, all of us, profess a strong devotion to the full-true as part of our role in sharing wisdom and kindness to our people. Since there are two wordsongs here which are in disagreement, it stands as critical that we discover on which side the fulltrue lays.”

Listening to the other healer speak in strong but gentle tones to the oracle, Gelfetia gained even more respect for the woman and held some confidence now that the other would become a critical ally just as the hoomaas had become allies to Gelf the wise.

She thus quickly responded to the woman before the oracle could offer rebuttal.

“Healer, you must know that our kinfolk have only recently discovered this connection and I have been privileged only once to bask in the wisdom of the Holy Mother. However several prophecies have already come true, such as meeting you by the statues, and the trees falling flat preceding the attack.”

In an instant though, the words of the oracle overpowered them as her voice rang through the hall like a swarm of poisonous quillbugs. “It is you! You are one of the cursed people of the mountain.” The woman gave the straight-eye to the other healer and she stared harshly with so much unhappy radiating from her that they both took an unconscious step back. “Pretvuukra how are you able to listen to the wordsong of this... this grishneevit!”

She was immediately shocked by the insult from one as supposedly lofty as the oracle. And her sense-readin told her that the other healer felt similarly upset.

“Oracle! You would speak thus? And directly in the shadow of the Holy Mother??” The other healer gave the oracle the straight-eye in return. “Would you swear, on the crown of Azealla that your own prophecy comes directly from the Adeima Herself?”

“Pretvuukra. How shameful of you to even suggest such doubt. *I* have been dwelling in this temple for 34 annums. I have the respect not only of the people, but of chief Gjintruk as well. The woman then quickly began calling for help from her kinsfolk that a rogue had forced her way into the temple. This meant it was time to make fast-steppins, before her theory about the healer was put to the test for real.

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CHAPTER 120

“I found her!” Fatima happily relayed to Oibo the first speck of good news their group had seen in nearly a week. She increased the magnification on the satellite image and asked Oibo to sharpen the edges. That confirmed it. The Gbowee was sitting roughly one quarter of a kilometer from that lone temple at the edge of the Xenlarian village.

“Great job Fatima!”

She looked up slightly startled to realize that Aminu had been working at a nearby interface without her knowing it. A sharp pain shot through her stomach from the pummeling she’d received, reminding her just how much danger that rogue woman might be in from putting herself in the company of those cruel natives. Aminu’s smiling face was a sunbeam pressing against, but not penetrating the clouds of her concern. It wasn’t enough to completely relax her worry, but it did tone it down a few notches. This was aided in no small part by the relief in finally having news to break in their regular losing streak, and she managed to return a smile for the man in appreciation.

A message from Huso brought the man’s own congratulations and he requested that they hold ipade to discuss how the situation should be dealt with.

When she reached the common room, the comments were already flying like a clouds of gnats along the Araromi Tawpe.

“Can we transmit an ultimatum for her to return?”

“Frankly, I don’t have any confidence that she’d listen to such a thing. Realize that she’s already gone behind the backs of the entire crew. Though for what purpose, I don’t think any of us could guess.”

“I knew we shouldn’t have left so many Jirgen-samas back in NewMali.”

“There has to be some way of getting a signal to her.”

Finally Rhumfa offered the only plausible solution. “If it were up to me, I’d just use the satellite to bounce a signal to her location. Then I’d tell her that if she doesn’t get that damn jirgen-sama back here, nan da nan³⁹, she can spend the rest of her life on this planet building some ‘cultural connection’ with those natives.”

39 Hausa term for ‘pronto’

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“Thank you Rhumfa. The idea of using the satellite to retransmit a signal is excellent.” Huso paused as he gave her a kind but level gaze. “However I’m sure that we can develop a less harsh means of enticing her to bring back the Gbowee.”

“Oh really?” This time Rhumfa was clearly not willing to regulate her emotions. Her eyes spit fire as she threw a hard stare back at her friend without looking the slightest bit intimidated.

“And what if she refuses to listen. Huh? Do you think that diplomacy alone is going to entice someone as rebellious as *this*,” she stabbed at the satellite image “into seeing reason?”

Manuel watched the interaction with frustration. The solution seemed clear enough to him, but Rhumfa was acting so irrational that he held no interest in attracting her attention with the way things were going.

He decided to wait until there were fewer people around before offering his ideas to Huso and Shadai privately.

CHAPTER 121

They made fast-steppins away from the temple to a place that the other healer felt would be safe for a more detailed wordsong. As she followed along, Gelfetia was filled with relief that the other healer’s discovery of where she was from did not cause the woman to feel the level of hatred that the oracle displayed.

“In all the annums that I have known her, I have never sensed the fraidness or hostility in the oracle as I have today.”

“I can certainly understand that if she tells the untrue beneath the very crown of the Blessed Ones that she would have good reason for the fraidness.”

“And you are certain that she tells the untrue? You have only met her once this day.”

She paused for a moment and gave the other healer the straight-eye. “I would return your query with one of my own. “Can you tell me if any of the prophecies shared by your oracle have spoken accurately of events that have not yet happened?”

The woman stopped for a moment, thinking back within her smarati and Gelfetia waited patiently for her. “Well, there was the one about the time of mists arriving early. But we have never expected that the prophecy would *literally* come true.

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They were always seen as more of a guiding allegory. But I sense from your emotions that this is not what you believe.”

“In the far back beforetime, it was said that every prophecy shared by the Oracle was a blessed prediction. As long as it was properly interpreted by an experienced healer, the guiding words of the Holy Mother would help us to follow the correct path. For example tale about a group of foreigners who would become an unexpected ally. This prophecy foretold exactly what happened between a group of strangers and the kinfolk. My goodness, so much have we lost since the days of Gelf the wise.”

“Gelf the what?! You mean Gelf the traitor. Gelf the deceitful. How could you even bear to utter that name?”

What an awful mistake. The words had merely slipped out, but now they could easily threaten to destroy the meager trust which had barely started to bud within the woman. It was impossible for her to put herself in the place of the other (as she often did with the kinfolk) who thought of the blessed mother as evil. How could the people of this place have such negative beliefs about such a wondrous person? A woman who had almost single-handedly rescued this entire village from the unhealth. She queried the other healer to learn about why she would hold such horrible beliefs.

But she was brought to great disgust by the wordsong the woman shared. It seemed that their people all believed that Gelf the wise had intentionally brought a great unhealth to their land with the goal of defeating a great chief and conquering all of the kinsfolk in the beforetime.

“And this is what you all believe?”

“Of course. It is legend repeated by all of the great elders. We have no reason whatsoever to question them. Without thinking, the comment escaped her then.

“It is true what they say, history is written by the victors.”

“Who says that? I have never heard such a thing.” Gelfetia briefly worried for what query the woman might bring. But she thankfully changed the subject instead. “Anyway, how can you believe something different? What could make *your* wordsong more fulltrue then the ones that our kinfolk share?”

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With a barely hidden smile, she shared with the healer as much as she dared of the legends regarding Gelf the wise and of the account discovered by a hidden group of people which spoke of the great collaboration that resulted in the banishment of the unhealth from the whole land. How the harm was the cause of a tribe of animal eaters who enslaved the lost seekers.

“And you believe all of this?” The woman stood there with her hands on her waist and showing the unhappy such that she could almost imagine it was the hoomaas Regina standing before her now.

“Healer, it is not merely that I personally believe it. Remember that I can see when a person is speaking the untrue. So when the foreigners who discovered the ancient knowledge tried to hide it, I was able to discover it even despite their efforts.”

“But why did these foreigners try to hide wordsong of your own history from you. That sounds most dishonorable.”

“You are right. The kinfolk and I hold strong belief that these foreigners can not really be trusted. Their tribe certainly does not embody the respect shown by Aye-yoobay and Seffee in the beforetime.”

Now the healer gave a snort of confusion. “Who are they?”

“Oh Pretvuukra. That is how you are called right?” She saw the woman nod.

“There is so much to share with you of the beforetime.” So, just as she had with many young’ns, she recalled the great tales of the foreign visitors who were discovered by Gelf and of the great collaboration which brought the healing to their entire village. She was careful to avoid mention of what the hoomaas looked like, their magic, or the wondrous land of urth from which they came.

“So you are saying that your people and mine are of the same origin?”

Yes absolutely. Our people have longed for generations to be reconnected with the holy temple of Adeima.

“And you would swear, on the crown of the Holy Mother, that you have spoken only the fulltrue this whole day?”

Well, to respond properly, there are a few things which I feel would not be wise to share. But everything that I *have* revealed to you is the absolute fulltrue. I would swear on the crown of Adeima and Azealla.

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“It did not escape my see'in that the Oracle would not swear to the validity of her own wordsong.”

“Nor mine.” She looked upon the other healer with a profound sadness which she sensed was shared now by the other.

CHAPTER 122

Krietfrup struck a massive rock against the stone wedge alongside four others doing the same. Each blow brought with it the crack of protest from the great tree that was quickly drowned out by the strike from another nearby. Their struggle was tedious and slow, but still a great deal less agonizing than the many days of hauling wudfells along the morass. Here they would only need to break down two of the great trees in order to cross the intimidating river churning along just an armspan below his feet.

He'd been skeptical of Gjintruk in trusting the smartknowin of the nomad woman. There was no way for them to know if her wordsong was the fulltrue or not. And by the time it would have been able to be confirmed, she would be far away, and with Gjintruk's bronze headdress too. But Prijnak smiled upon them and the first obstacle the woman had mentioned proved to be right where she had said it would be. Now they only had to get the tree to fall across the river and the crossing would be easy as a walk through the djengour fields.

“Krietfrup! We are all doing the hard work of getting the kinfolk across this river, you must stop gazing at the underfoot and contribute to our success.”

He was startled out of his thinkin by Imotren who was overseeing this particular operation. The man refused to merely stand and oversee the work, but hacked away at a second tree along with the rest of them. It was a quality that Krietfrup admired in him, and more than he could say for the grand and lofty Gjintruk.

The time was so long, that the Saülè was noticeably tired by the time the second tree fell across the river. Since he had thrown the final blow on the tree, it had been his honor to cross first and this allowed him to give the straighteye as the rest followed. He could tell that some of them had the fraidness while walking across

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and he made a point to note their faces. It would not do at all to entrust his safety in battle to kinfolk who were intimidated by a simple river crossing. Their fraidness might become catastrophic when the time of clashing spears arrived. It was pleasin to him that no more then a handful showed enough fraidness for him to be concerned for. The experience brought him assurance now that their victory would be a simple and swift one.

CHAPTER 123

“You know, I wouldn’t have believed you if you hadn’t mentioned the forst lying flat. There is no way that you could have known about this from so far away. But I was told by Imotren that the warriors planned to reach across the morass by using wudfells from the forst to create a pathway.”

It was easy to grasp the context from the healer and it was nearly as horrible as hearing the woman’s wordsong that she had eaten one of Adiema’s creatures.

“But don’t you see that it is such a great insult to Azealla to destroy her wondrous creations Pretvuukra? That is why the animal-eaters were so easily defeated by the warrior Truinye in the beforetime. For the Holy Mother will always bring defeat to those who take Her creations for granted.

“But these things are *gifts* from the Holy Mother. They were created specifically for us to use.”

The conversation was enormously taxing for her, but she pressed on nonetheless in hopes of bringing some recognition to the woman. “Who is it that spoke this wordsong that you believe in?”

“Why it is the Oracle of course. All the wisdom of the Holy Mother is shared through her.”

“You mean the same woman who refused to make the swearing that she spoke only the full-true?” Gelfetia had to be careful here, for it required no smart-knowin to recognize how tremulous this woman’s faith was right now.

“Well of cou.....oh. Oh my goodness.” Now the sense that she got from the healer was of strong confusion. It was a great deal less worrisome then the woman’s

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earlier assurance that such destructive beliefs for Azealla's creations were acceptable.

"I am with gladness in helping you to recognize the fulltrue. The Holy Mother has created this wondrous place for us to live in, but out of respect for Her Majesty it is necessary for us to show honor not only to Her, but to the creations which She has blessed us with as well.

She continued walking on with the healer to the edge of Xenlaria while her thoughts continued to whirl unabated. She was grateful that the healer was less stubborn than the evil hoomaas, but she still worried whether the rest of the kinfolk here could be given the understanding so easily.

"Healer, what was the other prophecy that you spoke of regarding the seer?"

She smiled inwardly, for this was a wondrous opportunity to provide wisdom. "It was, 'foreign seer woli eke of fear.'"

"What does that mean, wolly ekee?"

So she shared with the woman a little more about how many of the words from the foreigners in the beforetime had become part of their own in Ubuntu and that woli eke meant false prophet. Despite her uncertainty over how the local healer would take it, she offered the wordsong of her belief now, that their oracle was always with the fraidness of being discovered as one who invents prophecy herself rather than acting as a conduit for the Holy Mother.

"In the time of Gelf the wise, the prophecies were like a guide, helping to confirm when a kinfolk's steppins were true. It is similar now. For with the discovery that we have made today, I am certain that the prophecy regarding your oracle is genuine wisdom from She who watches over us."

The other woman however showed great sadface now. "But if that is true, it would be an enormous tragedy for our people. It's obvious now why the Oracle is with fraidness. Think of what would happen to the temple, or Chief Gjintruk for that matter, if this highly dangerous fulltrue were learned by the other kinfolk."

She *did* think about it. She thought a great deal, and those thoughts created a horrible picture indeed. What if both the oracle *and* the chief of this village were in fact aware of the situation and each supported the other out of fear of losing their power and influence? She felt that this would be too controversial to share,

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but it nevertheless gave her much concern regarding the people of this faraway village.

CHAPTER 124

Truinye stood with her arms folded across her chest like a hoomaas, not at all believing that the wordsong could actually be true. “You really believe that there are well over one hundred and fifty warriors approaching the river and heading toward us?” She gave Mautide the straight-eye hoping, despite herself, that the man could have miscounted. But his wordsong of having spoken with one of their warriors who was not in favor of the attack sounded too credible to be dismissed. He even swore on the spear of Prijnak that his wordsong was true. The man’s smart-know’n of the evil ones made her both glad that she had sent him but also worried for the kinfolk and their ability to withstand such a large attack.

“This means that their group will outnumber us almost four to one. Even with our extensive training, this does not bode well for our survival.” The barely whispered words carried farther than she had intended. She cursed herself inwardly for showing the fraidness in front of another kinfolk.

The man nodded somberly. “Do you think that we should share this with the rest of them?”

She paused and set her knife down, but kept the half-finished spear in her lap.

“We must, my friend. I feel the sureness that if our warriors see how poor the odds are at the onset of attack, they may allow the fraidness to take control when it is too late to strengthen their resolve. If as you say, their warriors have not crossed the great river, then we still have time to create more of the defensive measures. Before she leaves with the other hoomaas, please speak with Regina and see if she can develop any new ideas for improving our chances.”

The man’s expression was resolute as he turned to leave. “Of course. I’ll go see her immediately.”

He walked away with none of the gudstrength in his steppins that he’d shown earlier and it saddened her to consider how perilous the survival of the kinfolk was

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looking. What would happen to them, to the hoomaas especially, if Ubuntu were to fall?

She went back to hacking away at the spear while looking dejectedly at a large bundle of branches set against the corner of her shelterspace. It was time-consuming work, but at least the bundle of spears was greatly increased with a similar reduction in the pile of unfinished branches. As challenging as it was in these times to keep her grasp on hope, she refused to leave until the last branch was carved, sharpened, and hardened over a small fire. If it hadn't been clear before, it was absolutely obvious to her now that they were going to need all the inner gudstrength of Gelf the wise if there was any chance at all of protecting the kinsfolk from being destroyed.

When at last she was finished, she went back out and met with the whole kinsfolk who were all practicing the donga with impressive determination. For a short time she watched them and nodded approvingly, the warriors were showing more skill than she would have expected given how little time they had been given to the practice. Finally she raised her voice and asked for a short pause.

“Everyone, I want you each to practice the donga techniques against two attackers at a time. I will teach you all that I know of how to be victorious. We must be ready for a great many more warriors than we would wish for. And remember, when the call goes out of their approach, you must all station yourselves behind the pits which you created with Regina. Our only chance of surviving will be to use every advantage we have against the evil ones. She felt a great pain within her kaba in watching these kinfolk who had never held devotion to the donga before, and having the constant worry for whether the practice would be enough. It was difficult to imagine any way through which they could all survive.

No! She could not allow hopelessness to sink its foul roots within her. The village would most assuredly be destroyed and the hoomaas discovered if she did not continue clutching with all her strength at any chance of success, however fragile it might be.

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CHAPTER 125

The alarm sounded again through her quarters, though she was practically numb to it's siren call by now. It was as if the Ajogun were full on members of her own crew in this cursed place. The vast maze of travesty into which she was sinking now was certain to make whatever hair she didn't pull out turn gray instead. With her control permissions to Oibo removed now, it was as if she was back in the early days of her career with almost no autonomy at all save her own room lighting. But of course back then she had been blessed with the guidance of the lead pilot. Back then she'd had someone to turn to for answers. Here on this dead rock dozens of light years from home, she was not only impotent, but devoid of even a single clue as to how they might escape their collective torture. Everything had fallen apart, despite the galactic effort she'd put into the ship, the crew, and even keeping her own emotions in check. Nothing clearly was able to chase away the sinister ones for long. They were the scornful lover. The bitter sibling. The estranged daughter slamming the door in fury. What was the point in fighting anymore? How could one lone woman withstand the constant barrage of [evil magic] which had woven it's way into the very fabric of both the ship and this crew? In frustration she shouted at Oibo to mute the alarm for her quarters. At least she retained that small bit of control.

She casually threw a wrap over her buba⁴⁰ and meandered down to the common room. She gave a bitter laugh at the others' hurried steps. It wasn't like she could *do* anything about the problem, so why waste her precious energy running around uselessly in panic.

But when she entered and saw the graphic thrown up on Oibo's interface, her jaw fell to the floor. She barely made it to a chair before collapsing into it as the image seared itself on her retinas.

“Rhumfa?”

She didn't even hear the comment or notice the look on Shadai's face. All she could do was watch in horror as their nightmare went from merely horrendous to completely hellish.

40 A long-sleeved blouse

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“Oh we... are... so... TOTALLY screwed.” The comment might as well have been Oibo speaking for all the emotion that it held. She was beyond fear at this point, beyond hope, almost beyond the point of even caring by now. Without some kind of unimaginable miracle, the ship would no longer have any chance of being their escape pod. Instead, to her dismay, it would become their tomb.

She felt Huso’s arm around her shoulders and she managed to notice his face for an instant before it became blurred by the flood of tears.

“Rhumfa. Please. What is it?”

Like a switch, her paralysis broke. The apathy smashed into a thousand microscopic shards by her well-honed fury. “What is it?! You ask what is it?? Chineke me. Huso look at that!” She stabbed out at the screen. “Our ship. Our ONLY place of safety on this nightmarish planet is halfway sunk into the ground and you ask what is it?” The comment which she’d intended to come out just a little harshly had instead crescendoed into a hysterical shout.

“Rhumfa, I know it looks bad, but we still have the ship’s systems in working order.”

She turned toward Manuel with fire spewing from her eyes. “Oh really Manuel? Have you inspected the grav-plate circuitry? Have you checked the power levels flowing through them? Because *they absolutely will fail*. At this point there’s no way to prevent it. And shortly after the grav-plating fails, the structural resiliency of the ship’s hull is going to fail right along with it.”

The shocked faces staring back at her finally broke through her emotions and collapsed her fury. “I’m sorry everyone. I tried like hell to keep this from you. I thought... well, I hoped that we’d manage to get off this horrific planet before the damage became irreversible.” She put her head in her hands for a brief eternity while tears oozed between her fingers, glinting like miniature diamonds on her skin. Before long though, Huso worked his usual magic on her shoulders and then massaged her scalp. It wasn’t a solution, but it helped her at least regain some tiny degree of balance. “The thing is everyone, these grav-plates are designed to function in micro-gravity. They’re designed to *increase* the attractive force on all of us. They were absolutely NOT designed to repulse the gravity of a world almost twice the size of Earth. I gave it four weeks tops before we started to get sporadic

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short circuits. But now, we have grav-plates struggling not only to provide standard Earth levels of gravity, but they're being forced to operate under non-uniform stresses. Instead of another week to deal with the problem, we might have one or two days at most. I'm sorry everyone, there's just no way that we—"Rhumfa?"

She started to turn back to face her friend, but couldn't meet his eyes anymore. Her spirit was a deflated balloon being trampled into the ground. She had failed them so completely that she might as well have taken a knife and killed every last one of them single-handedly. But the man moved to gently raise her chin as he'd done back when they were still dating. "Was this the thing that's been eating at you since we landed?"

She wanted to swat his hand away. Wanted to hide in a dark storage locker and never look at his or any of their faces again. Then when the shock turned into hushed whispers, she very nearly did get up and leave. But Shadai joined Huso next to her and so did several others.

"Rhumfa, I can't believe you kept all this fear and worry bottled up inside."

"Did you really believe you could just keep these emotions stifled and it wouldn't come out some other way?"

"Rhumfa please. This isn't your fault. We have to work together."

"But HOW?!" She screamed "we have no spare parts for this type of work and we have no means of getting this boat into the air in order to reduce the stresses on the ship's circuitry!" She slammed her fist against her leg, now oblivious to the bruise it would bring later.

"We simply don't have any more *options* people." She didn't even try to fight the tears which rained down her flush cheeks in rivers thanks to their barely functional gravity.

CHAPTER 126

She felt the vibration of the antigrav coil charging up before the craft began to rise.

"Oibo, what in the world is going on here. Why are we lifting off? The native

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woman is still down there and I've barely finished maneuvering the drone into position above them!"

But the AI could only reply that an overriding program had set the craft on autopilot.

"Overriding program? But who could... Manuel. "If anyone could manipulate an AI to do his bidding, it was that guy. Which meant not only that she'd been discovered, but also that they weren't going to take no for an answer.

She frantically fought with the controls, tried disconnecting critical systems (even though that might cause her to hit the ground permanently), she even tried pleading with the AI, for all the good that would do. But nothing would bring the craft around from its path directly back to the ship. That meant she was in a whole world of trouble when she got back. Unconsciously she struck her fist against the interface in futile anger knowing that things were going to get a lot worse now.

In a last-ditch effort, she programmed a dragonfly drone to follow the healer and to also keep out of sight until she could find a way to return to the situation down there.

"Ikasha, what in the name of Kilimanjaro were you thinking?!"

The transmission, after half an hour of silence shot her right out of her chair. But she was for the moment bereft of any credible reply. What could she tell them after all? That she'd disappeared with their only jirgen-sama and taken the risk of exposing a native to even more technology just on the chance of proving some religious hocus pocus might be true?

"I..." she tried to start some kind of explanation, but somehow she just couldn't form the words.

"Really. This is has GOT to be the most irresponsible thing y-"

"Hold up Rhumfa. Can I speak with her?"

There was a pause before Shadai's voice came through over the speakers. "Ikasha, I can understand you're interest in these people and it's wonderful of you to care.

But there's important news that takes precedence over everything right now."

"Don't tell me you've found a way to-"

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“Watch out everyone, the grav-plates are going down.”

“Oh god, we’re never gonna survive this!” The last wasn’t uttered as a cry, but as an almost hysterical scream that sent chills along her neck despite the warmth of the cabin. The transmission ended abruptly then, leaving her deeply confused about what was going on back at the ship. Where only a minute ago she’d wanted to beg with all her might to return and find out what else the two healers would come up with, now there seemed to be a situation with the crew that was severe enough to threaten their very survival. With the interface now stubbornly silent, she couldn’t imagine what that would be except that it terrified her more than anything.

CHAPTER 127

Krietfrup saw one of the kinfolk just crouching low next to a shrub and was about to query her about what was going on when she gave the familiar hand motion next to the underfoot. That gesture meant fodiens. Jenvirey made a barely perceptible gesture in his direction and suddenly he noticed what she had been watching. It was two meldabeast munching in the grass about thirty footfalls away. That meant not only fodiens, but great honor if they were able to capture the beasts. This could not be done of course until a soft prayer was offered to Prijnak for a successful hunt.

He made careful soft-steppins up next to her and patted her shoulder in gratitude. There was a brief and unspoken wordsong between them before they both raised an ouray into their bow and let them fly. The weapons flew straight and true, a testament to their many days of training. He watched joyfully as both hit their mark high on the foreleg of each animal. With little time to waste, he quickly followed the first with a volley of several more and soon enough the animals stopped limping and fell to the underfoot.

Once news of the kills spread to the other kinfolk, Imotren himself came over and congratulated them both while the warriors heartily launched into carving the bodies and giving a share of the meat to each. Krietfrup and Jenvirey ate of the chest meat which they got as reward for being first to spot the animals. He tore

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into the food, savoring the fatty meal and gave many looks of kindface to his fellow hunter, for she had proven herself to be the best tracker among the vast group of warriors. He wasn't at all surprised at how quickly the mood picked up now among the kinsfolk. Everyone would be joyous at being freed from consuming the dried kulmelon that he'd been half-heartedly swallowing during the time of crossing the morass. He noticed that Gjintruk even was showing gratitude in his glances to them both. It would be honorable to bring congratulatory wordsong after the meal out of respect for his fellow warrior who had been first to spot the kill. For no warrior could hold good standing if they stood by and accepted praise for the work of another. Not only did he get a wonderful meal from this kill, but it was clear that his standing would be greatly improved thanks to Jenvirey's smart see'n. It was easily the highest moment of the campaign for him. One that he would look back on with nostalgia.

CHAPTER 128

Regina followed the other hoomaas along the well worn path leading to the cave of Aye-yoobay. She struggled to keep up, having spent much time at the end of the previous day with her precious flask. Her entire being was saturated with misery. Even more-so after having managed to resist the fire water for even a few days. It was as if her melancholy gained new strength from the brief exposure to false hopes. Despite her best efforts, the faint spark had nestled itself within her, that she might somehow manage to defeat the seduction of its escape at last. All through the days that she had helped to make the holes to swallow the evil ones, and the days after that when Truinye had looked to her for other preparations, she had been too distracted in the work to allow for putting attention on her own sorrows. But then came the time that all of them needed to prepare to flee the village and hide like requibugs in the hills while their denisovian kinfolk bravely fought the invaders. It was such an affront to the gudstrength of all the hoomaas. Her people were not filled with the fraidness, nor were they lacking in skill with a spear. All of the hoomaas were able people with plenty enough smartknowin to aid in the protection of Ubuntu. Yet they were all shamefully running away.

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In less time than it would take to plant a crop of kulmelon, the tremendous energy she had put into staving off her melencholy was quickly scattered like the seeds of the gnuitree. It was clear to her now, as it should have always been, that she would never in her life succeed in escaping the taught noose which held her prisoner to the precious flask of fire water.

The tears had dribbled down her cheeks as she succumbed once again to the only lover who couldn't bring heartache to her belly or her kaba. It wasn't merely her alone who suffered the result, as Lluchra had needed to bang loudly against her decrepit shelterspace in order to get her up in time to join the other hoomaas in fleeing the only home she had ever known.

Now she again had to force her aching limbs to move faster than she ever wanted in order to keep within sight of the others and preclude the shame that had accompanied her on every pilgrimage journey since the loss of her second child. Her smarati reminded her of each single annum when she would cry out as a young'n might with the need for help in cresting one boulder or another as she struggled to stay with the kinfolk on their annual trip.

CHAPTER 129

The first sight that she got of the ship would've been enough to collapse her legs if her body hadn't been pressed by 1.7gs into a seat. The forward section was canted upward at a sickening angle with the drive section partly buried within a vast sinkhole larger than anything she'd seen back on Earth. Several of the communication ports were snapped and the emergency airlock was punched by a large boulder. She saw the tilted ship grow larger in the viewer but it wasn't clear yet if there was catastrophic damage or not. All that she could tell was that it would be even more difficult, if not impossible to get the ship back in the air now. And she wouldn't know *that*, until Oibo maneuvered the craft into the jirgin-sama room. But things looked even worse when she searched along the side for the entrance and saw nothing but dirt where the jirgin-sama entry should have been. That was when Oibo finally informed her (as if it weren't obvious) that it would not

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be possible to fly directly into the ship. This meant using the kefatz and subjecting herself to the flood of horrible itching throughout her body. Thinking about it though, her own concerns really were trivial when compared to the calamity now filling the viewscreen.

Her voice shook slightly as she addressed the AI. “Alright Oibo. Set me down in whichever room has the largest concentration of people.” She was on pins and needles now wondering what was going on, and it was obvious that the crisis facing them all was drastically more important than any personal mission she might seek out. The way things were looking, neither her crew or the natives up in that village were likely to survive more than another week.

The horrible itching had barely stopped when she immediately felt herself sliding, with increasing terror, into the hard edge of a table. “Oibo, emergency transport me one meter left of Anya!”

This only meant another few seconds of feeling like her skin was on fire, but it saved her from possibly smacking her skull against the unyielding femoplast surface.

“Ikasha?!” The woman barely registered her surprise as she struck the wall in an eerily tilted conference room. Even with the lifesaving emergency transport, her head had struck with enough force to knock the wind out of her.

Things swam in and out of focus for a period that might have been seconds or several minutes. The doorway hovering at the top of a severe slope seemed to shimmer like the flattened surface of the saharan spaceport at midday. Every way she turned there was a struggle to make sense of what her mind claimed was reality. When she recovered her breath at last, it did little to mitigate the eerie nightmare of their situation. Like descriptions by the Yorupian writer named Danté, everyone around her wore the pained expressions of souls damned to eternal suffering.

For her it was less excruciating since she had spent more time growing accustomed to the horrible gravity while traveling in the Gbowee. But seeing everything around her canted like some child’s storybook gave her a feeling like she’d splurged on an authentic bottle of palm-nut wine.

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“What in the vast universe happened here? Fatima, why aren’t the grav-plates working?”

The woman winced before answering. “It’s a long explanation. And you’re not going to like it one bit.”

CHAPTER 130

“So tell me this, then. If our warriors would need over fourteen days to travel from here to your village, how could it be that you are able to visit the temple here in less time than it would take them to even cross the morass?”

The question caught her off-guard and she had to think for a long moment about the best way to answer. She didn’t actually know *how* the hoomaas had brought her to this place, but her best guess is that it was similar to when she had seen Truinye disappear surrounded by faerys. After all, the same had been related in the legends of Gelf the wise. But after learning the story in the beforetime of Oomkwo and Aye-yoobay, she knew that it would be highly unwise to share these suspicions.

“Pretvuukra, I do not actually know how I was able to get here. There is a very strange magic high along the slope of Higsthon. Gelf the wise knew of it, and so did Aye-u-bay. But as unusual as it is, there is also great danger which is not easily graspable. I therefore think that it is best to tell you only that I was motivated by the love of Adeima and the certainty that the prophecy which The Holy One was able to share through me is a most hallowed gift.”

The healer thought over the comment for several long moments, with many confused emotions playing themselves across her face. “Well if it is really the fulltrue that your prophecy is genuine, and be aware that I still have the struggle in believing this, then it would require me to hide the fulltrue as well from the others. My kinfolk cannot possibly be made aware that the wordsong of the Oracle, and the speeches of Gjintruk expressing her wisdom and honor, might be anything but the fulltrue. It would shatter the leadership of my entire village.”

She was impressed by the other woman’s acumen which strengthened her belief that Pretvuukra was indeed a person who could be trusted. The woman showed

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both the humility and honesty worthy of a great healer. “Pretvuukra, I deeply sympathize with you. The smart-knowin which you show displays a well-honed discretion. It is most clear that you were a wise choice by the Holy Mother to have the gift of healing. I so deeply wish that you could be blessed to witness the prophecy which She has graced us with.”

“But for that I would have to make the long trip up to Higsthon, would I not?”

‘Yes, and fight your way past a group of evil and magical hoomaas as well.’ She did not speak this out loud of course.

CHAPTER 131

There was an ancient story by a man named Achebe⁴¹ who wrote of a great change coming to his village and bringing his entire world to fall apart. Right now, sitting on the sloping floor with the gravity crushing his limbs against it, he felt that he could understand precisely how that man must have been feeling. Everything about their mission, their ship, their crew, and even relations with the aliens out on this planet’s surface had become an absolute disaster.

Oneyda gazed down morosely at the small vile of nullifiers hoping it would be possible to resist the temptation. The containers, each barely the size of her pinky, weren’t exactly prohibited on extended missions such as this. But their use was meant only for extreme situations in which the efficient operation of the ship’s crew was compromised and a nullifying of emotions was necessary to keep everyone properly focused.

To be sure Rhumfa would fit this description perfectly and it should easily be possible to explain use on the pilot to a diplomatic magistrate. This wasn’t the reason that Oneyda sat staring at the small collection of drugs though. It was clear to anyone with eyes that she wouldn’t be able to use them on Rhumfa without the crew turning their wild emotions on her in retaliation. Many decades of work in the UPC had taught her to read not only the tide of individual emotions, but also the larger pattern of group dynamics as well. The situation was as clear to her as the fate of Achebe’s protagonist. It seemed that despite Rhumfa putting

41 Chinoe Achebe - ‘Things Fall Apart’

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them into a situation from which they would likely never escape, the crew did not focus their blame on her but on the aliens and on some strange belief in bad luck. Since there was no practical reason to feel any degree of hope for their survival it didn't seem to matter now *what* the actual cause was. But if she wasn't going to be in some way helpful in moving forward, then the best she could hope for was to prevent herself from being a hindrance for the rest of them (she couldn't help thinking that the pilot was unquestionably becoming precisely that). The injector of highly addictive medicine filled her vision now. This was the do or die moment, where she had to decide between her career and her sanity. If they did ever manage to return, there would no doubt be questions asked of her. But there just wasn't enough hope of an escape for her to care any more. With one final deep breath, she injected the first vile and allowed the numbing sensation to work its way slowly through her bloodstream. Soon the worry and fear became like a blanket hanging in the sun just beyond reach. It didn't touch her and didn't really have any importance. Even the aching along her spine from the 1.7Gs pressing her into the floor was like a story she was reading under the covers at night. She watched the walls soften and bend slightly as her arms fell limply to the floor and she gave up wondering what the future might bring.

CHAPTER 132

“So it was all my fault.” The oppressive hand of gravity notwithstanding, she lacked the will now to even raise her eyes above the floor.

“Without question Ikasha. It's-”

“What? No, of course not.” Rhumfa watched Shadai pull the woman into an embrace, which was highly unusual punishment for someone who'd stolen a jirgen-sama and risked the safety of the whole crew.

“Oh really?” Kine now threw the woman a look that could have melted the glacier outside. “How many hours have we lost since Saaed thought about searching this planet's moons for the rhenium? And how many *more* hours is it going to take before we'll be able to find out if there *is* any and if it's even accessible? How much sinking of the Boabab could we have prevented if we'd sent a group out there right

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away! Dammit Ikasha, I couldn't even put into words how furious we are with you. If it were up to me, I'd just have Ereeko transport you over to an uninhabited part of the planet and leave you to rot out there!"

She stared at Kinfé open-mouthed. Sure the woman was echoing her own thoughts, but the venom disgorging from the woman's mouth was more far beyond acceptable norms. Somebody had to bring some rationality to this situation before they descended so far into the pit of blame that someone started throwing punches. She tapped regularly on the wall to quell the murmuring voices. "I have to agree with Kinfé. We could've at least gotten up there to begin searching those two moons by now. That would easily have cut eight or nine hours off of this nightmarish agony. Ikasha, you have to realize that actions have consequences." The looks that were being pointed toward the other woman were only confirming her earlier fears."

Once again she realized that she'd let her anger and frustration fill her own mouth with poison, just as it must have done with Kinfé. Dammit how could she help the crew get through this if she allowed herself to succumb to the most savage emotions? There had to be restitution, even if it went against her present desires. "*But!* Everyone, we're not some primitive culture in Amehrika or Perzya. We don't need to resort to capital punishment just because one of our crew has shown poor judgment. We, *all of us*, have to consider very carefully the long and difficult road that the human race endured in escaping from the control that our baser instincts once forced on us. Being part of the UPC, building colonies on dozens of worlds has taught us that we *can* do this. We *are* able to be more than merely the sum of our parts. We'll have plenty of time to work out the consequences for Ikasha once we're up in the air." She almost added, 'And if we don't manage to get off the surface, well then none of it will matter anyway.' But that was obvious enough with out her stirring more poison into their stew.

"I second that comment." Anya paused and had to speak louder now to get their attention. "Look everyone, we'll have plenty of time to worry about blame another time. For now we need to concentrate on getting the ship, most especially the grav plating, in working order again."

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Rhumfa gave Anya a look of gratitude for the support. Helping them all to stay focused on the chance, however slight, of getting the ship's systems functional before it's structure collapsed was absolutely the highest priority at the moment. Huso as well joined her in calling for restraint and it looked as if the fury was calming to only a low rumble. "Let's all of us keep in mind that we absolutely can't survive without focusing on the most important tasks right now. The idea of checking the planet's moons for the materials we need is quite brilliant. I for one am not going to just give up hope" the man paused and gave her a knowing look "while there remains any hope to be had on this world."

She took that as her cue to show more initiative than she'd managed earlier.

"Kaylan, why don't you and Ereeko take the Gbowee and check out the planet's moons and see if you can find evidence of any rhenium. Send a datastream the moment you find something, anything worth commenting on."

"I'll go with her. It's likely that she'll want some company."

"Can I go too?"

With the volunteers multiplying each second, she could easily see where this was going once they all realized there was a chance to rest in microgravity on board the jirgen-sama. But obviously the whole crew wouldn't be able to fit.

"Everyone, why don't we have Oibo randomly pick six crewmembers to join Kaylan on the jirgen-sama. Does that sound like a fair solution?" If their situation alone wasn't dangerous enough, the three-ring circus that it was causing among the crew might do them in even before the ship lost integrity.

From the look that Huso gave her, it seemed that the initiative was appreciated, so she immediately instructed Oibo to do so. But she told the AI to exclude Ikasha from the drawing. There was no way that she would offer the mutinous woman any such relief. Then she slowly and painfully shifted position, trying constantly to find a place against the wall to rest her aching back. At times it felt like she might be grateful to have one of the ship's structural beams crush her and put an end to all of this torture once and for all.

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CHAPTER 133

For the first time in the entire history of Ubuntu, Umkobo brought the iron ologo away from its traditional place of honor and instead of using it to watch over the ancient ones, he used it now for gaining smartknowin of the approaching conflict. There had been much contention with Lluhra about the breaking of tradition, but Truinye had agreed with him that the survival of Ubuntu might depend on having as much advanced notice of the warriors' approach as possible. If the kinfolk were to fail, then protecting the device would be of no consequence. But their new healer emphasized that it must be used with great care and respect. As if such advice needed an utterance.

Thus he gently set the eye on top of a large wudfell and gazed at length over the whole land, seeing even as far as the river in the far distance. None of the kinfolk had ever witnessed such a thing and he was momentarily awestruck by the richness that he was privileged to experience. But after several moments he consciously reminded himself that this wasn't a time for merely satisfying his own sense of wonder. The whole of his kinfolk were in danger and he must keep the straight-eye most diligently for attackers.

It was challenging to search for one specific thing as the eye greatly limited how much of the land he could view at any time. After many long moments examining the landscape he at last caught sight of a large group of warriors making their way slowly along the Juantaylib to the east of the village. It seemed likely that the evil ones did not know the location of Ubuntu and would spend much time searching over the ground for the right path to follow. He prayed to Azealla that this delay would last, for the group appeared much more formidable now that he was able to view them directly. It brought the frightfulness to him that even the many days spent on preparations might prove futile in the end. With a trembling kaba, he made fast-steppins over to Truinye and gave her wordsong of his findings.

The warrior listened carefully to his description of the invaders' size and distance. Then she stood thinking for a moment. "It would be valuable for us to cover any evidence that would lead the evil ones here. We may be able to wear down their gudstrength by forcing them on a longer journey. Why don't you go out with

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Mautide and Lluchra to create a false trail to confuse those people and lead them out toward the wild lands.”

As soon as the plan was spoken out loud, it seemed completely obvious and he wondered why he hadn't thought of it himself. The reason of course was clear enough with some consideration. Truinye was the greatest warrior in the land, and this only validated her reputation more firmly. With so many evil warriors threatening them, stealth was so far their greatest tool and he made it clear to their leader that he would be honored to carry out the woman's plan. “We could also set up false clues to lead the evil ones in a loop back toward the river.”

The moment he said it, the warrior's eyes lit up and she showed strong agreement. Looking at her now, he was coming to believe that Gelfetia's absence had perhaps been a blessing in disguise. Truinye was absolutely the best leader for them in this most dangerous time (though of course he would never dare to speak such a thing out loud). “I am especially grateful that the evil hoomaas allowed you to leave their magic boat. There is no question that Ubuntu we would have little chance of surviving without your guidance.”

The warrior returned his friendly gaze. “As am I Umkobo, as am I.”

CHAPTER 134

Ereeko brought the Gbowee on a long curving trajectory that would bring it into high orbit around the larger of the two moons. Kaylan had suggested that the closer one at barely 1100km across was too small for its gravity to attract any heavy metallic elements. She stretched her limbs luxuriously, savoring the relief which their escape into microgravity afforded her. But only a short time into her relaxation the pang of guilt seeped within her thoughts. Her own comfort was mere luck at being the most experienced jirgen-sama pilot, she could easily have found herself stuck on the ship, as tortured as the rest of the crew back there. The guilt grew in strength like a thin veil encompassing her. Damn. There just didn't seem to be any thought-process which gave her real comfort as long as the looming specter of tragedy girdled their heads like a swarm of wasps.

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“I’m detecting a weak magnetic field. That’s a good sign.” She turned over to look at the older geologist in hopes that he would offer more. But he seemed unusually preoccupied with his readings and equipment.

“Is there anything you can suggest Kaylan? It’s a pretty large moon, maybe there’s an area we should aim for.”

The moon had a sprinkling of craters and a thin nitrogen atmosphere, but the latter wasn’t enough to hide anything from the craft’s sensors. To her untrained eyes, it just looked like a big round hunk of sterile rock. But if her own analysis provided no clues that wasn’t surprising, she’d failed every science course back when she was a teenager. It was that humiliation in fact that sent her off on the weekends tooling around with the speedy little gobo craft. She took a second away from the controls to see what Kaylan was doing and considered probing the man again. But he interrupted her thoughts with a comment that sent a shiver of ice down her back.

“I’m sorry everyone, I’m just not finding anything so far. The readings show nothing but iron, granite, and silica down there.”

Though his words seemed innocuous, the man’s tone of voice trembled enough that she feared he was having as much trouble keeping down the panic as Rhumfa had been on the planet’s surface. It needed no repeating that if they didn’t find any Rhenium on this moon there was little chance any of them would survive more than a week on the ship before some part of it flattened them into oblivion. After all, they couldn’t spend the rest of their lives in orbit aboard the jirgen-sama, much as she would prefer that.

“But there has to be something.” Fatima’s voice managed to sound both pleading and hopeless at the same time. “This is our last chance dammit!”

“Yeah. You’ve got to keep looking.”

“We can’t giv-”

“We’re not giving up yet. Let’s make a few orbits and perhaps we’ll be able to tease a diamond out of all that dirt down below.”

She made five more orbits at varying angles to the elliptical plane without hearing anything of substance from Kaylan. It began to creep into her thoughts that this really was going to be the end, for all of them. Even despite two fully functional

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energy crystals, they would never find the means to apply all that energy towards escaping this planet's massive gravity well. The realization brought her own hands to trembling and a flashing light on the panel reminded her that the craft was sinking too low for a stable orbit. She briefly panicked and overcompensated, thus causing them to miss the area which Kaylan had been interested in. She gave a sigh of understanding for what Rhumfa must have been going through with trying to get the ship down without crashing them all into the surface. But now she was coming to believe that the woman hadn't actually done them any favor. At best she'd only delayed their suffering rather than preventing it. After all, which was worse; plummeting to the surface at thousands of kilometers per hour while laying in peaceful unconsciousness or spending her final days struggling to survive in high gravity until the ship's structure finally gave in and crushed her body flat?

CHAPTER 135

Regina sat in the cave of Adey-walley, which no kinfolk had entered in the whole history of Ubuntu. It was not for any veneration that she knew of. They simply had too many rituals of remembrance during the pilgrimage for the kinfolk to spend time exploring the cave. It was such a long journey that they typically needed to hurry back to the warmth of the shelterspaces before the food ran out. She thought much about her ancestors now and how very different they were from the evil visitors on the mountain. The wordsongs of Gelfetia had told of how the ancient ones had easily been convinced to help when impending disaster threatened the village in the far back beforetime. The healer spoke of their people as honorable, kind, and selfless.

But these 'crew' of Huso seemed content not only to hide away in their magic boat, but even to keep their cherished healer imprisoned inside. With so much time left for considering such things, she found herself deeply confused by the difference and so she asked Gerauidim what his impression was of the strange visitors.

"You mean the people in the large magic boat?" The man stroked his face-hair and sat thinking for a timespan before he shared the wordsong. "Well, I saw little more than you, when we were assisting Gelfetia in regaining the gift of prophecy. I had

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been checking the many rooms with Kwandic to see which ones contained their people. We came upon two of them in a room filled with wonderful smells. I feel quite sure that it was a place of fodiens. But anyway, we restrained the two hoomaas as Gelfetia asked, but I was mostly just surprised at how little gudstrength they had. Even compared to all of us here, they were as a huitzfly. I remember commenting to Kwandic how strange it was that these people could make something as wondrous as their magic boat with such little vigrus in them. But there was no way to find out such a thing, for the hoomaas was too busy telling the untrues of how she would harm us with weapons if we didn't let them go."

"Those hoomaas do not have the respect for the fulltrue as our own kinfolk do." In exchange for the kindness, she offered to Gerauidim the wordsong of how she had seen Aninniyi supposedly delivered to Pritlaxtl and she had attacked the hoomaas with her fists, breaking her word to Gelfetia in the process. But when she had seen the red stain on the woman's uniform, she had felt the shame of her mistake and after this had merely restrained the injured woman's limbs. It was so strange that despite the similar wordsongs that everyone had, nobody was able to understand how both they and the visitors could be hoomaas, but yet have such different amounts of gudstrength. And how could it be that the visiting hoomaas were so full of the fraidness of this land?

Obviously they would have been with the fraidness from a group of people invading their great shelterspace. But it seemed to be more than that. Kwandic had spoken of the disgized man Huso's great surprise even from the seeing of hoomaas here at all. If she was the same type of people as they, what could be so strange about it? She considered that it must have something to do with the ground force and how different it had been for them on their magic boat. This brought her also to think about the strange object with the shimmeri that she had seen rise up from the stones of remembrance. (There was still some bitterness that Aninniyi had not believed her during such a momentous time.) It seemed that perhaps the strange control of the ground-force and the object she had seen were connected. Perhaps the same magic of these hoomaas allowed them change the ground force both for themselves and for their flying box. It did make some small amount of sense, though the magic that would allow them to do such a thing was far beyond

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anything she could hope to understand. It would take a lifetime of annums to grasp such powerful magic as that.

CHAPTER 136

“Opé o!”

She prayed to the depth of her soul that the one single word spelled relief from this accursed place. But as the seconds ticked by, her hopes began to fall and she drummed her fingers irritably along the command panel with increasing force. The waiting for some news, any news from the geologist out there in orbit was driving her crazy.

Finally the wait was too much for her. “Kaylan! What’s going on up there?!” It was another couple of seconds before he finally replied. “Oh, sorry. I just wanted to be sure. No false hopes you know. But it definitely appears that there’s evidence of zinmarium about three kilometers below the surface. We’ll need to make a trip back there for drilling equipment, but I’m confident now that we’ve found a way off this rock.”

The room quickly exploded as the cheering soon drowned out whatever else the man might have said. There were tears of relief and even hugs for those who could manage to rise off the wall, which had now become the floor. Kinfe happily forwarded the good news to the crew scattered in isolated pockets around the ship. “Rhumfa, how easy is it going to be to reach down so far beneath the surface?” She looked over at Kinfe with a frown. Didn’t the woman know that Kaylan was the one who helped dig the foundation pilings for NewMali? Each dome had been built to extend half a kilometer below the surface with another 50 meters of reinforcing composite due to the loose rock there. But knowing what a hair-trigger that one had been on these last few weeks, she merely sighed inwardly and let Kaylan up on the Gbowee deal with it. Besides, she was too busy thinking furiously over the few years of engineering she’d studied and trying to plan out how long it would take to put things in working order. Would they be in time to prevent the ship from suffering permanent damage? She just couldn’t be sure and

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that nagging bit of insight kept her from completely letting her guard down in the new dawn that the lot of them now inhabited.

CHAPTER 137

Manuel had been alone in his quarters when the plates failed and his only companion now was the feeling of abject hopelessness that they would likely spend the last hours of their lives in this unforgivable crushing environment. He could do little but sit there thinking of how many suicides might result from their situation before the ship's structural integrity made the effort to do so unnecessary. So it was with enormous surprise that he heard the door chime sound from 4 meters above him.

Obviously it was impossible to reach the release, but thankfully there were a few preparations that he and Huso managed to put in place, which included giving Oibo voice commands for all systems. He called for the AI to release the door and saw Ikasha panting along the door's edge right next to his access rope.

With a wave from him, the woman slowly and carefully made her way down, navigating around the bolted in furniture before she sat against the far wall next to him.

"I'll take it as a compliment that you took such a risk to make it all the way over here to my quarters. It's nice to know that we won't have to spend our final days alone."

The woman looked at him quizzically. "Final days?? What do you mean? Didn't you hear the announcement?"

He pointed to the AI interface which was turned off at the moment. "It seemed pointless to waste time with shipwide communications when our very lives are—" But the smile on her kind face gave him little preparation for the tremendous interruption regarding Kaylan's discovery. The moment she finished, he joyously threw his arms around the woman and brought her close in relief and gratitude. "So this means that we might survive after all?" He said it hesitatingly, not sure that he could believe it, and not trusting his voice to utter the words. Only a few hours ago he'd been thinking of what books he would want to print in the final

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days before the ship's systems failed. But now his thoughts were interrupted by a new sensation. Ikasha hadn't removed her arms yet. He noticed her now gazing back with something more than simple relief. In response he pulled her closer yet, despite the hard floor digging into him. It finally penetrated his consciousness that all the friendly gestures they'd shared on the ship might have a deeper meaning. He also berated himself a little for taking so long to allow the understanding to sink in.

"I can't tell you in words how much it means to me that you were willing to make it all this way just to come visit me."

They sat like this for a dozen minutes or so before the woman's secondary agenda finally surfaced. "I have to admit Manuel, that it was more than just your good looks that motivated me."

He raised an eyebrow then and waited for her to continue.

"I mean. Well, you know about that little detour that I took with Gelfetia."

Suddenly her eyes grew wide and her mouth grew into a large O. "Crap. That woman is still back there in the other village. What if they find out where she's from? What if?"

Worrying now more for the woman's peace of mind and also motivated by curiosity, he put a finger gently on her pursed lips. He noticed now, how much they were dominating his attention. He had to keep ahold of himself though for Ikasha's sake and not get distracted. "Alright, now I'm sure we could get a drone to find out what's happened to her. Why don't you tell me what you were about to say."

It took a few more seconds and she insisted that he not let the matter of the native healer get lost between them. "Well, first there was that 'prophecy' saying that the forest would lay flat before an attack and that came true. Then there was the one saying that two healers would meet by the statue, which I helped make a reality. Now we find that the moon that those people call Twiklaryun is where Kaylan found the zinnarium that we needed for the thrusters. Can you really tell me that this is all just coincidence?"

He pulled away slightly now as he sat thinking it over. But no matter how ridiculous it sounded, the three events in combination were difficult to ignore.

"Well. I mean. Sure, it sounds like a pattern. But are you really trying to tell me

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that these natives can somehow predict the future just by breaking into the power room? Think about what you're proposing Ikasha. It sounds like some kinda black-magic voodoo."

She looked back and her mouth had returned to a frown. "Believe me Manuel. I have. I've thought about nothing else since your damn virus took control of the Gbowee."

He suddenly found it difficult to look at her face, and focused instead on the top of her shirt. "Um yeah. Sorry about that."

She slapped him lightly on the shoulder to break the tension. "And we still don't know what happened to Gelfetia. I mean even considering what she did on the ship, no one was hurt right?"

The feeling of worry crept into him that Ikasha was backing him into a corner with a strategy that he didn't fully grasp yet. He'd suffered too many screw-ups already when he let his attraction do the thinking that should be controlled by higher brain functions. He wanted to bring up what happened to Fatima and Saeed, but with all the guilt weighing them down as much as the gravity was, it felt highly unwise at this point. So he just nodded instead.

"So can't you at least entertain the idea that the woman's other prophecies might prove true?"

It was almost frightening how dogmatic his friend was becoming. What had started out as mere curiosity toward this far away culture was beginning to look like proselytization. He wanted to remind her that this was the enlightened age. They didn't need to be like the krischins or mooslims, believing that some invisible man in the sky would save them. The dark ages had been replaced by reason and kindness. Humanity didn't need to be ruled by some primitive belief that the answers could only be provided by some omnipotent being. If someone was feeling troubled, they could meditate, spend time with a friend, or take a walk in the forest without the need for mythical stories or silly prayers.

He tried to tell her all this. But then he had to recognize that none of the old religions had ever done what Gelfetia had. None of them had managed to predict events which none of them had been able to resolve. No religion that he'd ever

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heard about had described something which couldn't be proven until centuries later.

"Oibo, play back the full recording of the prophecies we heard from the native healer." He paused briefly and corrected himself. "Oibo pause that. Play it at three-quarter speed and give a 20 second pause after each one." He didn't want to miss any subtle hint if what he was thinking proved true.

As each one was sounded out, he mulled over the possible meaning. The one about the man cursed didn't make any sense, unless he considered that all of the crew seemed to be enduring something of that sort. But the second one, that rang even clearer after the discussion that he'd had with Saaed when they'd first realized the woman next to him had gone rogue. From the sound of it, he could almost imagine the native healer was telling them a week beforehand where Kaylan would be able to find the only high-temperature metal in this whole planetary system. He wrapped his arms again around Ikasha, not trusting himself to keep them from trembling uncontrollably. Surprisingly, she didn't seem to mind, which in itself was enough to keep him from sliding back into apathy.

Several of the other prophecies, such as the mention of 'ojute' were nonsensical and he chose to ignore them for the moment. The one about the forest, and of the healers meeting in the temple were already discussed. The other one about their term for death and the 'underfoot' was confusing also and he was trying to imagine what it could mean.

"Kasawa nauyi precipitate canza tunanin-"

"Oibo pause recording!" He stared at Ikasha, no longer able to hide a look of pure terror. "Gravity failure?! This stone-age native who doesn't even have a word in their language for the forces of gravity is talking to us about the inevitable failure of the grav-plating?!"

Ikasha, who had been silent up until then, began to speak, but he cut her off. "No. No no no. I simply will not believe it!" His eyes grew to the size of planets as he stared at the woman. "Ikasha, do you realize what this implies?! By the stars, this is absolutely ridiculous!"

"But it makes sense, doesn't it?" The expression she wore spoke volumes more than she was able to say with mere words alone. "Just think about it Manuel.

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There's something here" she tapped the wall next to her, "something completely new to our understanding. Something that requires a massive change in our thinking."

He did think about it. And the thinking terrified him more than even a structural collapse could. It implied that whatever these 'gods' were after, they were willing to take any steps necessary to get what they wanted. To them it made not the slightest difference if one puny 'hoomaas' got in the way or even died in the process. He began thinking about the ancient krischin stories of a vengeful god who exacted punishment for something called 'sin.' There was a good chance the lot of them might be in more danger than he could ever have dreamed in a thousand lifetimes, and it brought a cold sweat to bead on his skin.

CHAPTER 138

Hakshara called out excitedly for Beljutil to see what she had discovered. "It is the steppins of the cursed people of the mountain. We can be sure of it." He moved quickly over to her and examined the impressions closely. He couldn't say exactly why, but there was something that made him think twice about the steppins. It took a few moments before the understanding became clear to him, but then he heard a voice call out next to him that Hakshara was right and the steppins clearly led to the east.

He gave the other one the straight-eye, and recognized Freetlak whom he'd occasionally suspected was aware of how ridiculous this campaign was (either that or the man's think'n was dominated by the fraidness). The man had been demoted because of his frequent distractions and there was little kindness for him these days. But as he considered the situation, it dawned on him that perhaps Freetlak was actually the one with the greatest smart-knowin of them all. Could it be that he also was able to see through the flimsy wordsong of Gjintruk and Imotren (curse his name) when the rest were so blind? He would need to test this. He would also have to be very careful. For there was no doubt that Gjintruk would be willing to send him to Pritlaxtl if he suspected a threat to their campaign at such a critical time as this.

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“Freetlak and Hakshara show wisdom in their see’in. These steppins clearly lead off in this direction.”

Not surprisingly, Nukremit gave only a casual glance and the weight of his support chased away all doubt from the rest. No one else gave close examination of the imprints, but for him the story was now a fascinating wordsong. He resolved to speak with Freetlak when there were no kinfolk nearby who might overhear the very dangerous wordsong playing within him. He prayed also to Azealla that the risk would not bring the end for them both at the hands of Gjintruk.

CHAPTER 139

“Huso, I don’t know how you survived so long out there. This punishing gravity is a nightmare.” Rhumfa sat panting next to her friend in complete awe now of his trek into the village. For her, even simple tasks like going to the break room for a meal or relieving herself was an uphill battle, literally. She was ever grateful to Saaed for having the forethought to suggest setting up a series of ropes which they all used in order to pull themselves up along the heavily sloping floor when they needed to reach the corridors. But every movement was excruciating for her. She found herself relying on Oibo as much as possible since the failure, even for simple things like displaying images of the ship’s systems. If Kaylan and Fatima didn’t succeed in bringing back zinmarium soon, she worried that they might not even survive long enough to install it. Could the ship’s structure withstand these kind of forces for more than two days? Would the crew be stranded like those scientists on board the Nneka? Would they even be *capable* of surviving here if the ship ended up being unrecoverable? For a moment she had the terrifying thought that some people might even be drawn to end their lives if it came to that. As if to echo her concerns, a low groaning became audible just at the edge of hearing. It was hard to deny that the very skeleton of the ship was protesting the undue demands being placed on it. She found herself praying not only to Olodumare,⁴² but even to the colonial gods for some kind of assurance now.

42 The divine creator and source of all energy in Yoruba tradition

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“Kaylan to Baobab.”

She would’ve jumped up, if the oppressive hand of gravity hadn’t been pressing her against the wall. “Yes Kaylan. Please for the love of god tell me you’ve been successful.”

“I have Rhumfa.” Everyone in the room let out a collective sigh of relief at the sound. It only took a few seconds before the relief turned to excitement and the comments grew to a meteor shower around her.

“So you’ve gotten the zinmarium?”

“How much is there? Will it be enough?”

“Is it going to be accessibl-”

“Ho hold on now.” His voice took several more seconds to cut through the collective chatter. “We’ve reached the pocket of zinmarium and it looks like there will be enough to at least reinforce the structural elements of the ship. I haven’t yet been able to analyze the samples for purity. I won’t be able to tell you with confidence how much of it we can use until that’s completed, but so far things are looking good.”

Not giving a damn about protocol anymore, she just pulled Huso close to her and kissed him passionately in her utter joy that they might have a chance, however small, of dragging the ship out of its premature grave. Drinking now from the great pool of his eyes, she could finally see the sparkle of joy that she only now realized had been missing since the moment he stepped out of cryosleep. Maybe, just maybe, they could pull the proverbial sword out of the stone this time, at least she prayed that they could. The news even brought her the temptation to pray to the natives’ god for a resolution at this point.

CHAPTER 140

Something was wrong. The hoomaas Eekasha had told her that she would leave a magic device to listen to them and that the hoomaas would bring her back to her people when her business in the temple was finished. But she had not heard or seen evidence of the woman, and the Saülé was beginning to grow tired now. It was not clear to her what method the hoomaas would use to share wordsong since

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Pretvuukra could not of course be allowed to see a hoomaas, but if there *had* been an attempt to bring her back to the familyland, she was not at all aware of it. She did not know what the problem was, but now the implications for all of her people were becoming painfully clear to her. Whereas the magic boat of the hoomaas was close enough to allow her to reach her people if necessary, this place of Xenlaria was many days journey even without the challenge of crossing the morass. How could she possibly make it to Ubuntu and to her people in time to bring them gudstrength against the warriors who might be approaching the village at this very moment?

“What is it that gives you the fraidness Gelfetia? Is it the kinfolk here? You can trust that I will not reveal the fulltrue to them of where you are from.”

She turned to the other healer gratefully. “No Pretvuukra, but thank you for that. I was worried for my traveling companion. Perhaps something went wrong to prevent her from returning. I have the fraidness that I will not be able to be with my kinfolk in a time of great need.”

The woman thought about that for a moment. “Well, it’s quite rare to find meldabeasts in this region, so the only danger to your companion would be one of the kinfolk.” She paused and gave the straight-eye. “Is your companion also from Higsthon?”

This she had to think about. But a reasonable answer soon presented itself. “I honestly don’t know how far away her village is, but that is where I met the woman.”

“Well, I expect that she will be perfectly safe as long as she does not meet any suspicious kinfolk.”

‘That’s more true then you could possible imagine.’ But she of course did not say this out loud.

“If you would like, you’re welcome to travel with me to my shelterspace and we can return here tomorrow to look for your friend.”

The offer was quite tempting. She did not know their village or their kinfolk, and if someone had in fact responded to the oracle’s plea then she might still find herself in danger. It was definitely not a time for her to be alone among strangers.

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Despite the barely kindled friendship, she would have to put her trust in this foreigner and pray to Azealla that her trust was not offered too quickly.

CHAPTER 141

She hated herself. No matter where she dwelt, the cowardice and weakness always seemed to win. Shaking her precious flask now, she knew that it held no more than a couple of drops. For the better part of the last day she had fought savagely with herself, to consume it all and release herself to its numbing effects or to try and stretch it out, which would make it last longer but with too much of the regular world still encroaching in. There had seemed to be no winning option, and in her futility she had drained every bit that she could reach.

Now the last of it was gone, and there was no option to return to the village for more. In the few days digging the holes and preparing for battle, she'd survived through the distraction of hard work. But up here above the village, there was nothing at all to provide distraction. Nothing to do but sit and think about what horrors the approaching warriors might be doing to her kinfolk. The whole of her hoomaas companions were relegated to this cowardly refuge for them to wait like fragile requibugs. None of them could bring the risk of the condemnays by allowing themselves to be seen by outsiders (except of course for the ones from the sky she reminded herself).

This brought her the earliest hint of an idea to her thinkin. But it would require even more courage than her attempt to create the holes to trap the invaders. She was not at all sure that she possessed such gudstrength within her. But then there seemed little other choice, for an end to her time of existing in this land was even preferable now when compared to the suffering that she endured within her kaba each and every day. Perhaps in the waiting arms of Pritlaxtl, her kaba would at last gain peace.

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CHAPTER 142

The moment the crew of the Gbowee set down outside the ship with their first haul of zinnarium, there was huge eruption of cheers from the whole crew. Even though few of them could move more than a meter without sore muscles, everyone now managed to find strength enough to endure the pain. One by one they hauled themselves to the construction bay in hopes of offering whatever help was needed in fabricating new thruster lines. Oneyda and Rhumfa had no shortage of willing participants to run the 3D-printer, weld the seams, build the joints, and connect the wiring.

Rhumfa paused to watch the activity with the first smile she'd worn since the moment she'd managed to get them down successfully on this rock. It looked like they would at least be able to move the ship out of danger, at long last. Then once that was done, they could figure out what parts would be needed to get the air cycling system working again. Though she was still reluctant to give hope more than the slightest foothold, it was difficult to hold it at bay either.

Everyone was feverishly operating the maze of improvised ropes and pulleys, carefully manipulating equipment that now weighed twice what it was supposed to. Turning over briefly at the hand on her shoulder, she spotted the kind eyes of her dear friend Huso. She briefly leaned her head against his shoulder, taking comfort not only in his presence, but also the small relief from keeping her own head erect.

“Rhumfa?”

Knowing he wouldn't appreciate the effort to keep them both standing up straight, she grudgingly pulled away.

“Do you think we could use the same raw materials that Kaylan brought back to get the grav-plates working again? I mean, even if we get the ship on level ground it's still going to be tough to negotiate with this crushing weight pressing all of us into the floor.”

She passed her gaze between him and the 3D printer working through the final passes on a reinforcement bar. But finally she returned to the more comforting vision of his face. “I don't see why not. Oneyda has the specs for every element on the ship. The only extra pieces we would need are some conductive metal like

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copper or silver. I'm pretty sure Kaylan mentioned finding a few kilos of silver closer to the northern pole. It should at least be possible, though I can't say how much of the flooring we can repair."

"Alright, good to know. Let's get on that as soon as the ship is level again." The man rubbed her shoulders briefly before heading off to give Shadai help with attaching feeder lines.

It wouldn't be quick, and it wouldn't be easy, but after weeks of beating herself up over the insanity on this planet she could finally believe that it would be possible to leave behind the natives with their weird religion and ludicrous prophecies. She could finally return to a life where things made sense at long last.

Or at least, so she thought.

CHAPTER 143

"Manuel. You didn't even let Oibo finish that line." She'd been as patient as it was possible to be and yet he still wouldn't entertain the idea that they all were experiencing something truly extraordinary on this planet. "All the native said was that our gravity failure would cause us to change our thinking."

He turned to her finally, but the cynicism remained carved rigidly into his face.

"But change our thinking about *what??*" He folded his arms even though the effect was greatly lessened by his seemingly casual pose reclined against the wall.

"Ikasha, all of these roundabout allegories and obscure terms just aren't making any sense. Even if we entertain the idea that there *is* some kind of powerful force here, how is anybody supposed to know what these weird beings want??"

She couldn't argue about that one of course. She'd been experiencing her own frustration with the constant ambiguity. But nothing was able to dull completely the feeling deep in her gut, that there was something here that was calling to them. Calling to her specifically mayhaps. It felt both deeply primitive and at the same time wondrously advanced. But the sense was too obscure for her to express it in any way that her friend might grasp. She needed something more concrete. Something she could put her fingers on. "Oibo, please feed out a twenty centimeter sheet of synthpaper and a stylus."

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The items materialized, but it required her to crawl along the room's wall to the edge of Manuel's control panel in order to fetch them. This alone brought her to panting just from the effort to get there and back. When finally she managed to get herself into a reasonably comfortable position again, she wrote down each one of the prophecies exactly as the AI had spoken them. "Okay so this one already happened, and this one. We can scratch them off. The foreign seer we don't understand yet. The one about their god of death, I think that's what Pritlaxtl is, that one's still an unknown to us."

"You see, there's just far too many unknowns compared to real facts here."

"Hush." She tried to sound gentle, but her tone came out stronger than she intended so she put a hand on his lap to diminish the frown that had grown on his face. "Then lastly there's the one where the gravity failure causes us to change our thinking. But you're right, we don't know what that thinking is."

"We also don't know what the thing about Ojute is either, we don't know most of these-"

"Wait." She silenced him again now, but more gently this time. There's something familiar about that name." She had to think a second about Penreida who many of them avoided due to the woman's strange emotional issues. "Penreida asked me about that one, and the numbering system that was used along with it. But neither of us knew what the number was for."

She spoke to the AI and did a search for Penreida's name and 'da shida' which of course brought up the native woman's prophecy, but also a conversation between Penreida and the pilot.

She noticed that her friend had developed a scowl on his face. "I really don't want to be part of a conversation with that technician." She couldn't really fault Manuel in his opinion, he was only expressing the thoughts which she had heard from over a dozen colonists back on NewMali.

"It won't be any easier talking to Rhumfa about these prophecies. In fact, just this one time I would figure that Penreida could be the lesser of two evils."

"Tomato, tomahto huh?"

She looked at him quizzically, but he merely said it was something from his grandfather. She remembered that his grandparents were from Santa Cruz de

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Tenerife,⁴³ one of the only places which had retained some lasting flicker of the old Yoruban culture.

She asked Oibo to ping Penreida and saw Manuel scowl from the corner of her eye. As expected, the voice was not the least bit direct. “I really don’t have the bandwidth for a conversation right now. This is a very difficult time for me. I’m so weak with this gravity that I can barely even get up for food.”

“Penreida I’m sorry that you are having trouble. All of us are struggling right now-”

“But you don’t know what this is like for *me*. You all have each other, but I’m stuck here by myself in the power room.”

“I’m sorry Penreida. You’re right that I can’t imagine how difficult it is to be there by yourself.”

There was a pause long enough to give her the concern that the connection had been broken.

“Thank you for acknowledging this. It really helps me to experience some empathy.”

After another pause she tried to get the conversation moving in a direction that would provide some answers

“Hang on a minute please. I need a little processing time to be ready for this.”

“It’s a good thing she’s not in the room with us to see you rolling your eyes.”

Manuel whispered next to her.

“Shhh. There’s a small chance we might get something out of this if she doesn’t hear your comments.”

“What was that Ikasha?”

Damn, she thought to herself. “Nothing Penreida. I was just giving some data to Oibo.” She didn’t think it was safe to admit that Manuel was next to her. It was often suspected that she had a crush on the man, which would only distract things further.

“What kind of data?”

The woman really was insufferable. “Well if you can help me with the information about that prophecy then it would help my analysis with Oibo.”

43 Part of the Canary Islands located off the coast of Morocco

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“OH. That’s all you wanted. I thought it maybe you were mad at me. I think that I can handle that. Just give me a second to be fully prepared.”

They finally got the story out of her about a conversation with Rhumfa involving one of the books found on the Nneka.

“But you don’t know what was in the book that this saying might refer to?”

There was another long pause and she saw Manuel imitate drumming his fingers on the wall, but the voice finally came back through the interface. “I never got to that point. Rhumfa seemed very agitated and she wouldn’t tell me what it was all about. It became a really stressful situation. I don’t want to speak poorly about someone, but I felt like the pilot was putting way too much pressure on me. She doesn’t give me the space that I need to work out my thoughts enough to allow me to process everything fully. It helps so much more to have a really empathic conversation where people listen respectfully and it helps to build a real connection betw-”

“I’m sorry Penreida for that situation. If we find anything about what Rhumfa discovered, then we can forward the data to you.”

“We?”

Dammit! “I mean Oibo and I.”

“Ikasha, you know it’s really not healthy to treat the AI like it was another person. It would be better to medi-”

“Thank you Penreida. I have another call that I have to take. But I really appreciate your help.”

She breathed a sigh of relief when the connection was finally cut. Neither of them noticed how tightly her fists had become clenched by that time.

CHAPTER 144

The whole group was only a few steppins away from the wide brook that everyone had crossed little more then two days in the beforetime. Imotren was bristling with anger and he worried now that the man might strike down Hakshara for the error. “How could you both have been so stupid?!” He moved quickly next to the woman hoping to dispel the man’s fury.

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“Don’t forget please that I also made the same interpretation of the steppins.”

Imotren had been showing great unhappy and his hands only clenched tighter now from the interruption. He turned from the other woman, and seemed finally to notice him as the daggers in his eyes shifted their aim. “Yes, but from *you* I might expect such stupidity. Son of Gelf, that’s what you are!”

He seethed at the insult. “I still retain some rank Imotren, be careful of your words to me.”

The man stared at him now and his face seethed with pure hatred, his eyes now as cold as the great peak of Higsthon beyond. His words managed now to sound even more cruel than before, if such a thing were possible. “You would dare to bring such a claim? Remember that you hold only the level of status that *I* bestow upon you. In case your smarati is damaged, know that it was *you* who decided to end the mating with *me*. So do not now believe you can hold onto high rank after the fact, merely from my own beneficence.”

He watched the man stomp off to speak with Gjintruk, even more worried now for what might become of them both. Would the chief allow Imotren’s anger to dictate their punishment? It was fully possible. Unfortunately he did not know the feelings of the chief as well as he would have liked. In such a situation, he could imagine any number of possible outcomes. But the look on the chief’s face when they returned was decidedly in the direction of great unhappy. Gjintruk called the warriors near them together so that all might witness the decision. It was a long moment before they were brought in and he saw nothing but unhappy in the eyes of everyone approaching. Though he held himself straight with hands unclenched, the fraidness began to sink its clever fingers within his kaba as he listened to the fate being expounded.

“It is one thing for a Xenlarian to make an honest mistake. But for those of rank to help in reinforcing such foolhardy think’n which now has added several days to our journey, an example must be made. Beljutil it is my decision that you shall be banished to Pritlaxtl.”

The life-fluid drained to his feet. Was this to be the end for him? He cursed himself now for trying to stand up for Hakshara. It had been a deeply stupid thing

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to do. He would never see the kinfolk or visit the temple at the feast of Azealla again.

“What? Gjintruk, that seems quite harsh.”

“Ah, you still have feelings for him I see.” The chief threw Imotren a knowing look and paused briefly. “Very well. We can simply exile the man. Maybe he can find a community with Prutchita and her nomad friends out here in the wilderness, or mayhaps he will find his end beneath the legs of some meldabeast.”

Now Imotren seemed to gaze at the chief with what might be interpreted as a sad resignation. Feelings which he himself actually held sympathy for. He wondered if the man would speak again in his defense. But Imotren had apparently stuck his neck out as much as he was willing.

“Thank you Gjintruk. You are most wise.”

The warriors who had once stood by his side as they all made the procession for so many days now held their spears pointed outward, forcing Beljutil away of the company of the men and women he'd known since his days as a young'n. Each one of them showed the unhappy, all except Freetlak who could in no way help him now. It was too painful to watch anymore, and so he kept the straight-eye on Higsthon while making dejected slow-steppins away from the kinsfolk. Whether Pritlaxtl claimed him now or not was of little consequence. For his life would be one of misery whether it lasted a few days or several annums.

CHAPTER 145

“I swear she's gonna leave us abandoned on the far side of the planet for this.”

It had taken all of the debate skills that she'd honed since her university days, not to mention quite a bit of feminine charm to get Manuel to help bypass the software lock on the Gbowee's systems. If she were nervous just from the thinking of this plan, then the reality of leaving the crippled ship behind and racing towards some neolithic citadel just on a hunch brought her to wonder if she might in fact be leaving behind the last fragments of sanity that were left in her mind. But this hunch was stronger than any feeling she'd experienced in her life. It was like a small voice, calling within her, teasing her. Whether for good or for ill, the answer

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needed to be discovered and there was no reason she could envisage for putting it off any longer.

The convincing of Anya to join her and help pilot the jirgen-sama was, thankfully a great deal less challenging. The woman still thought this experiment was unlikely to prove anything, but Anya was at least as intrigued as she was at the possible implications. The discussion between the two of them had been especially lively and it had taken many times back and forth looking through the ‘prophecy’ as well as that book from Ojute. But at last they found themselves about to pull off the most dangerous experiment ever conducted on an alien population.

This point. This brief moment in time hanging over the precipice of catastrophe was going to be a sink or swim chapter in her life. Either her instincts were right and this would bring about some kind of solution to the malignant cloud hanging over their entire ship, or she would be taking the risk of ripping to shreds the very last vestiges of good will that Rhumfa might have toward her. It was possible that the crew might even subject her to the first capital punishment in the history of space flight if she failed. The tremors weren’t just twitching all over her hands, they brought a trembling all up and down her spine as well. This was why she’d put so much effort into convincing Anya to help out with the flight. It was doubtful that her trembling would allow her to pilot the craft safely at this point. She was almost crippled by fear, and held on to a sense of purpose by little more than sheer will.

The trembling in her hands continued unabated as the jirgen-sama sped towards a modest zigurat built on the outskirts of the rapidly approaching village. It all looked familiar enough to her eyes, but Anya hadn’t ever seen this in person and she gazed awestruck at the sight below them.

“Ikasha, the video feed doesn’t do this place justice. It’s like a living archaeological museum.” The woman turned briefly to look at her companion. “What was that director’s name? The one who did a documentary on the ancient mosques of Kampala?”

“It was Ayanoshi Doyo.”

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“Right, that one.” But soon enough they were 2000 meters directly above the temple and Anya had to focus on the interface. “We won’t be able to do a thorough subsurface scan from this elevation you know. It’ll be necessary to go lower than we really should.”

She actually knew more about the systems on the Gbowee than Anya realized, and most of her own study had been done without any of the crew’s knowledge. But this time she was smart enough to keep her clandestine thoughts to herself. Any possible animosity at this point would be terribly dangerous for the micrometer tightrope that she was traversing both with her companion and with the rest of the crew.

“I would say that it’s early enough in the day that we shouldn’t have a problem. Nearly the whole village is off on that silly attack across the morass.”

Nevertheless, Anya kept the craft at 1800 meters to stay on the safe side. This time it was taking all of her attention just to keep the scan focused properly, and also watch for possible figures venturing outside. All of those worries became secondary though when another step towards validation at last showed itself on Oibo’s interface.

“By the rock of Olumo!! It *is* there. A void in the granite layer directly below where that smoke is rising from! That must be where the oracle sits.

“Well, sure, but-” Ikasha made her way carefully up to the control counter and sat next to the pilot. Just as the woman had said, there was a cavern of some kind directly below the center of the temple.

“No, there’s something down in that void. I can’t distinguish it clearly beneath all of that basalt.”

Now moved by curiosity, she punched in several commands to the interface and watched the rear of the craft. First there was just the column of speckled dust until the molecules began to coalesce and then the form started to become clear. But while she was saturated with excitement, Anya quickly began to show a horrible dread.

“Oibo! Emergency pause in the transport!”

Anya must have looked back too and was quickly furious. “Ikasha are you out of your ever-lovin mind?! How could you be so irresponsible!”

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“I’m so sorry Any-”

“We could’ve been killed just now.” The woman paused, her features twisted in a mixture of fear and rage. “Oibo, what are the energy level readings for the crystal held in transport.”

The response informed them that the crystal was indeed depleted and the other woman finally acquiesced to completing the transport. But several distinct glances made it clear that a great fracturing of trust had occurred and Ikasha worried now if she would continue having this effect with every single person she worked with. If her instincts here were not one-hundred percent true, she considered that it might not be worth returning to the ship at all. This gave her over to wondering if it were even possible to adjust to the crippling gravity on a permanent basis. And even if it *were* possible, there’s no way she would get through it without an enormous degree of struggle, and pain. Even just considering the idea filled her with a terror at least as consuming as what the crew were experiencing back on the ship.

CHAPTER 146

Work was going much more slowly than she’d hoped. But she kept reminding herself, for the thousandth time now, that these were the most difficult working conditions their people had endured in centuries. Typically if a ship’s systems were damaged, they would just lower the gravity-plating to speed up the work, or if somehow the grav-plating failed, just go into stasis and return to a ship-building facility. But here they had the combined torture of heavy gravity, damaged thrusters, *and* a sinkhole the size of Lake Toho that was practically digesting their ship like one of those extinct sharks she’d seen in the natural history museum. In the end the crew had decided on simply repairing the burnt out circuitry in the now buried jirgen-sama room. Not only was it the largest open space on the ship, but with the Gbowee parked outside, it had no other purpose for the time being. Within a couple of days the room had become completely transformed. Equipment had been transported in and set up, power lines and transmitters were scattered wherever someone had the strength to install them, and exhausted people poured

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over the gaping holes in the floor working on burnt out circuitry as if their lives depended on it. Which in fact they did.

At last the time came when Oneyda and Kinfe put in the final touches and the grav plates were turned on. Instantly, the room was filled with a collective sigh of relief. Finally, to have even one room on the ship where she could stand up straight and walk around like a normal person. If they weren't excited to help before, the entire crew were now falling over themselves to contribute to whatever jobs Oneyda or Rhumfa wished. The machinery was working around the clock while people took shifts fabricating parts for the thrusters and the plasma lines. Any excuse to allow them to stay in the room was now seen as a reward instead of just a work detail.

Leaving the room though, that was another issue. Not only would they have to endure the higher gravity, but some crew members almost lost their lunch from the transition between gravity pushing straight down to the floor, and a different gravity pushing at 45 degrees to it. She had hoped that the doctor would be able to come up with some brilliant protective options, but Kotingre hadn't been able to give her anything worthwhile. Even worse, he suggested that that too much tampering might require inner-ear reconstruction for the most severe cases. In the end they had set up a temporary food dispenser and lavatory to limit trips between the different environments for the dozen or so people on hand.

Watching from the doorway at the feverish activity, she couldn't help but be impressed. None of them could have fully grasped before now, how much innovation they had access to when the whole crew was joined together in the fulfillment of a shared goal. People were finding solutions even for problems that were completely outside of their field. It gave her pride not only in the crew, but in the UPC committee which had put all of them through so much rigorous testing and evaluation. She had always understood *intellectually* that there was value in all those dozens of hours of preparation, but it hadn't been until now that she came to really *feel* the importance of checking people so carefully before anyone was lifted outside of Earth or Mars orbit.

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Finally, she stopped being a mere observer and dove into the work of running a soldering drone for one of the electrical subsystems.

CHAPTER 147

It was a blessing from Prijnak that the two warriors had caught those meldabeast. The kinfolk were still carrying bits of dried meat now and there was less talk of the unhappy from the warriors. His kaba was greatly comforted from the knowin that the women and men under his command were satiated. If the warriors were with fodiens, then they would gladly continue the steppins toward the hidden village of the mountain where the evil ones had attacked his people. It was with a great sigh that he let go of the last vestiges of fraidness for rebellion or second-guessing. It had been spoken about by earlier generations of hunters, that the fullness or emptiness of the belly might determine the gudstrength of the think'n to remain focused on a goal. He was glad now to have the know'n that their group was on the downhill side of that curve. It was most fortuitous that his quiet stockpiling of dried melon-fruit had not been fully depleted. But if not for the fresh meat to boost the moral of the warriors, his preparations might even yet have been insufficient. He made a note to suggest to Gjintruk that the two warriors who brought down the beasts should be given special honor upon their return. As he looked up from the side pocket of his walking pack to check his own ration, a tiny glint caught his attention. He gave the straight-eye to the east of the mountain and it did seem as if there was some flashing light up there on the slope. It was daytime and no shimmeri should be visible, so what else could it be? He ordered a halt to those nearest him and asked Imotren to join him.

“Yes Nukremit. What is it?”

He still did not know yet what should be made of the official. The man spoke fervently of showing courage and trained with diligence on all manner of weapons and strategies. However he had not listened to any wordsongs convincing enough to tell him of the man's true reliability either in strategy or combat. He remained with the concern that their leader might in fact end up dominated by the fraidness when the critical time of conquest arrived. Nevertheless the man held the support

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of the oracle, and it would be absurd to question the will of the Holy Mother. No, with Her support, he must assume that Imotren was trustworthy in all situations. He showed the man where the bright spot was. “Imotren. What do you make of that-”

But no sooner had he raised his finger to point out the light, then it vanished like the spark off a fire against wet sticks. He stared at the spot and thought to himself for a moment on whether it was a signal from Prijnak. It must be that, but not having the skill of the oracle, he knew not what the meaning of this sign could be. “Were you meaning that bright shimmeri on the slope of Higsthon? I did see it as well.”

It was a great relief to hear that his see’n was not false. He watched the man give the straight-eye all around and began to feel the hope that there might in fact be some gudstrength in the man beyond simply inheriting influence with Gjintruk’s predecessor.

“If you look at where that shimmeri sat and turn in the opposite direction, you will see the Saülè. Perhaps something up there reflects the Saülè just as Gjintruk’s spearhead does.”

Spearhead! “That’s it! Thank you Immotren, your council has proved most valuable. We should inform Gjintruk at once that the cursed ones have been located.”

CHAPTER 148

They both stared closely at the crystal. It was as black as the shadow side of Neptune and Oibo had given them an audio warning that the energy use on the jirgen-sama would dramatically increase with the weight of such an enormously dense object. It was said that an energy crystal was the densest and heaviest object ever created by humans. It was almost like a miniature black hole, but many times less powerful. This meant that the power systems on the Gbowee wouldn’t hold them aloft for long, but this did nothing to stop them from drinking in the sight of it. Neither of them had ever seen one directly and Ikasha wondered if this was what it might be like in fact to stare directly into the face of a real black

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hole. As fascinating as the object was, it also brought an unexplainable terror to her soul. These crystals were the fundamental nexus of their entire extra-solar existence. Without the energy crystals, humans would be trapped within the tiny bubble of space that could be traversed at 1/50th of light speed.

Finally though, another warning from Oibo shook them out of their stupor.

“Comeon Ikasha, it’s now or never for this” She paused and glanced back at the crystal “and I pray to all the gods, old and new, that whatever was contained in that peculiar prophecy can justify what we’re about to do.”

She wanted to give Anya her attention, but found it now too difficult to look at the woman. All she could offer was a whispered, ‘me too.’

CHAPTER 149

“So you think that this bright light was a reflected spark of the Saülè?”

“Yes wise Gjintruk. Which would put them about a day’s travel up the slope towards Higsthon.”

The man raised his spear into the air enthusiastically. “Nukremit you bring glory to Prijnak and to our people this day. I believe the honor to lead this final stretch should be yours now.”

The man bowed respectfully. “Thank you my liege. I am humbled by your generosity.”

He joined the chief in rounding up the warriors and made sure that there were runners to pass on the speech to the farthest edges of the group. The effort took some time, but finally all preparations were ready. Gjintruk stood before them in his bronze-plated armor with the Saülè gleaming off it brilliantly.

“Great warriors of Xenlaria. I praise you for the magnificent courage that you have shown on this journey. We have all survived tremendous hardships and explored savage wilderness with gudstrength, courage, and honor to Prijnak. The cursed people of the mountain are only one day’s journey from here and with the Great Warrior by our side, we can be assured of a glorious victory. The spoils of battle will be ours for the taking and I give you my word that you will all be generously rewarded for your tireless efforts. Great wordsongs will be shared for

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generations of our spectacular campaign this day. By the end of tomorrow our kinfolk will be free forever of the curse from the magical people of the mountain!" He paused and made a point of giving the straight-eye to as many warriors as he could. This always succeeded in securing a greater level of allegiance among the women and men. It gave each one of them a feeling of personal connection with their leader, a trick which his own father had taught him before the man had succumbed to Pritlaxtl. "I feel to the very depths of my kaba that you will not only bring honor to me and to the kinfolk back home, but to Prijnak and Azealla as well. So be sure that your spears and ourays are well honed, and let us all take the final march to victory!"

The men and women all raised their spears in excitement as they spread out in a formation and each gave the straight-eye to their weapons while the suggestion was freshly spoken.

Only one of them now marched with a feeling of deep unease within his kaba. Unnoticed, thankfully by the others, he did all that he could to focus on the natural surroundings and chase away thoughts of violence and utter wrongness from his head.

CHAPTER 150

Saaed was already sweating from the effort, despite being outside for less than an hour. Even the power-assist leg braces were only able to cut his struggle down to a low ache. Obviously the rest he'd gotten in the jirgen-sama room only made the work outside that much worse. Not only did he have to fit the new lines to the thrusters under the full brunt of the planet's gravity, but he also had to keep his footing along the steep gravelly slope beneath the ship. Each day the ship had ground its way down through the dirt, pulverizing anything larger than someone's hand. By now, a person standing on the mountain would barely see half the ship sticking up and Rhumfa was doubtful they'd be able to lift out even with all thrusters at maximum power. But of course that didn't mean he was going to stop

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trying. It was as obvious as the nose on his face that this would be their one and only chance of surviving to see their beautiful planet once more.

He thought back longingly now of the few days working in the jirgen-sama room under normal Earth gravity to build the lines in the one part of the ship which they'd brought to tolerable standards. But of course there was only so much that could be pre-manufactured and obviously someone had to be the unlucky one to fit the units into place. As much as he was frustrated with getting the short end of the stick, grumbling wasn't going to accomplish anything at this point.

He carefully disconnected his thin nanotube tether and reattached it underneath the cowling. Huso had reminded him at least five times that the tether was his only protection against a possibly fatal slide down the steep and slippery 40 degree incline. Bracing his feet, he managed to lift the first line and secure it in place. But that was the easy part. The fittings themselves he soon discovered were only a couple of millimeters too small. The time and energy that would be needed to re-fabricate a connector would delay them by several hours if he couldn't get these parts to fit. "Otele mgbeke eeeee!" For all the anger he put into the exclamation, it fell impotently against the side of their crippled ship. Things were already going badly enough, there just *had* to be some way of getting the stubborn parts to connect.

Not for the first or even the tenth time now, he wondered about those damn natives and how their peculiar legends occasionally pointed in the most mind-boggling direction. Normally, he would agree with Rhumfa that the immature culture was nothing more than an interesting footnote in an anthropology text. But that concept couldn't withstand the impossible coincidence of finding zinmarium in precisely the spot that their healer had mentioned. This brought within him two wildly opposed reactions to their situation, both of which defied even a hint of rational debate. It was all such a huge mess that manifested itself in a spiritual tug-of-war that made concentration on even such critical work as this a mere spark in a bonfire.

Briefly he nearly lost his footing, which like a physical blow, reminded him of the more prescient battle that he waged right here and now against the heat-treated metal, all while his thin veneer of patience struggled to endure the sandblasting

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force of this cursed planet. He was feeling almost physically ill from all the dead-ends, the alarm calls, even Rhumfa's emotional breakdowns (though the last was more understandable in hindsight).

Meanwhile the fittings stubbornly fought off every one of a dozen different methods of coaxing them into place. They simply refused to budge the final two millimeters into place. Finally he just took a prying tool and started pounding on the fitting for all it was worth. There wasn't any rational thought by this point, just an overwhelming hopelessness and fury with a stupid piece of metal that simply refused to cooperate even the slightest amount.

A blinding explosion of agony brought cruel reward for his impatience and in an equally primitive rage, he slammed the prying tool against whatever surface was nearby. Unfortunately this happened to be a cover made of spring steel. Thus he got only the barest glimpse of the tool hurtling back toward him before everything went black.

CHAPTER 151

"Come on Ikasha, it's now or never. The jirgen-sama wont be able to hold this altitude forever."

Even now staring down at the ancient ziggurat sitting stoically below them, she realized she was still trying to believe that this could all be turned around somehow. That, like a magical premonition something would swoop in and rescue them, and she could bring the craft back to their ship without anyone knowing of her enormous crime. As ludicrous as it seemed, she even began thinking of the key commands that would be entered to log in a new flight pattern. It was ridiculous of course. And yet she sat frozen, her mind shifting back and forth between continuing the path she'd worked so hard on and reversing course for the only home she knew on the vast surface of this planet. No matter how much she shouted at herself, her fingers were a set of stones balanced rigidly in place, just half a centimeter above the user input pad.

"Ikasha!"

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Finally the shout motivated her as she'd been unable to manage alone, and her fingers managed to punch the command input to Oibo. The craft bounced slightly as the enormous mass of the functional crystal was transported out of its shielded chamber and into the cavity below the temple.

She looked over briefly at Anya, "if we're wrong about this-"

"I don't think it makes a difference either way at this point. The ship might not survive escape velocity even if we *do* manage to shift it back onto solid ground-"

Anya wasn't able to finish the thought. Instead their attention was drawn back to the interface where it looked as if a virus was interfering with Oibo's systems.

The craft suddenly began to lurch drunkenly about while Anya was suddenly distracted in a frantic attempt to restore manual control.

"Olúwa ò! Make sure that seat is secured Ikasha. I think we're going down!!"

CHAPTER 152

Mautide couldn't believe what the iranian ologo was showing him. The great mass of evil warriors was certainly to be expected. But it was impossible to deny that one of them had appeared to be pointing straight at him. How could that be when none but his own people possessed magic such as this? The warriors had to be almost a day's travel from Ubuntu and even the most sharp-eyed warrior could not possibly see with such penetrating exactness. He watched in terrified fascination as one of the warriors seemed to motion for another as he pointed toward their village, but then it became clear that if by some chance they *could* see him, it would be more valuable to hide. Thus he threw a piece of cloth over the magical looking device and crouched low against the hillside.

It took many long moments of battling with the fraidness before he found it within himself to risk peering through the thing once more. As he scanned across the far underfoot, at last he saw the great wave of men and women marching towards Ubuntu. They seemed not to notice him now, but that was a trivial thing because it was impossible to deny that their time of desperate battle for the familyland was rapidly approaching.

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He carefully set the magical device back in its case with as much speed as possible and hid the tool beneath some soil before making fast-steps towards Truinye. He found their warrior making her way along the line of defenses and checking that everything was as prepared as they could possibly make it. The traps of Regina were covered by obscure cross symbols of green and red, something from the stones of remembrance. Truinye had suggested that the symbols would prevent the kinsfolk from falling in the pits, but also be too obscure for the evil ones to interpret. Not until it was too late of course.

He hurried to their leader and told her of what the iran ologo had showed. “I assure you Truinye, that I could not have known that their people would be capable of having such smart-knowin. Once it became clear, I quickly hid the magic tool and rushed here.”

The warrior gave him a brief smile and laid her hand on his shoulder. “Mautide, you need not feel the shame-face. If it is the full-true that the evil ones are so far away, then perhaps Prijnak is showing some kindness to their people. This would indeed be so very tragic, but it will not lessen our resolve to protect the holy land. No matter what happens this day, all the kinfolk know that we are on the side of goodness and honor. I will stand with you all and-” She quickly gave the straight-eye toward the brook and her eyes became wide. “I hear their movement. We must hurry with final preparations. Tell everyone to eat what they can and be ready to take position behind our defenses.”

Despite himself, Mautide began to feel the fraidness begin to saturate his kaba and he worried that the time might come where he was at risk of letting his kinfolk down. He glanced briefly at Truinye, but she was already moving to check on all the others and it was clear now that nobody could help him to work through the fraidnes now but himself.

CHAPTER 153

Kinfe knew it wouldn't last long, but at least for a brief time it was a joy to find that they could access the outside through a service airlock which happened to be at ground level now, though for how long she couldn't be sure. The ship was still

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sliding, but much more slowly here, so they might keep a sliver of good luck until the thrusters could finally be made functional. It was certainly worlds better than dealing with the kefatz. She absolutely hated the effects of that thing. It wasn't just the idea of having her molecules shifted around and tossed into space, but that horrible itching over her entire body was almost worse than listening to Rhumfa's complaining. Given a choice, she'd prefer to get a dozen wasp stings on her backside. So as long as there was another option, she would happily take it. But this did nothing to tame the transition to the outside gravity. With the plates mostly functional again, it was now even more disorienting to step from normal Earth gravity to the crushing force outside. Damn this horrible mission and especially Rhumfa for casting them out here. If it wasn't for Huso's concern over Saeed's safety and the lack of response on his waya, there wouldn't be anything to convince her to put up with this misery.

Once outside, she called him several times and searched in all directions while struggling to keep her footing on the precarious slope. At one point she almost managed to fall herself.

“Shàngbá ò!” It was easy to see now just how dangerous it was out here and despite how frustrating the man could sometimes be, the worry for what might have happened crept into her like a virus. She looked around and called his name until her mouth went dry. All the while her cool indifference was slipping away along with the gravel beneath her feet. What could she do if he were unconscious? They might never find him at all. The thought made her realize how much she admired Saaed. He was one of the very few competent, and mostly tolerable people left on the ship. It was really such a shame that the council on NewMali had selfishly kept all of the smartest and most talented people back there while the remaining nitwits could just about keep the ship from crashing into a rock, as Rhumfa had done.

Finally though she noticed the pencil-line tether stretching out from the ship and downslope to a string of boulders. The tiny splash of red quickly shifted her attention and she started moving as fast as the loose ground would allow. It was a chilling place to be stuck in. Even under standard gravity this slope would've been

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disconcerting, but out here it was downright calamitous. Her eyes now scanned constantly between the ground ahead and the tiny spot of color while she held the tether line in a vice-like grip. There was no way she would let herself end up thrown against a pile of boulders. Not if she could do anything to prevent it.

When she finally reached Saeed, his sprawled form looked sickening and the pool of blood splattered on the rocks nearly upended the meager lunch she'd taken just an hour before. This was clearly outside of her pay grade and there was no reason to put off the call for reinforcements now. She carefully pulled out the waya while Saeed's tether cut tracks of red into her fingers. "Huso this is Kinfe. I'm going to need Kotingre to join me outside the ship right away. Saeed looks like he's critically hurt." She realized in saying it that she hadn't even checked for a pulse. What a stupid mistake for her to make. Of course, she should know better than that. But looking at the crumpled form, she wasn't sure if she could manage to reach a hand out to that tangle of bloody limbs.

"How bad is it Kinfe? Is he unconscious?" The worry saturated the man's voice and she finally overcame her squeamishness to tentatively reach out a hand toward the limp and bloody wrist.

"He looks terribly bad Huso. It's absolutely deadly out here between the crushing gravity and this 40 degree slope. Not to mention the cold-"

"Kinfe! What is his condition?"

"Right, sorry Huso. I'm not an expert of course. He's unconscious and both his legs are bloody and twisted. At least one arm seems to be missing, or it's underneath the torso. His head, there's a huge-"

She couldn't take it any more. The pressure of bile in her throat finally pushed it's way out and she barely managed to turn her head and keep from losing it right on the guy's damn shoes. It was another minute or two before she could spit out the vile taste and utter words again. By now Huso's voice was nearly panicked.

"Never mind Kinfe. I'm sending a message to the doctor and well be at your location-"

"No Huso. Don't be stupid. There's no reason to risk any more lives out on this hellish slope." Was the man so deaf that he hadn't heard what she said about the conditions out here? "You need to use the kefatz and get him straight to the

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medical room. It'll not only save precious minutes, but you won't be risking your own skin out here to boot."

"Good suggestion Kinfe. I'll make it happen.

She was grateful that he had been the one to answer. There was no telling what would've happened if she'd had to describe the situation to Rhumfa. Next to Saeed, Huso was pretty capable and at least a tolerable human being.

CHAPTER 154

It was late morning before the chill of the air finally dissipated with the blessed rays of the Saülè. Having nothing else to be occupied with, she assisted Pretvuukra in selecting a stock of wardbreath leaves near the woman's shelterspace. Despite her worry, the surrounding forest did much to bring calm to her feelings of unease. Neither of them had an idea of what could be done regarding their respective kinfolk who were both in danger from the ridiculous battle on the far side of the morass. But there was no obvious means of helping prevent the tragedy either. All that she could do was offer regular prayers to Azealla and to Adeima for everyone's safe return, which she did.

She was just putting a few leaves into her bag when a flash of light caught her see'in. As she turned to look, the fraidness became strong within her when she saw a flying machine falling rapidly towards the trees in the distance.

"What is it that brings you the fraidness?"

In panic she quickly swung her eyes toward the ground as the other woman turned to follow her see'in. She could think of nothing to say which would not bring the threat of condemnays. She had to somehow distract the woman from seeing what could be nothing other than the magic of the hoomaas. In her panic she pointed to the underfoot and spoke of a plant which she had thought might bring poison.

Pretvuukra followed her gaze and soon commented mockingly. "You mean the fruengaz? Seriously? Only a first year apprentice to a healer might make a mistake such as this." The woman now raised her gaze to show the straight-eye.

"You are still with the fraidness though. Could you actually have been willing to speak an untrue?"

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“Pretvuukra, I-”

She never had the chance to finish her thought. In mid-sentence the woman became surrounded by faerys momentarily before she disappeared from the see'n. Now Gelfetia was *certain* that the magic of the hoomaas was at work here. But the question was, why? If their people were as cautious about preventing the condemnays as they claimed, then what could cause them to act so foolishly? As the same faery dust began to obscure her own see'in, it became clear to her that the answer would come to her soon enough, whether for good or ill.

CHAPTER 155

At last! Nukremit had given the straight-eye from beneath cover of the forst and was able to spot a multitude of shelterspaces in the distance along Higsthon's sloping feet. The cursed ones were less then half a days' steppens now and ripe for the picking. He gave the straight-eye all over the area but saw nothing of note beyond the shelterspaces themselves and a few crags of rock. These people would have no great mass of warriors, no deadly hail of sticks to rain havoc from above, they would likely have little resistance at all.

He had invited Gjintruk to use quietwords for a rousing speech to galvanize the warriors before they began their primary attack. It was important, he knew, to ensure that all of women and men were properly focused on victory and nothing else. Whatever he felt about the man, there was no question that Gjintruk was a born leader. Listening to their chief, he had been deeply impressed by the wordsong, which could have inspired even a meldabeast to join their campaign.

“Nukremit, do you not think that it would be wise to give the warriors some more rest and attack as soon as the Saülè shows Himself above the mountain?”

He looked over scornfully at Imotren, for he was even more convinced now that the man would never make a practical warrior. “You let the fraidness overshadow your smart-knowin. I believe it would be best for you to remain along the sidelines and let *me* do the practical work of leading the assault.”

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The man began trying to interject, but Nukremit silenced him. This wasn't Xenlaria where the man could intermingle within the crowd of the plutarchs, this was the realm of warriors now. Even Gintruk would agree, of that he was certain. He reinforced the point with his own strategy, on the chance that the ignorant fool would be able to put aside his hubris and learn at least a little smart-knowin.

“Any warrior with the least sense would understand that the Saülè will rise from behind the mountain. This will cause us to be blinded once it appears. You need not be with the fraidness. This is but a small village and we should outnumber them easily. The battle will be won before the end of a single day, I can promise you that.”

The man scowled back, but it was clear that he could not think of a practical response. He then noticed with surprise as the man's scowl quickly disappeared only to be replaced by something unexpected.

Turning to look, his mouth fell open as a great river of stones and boulders began tumbling in their direction.

“Take cover-” he made to form the warning, but it barely escaped his mouth before he turned to make fast-steppins toward a vigrus tree. The barely formed thought of climbing it was soon useless as the rocks and stones picked up speed and he had only enough chance to press himself against the leeward side of the tree as panicked shouts echoed throughout the mass of people.

CHAPTER 156

Kinfe finally regained some amount of stability when Saaed disappeared from sight. She didn't do well with blood, and under these kind of conditions there was no room for error. Unlike Saaed, she wasn't clipped in to the tether, a mistake which she was quick to correct. If she were to loose her footing completely, it was a long and uninterrupted slide towards the hole containing the drive section of the ship. There's no question that even Kotingre would be of little help if she were to fall so far down there. But in spite of the danger, she found that it captured her attention as well. What could have happened beneath the ground to cause such a huge sinkhole in only a few weeks? More importantly, how realistic was it for them

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to expect the ship to survive both extraction from the sinkhole and the rigors of interplanetary travel after that? Saaed had pointed out that even once they extracted themselves, the structure might be too heavily damaged to make the return trip to Earth. Which, given the man's long engineering experience only worsened her unease. It was seemingly a dozen minutes before she could tear her eyes away from the theoretical and focus on the more immediate task of getting back to their temporary oasis.

"Kinfe, where are you? Are you alright?"

Kotingre. His voice was a mosquito buzzing around her ear and she would have gladly left him on NewMali too if Rhumfa hadn't insisted on keeping someone with extensive medical training on board.

"Kotingre, I'm *fine*. I just prefer to use an airlock while we have the option. I'm not excited about having all the atoms of my being scattered across a quarter kilometer."

She didn't really care to hear what his response was, but it was cryptic enough that she merely ignored it. Then she focused on playing out the line until she managed to make it to the other side of the landing strut. But that was where the gravel had been loosened already by the strut sliding along it.

"Olúwa ò!" Thankfully the fall hadn't been catastrophic, but the fresh pain on her legs and backside were reminder enough of how treacherous the ground was beneath the ship here. She held more tightly to the line and finally caught sight of the airlock now half a meter above the ground.

"Oibo, open the airlock door-"

She never got to finish the command as her foot slipped away from her in a shower of pebbles throwing her to the ground once more. Thus she never got to see the figure which darted quickly into the airlock when she blacked out.

CHAPTER 157

Drekulye sat flat on top of a rocky crag only a few steppins from the village. He did not know that this position was offered to him because Truinye suspected him to be dominated by the fraidness. Instead he considered it a great honor to keep the

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sharp-eye for the sake of his kinfolk. His limbs still ached from the full day spent bringing stones and lining them up in the area Truinye expected the attack to come from. The whole of the kinfolk had watched in satisfaction as the stones tumbled down upon the attacking warriors, bringing much fraidness to their people he hoped.

But now the movement had begun again and the terrifyingly large mass of warriors were only a few dozen steppins out. He called out when the warriors began charging up the slope towards their village. At first it was confusing because it seemed that many of the warriors came to a hurried stop long before they reached Ubuntu. But his eyes grew large and the fraidness enveloped him when he witnessed a great many small sticks fly into the air and arch toward their warriors in a vast cloud.

For several moments he watched numbly as the cloud reached the apex of it's path and began falling upon them all with horrible ferocity. Several of the sticks dug into the ground within five steps of his own perch. This type of weapon was not something they had ever heard mention of. In barely an instant there were many cries of pain from unsuspecting warriors who became injured without having lifted a single spear in defense of Ubuntu.

Where before he had worried that the fraidness would prevent him from climbing down to join the warriors, now the great mass of flying sticks gave him the strong motivation to fly to the underfoot as quick as he could in search of some protection from them.

But while few of the evil ones who launched such things would have aimed for the rock, he found that once on the ground there were many more of the deadly sticks showering the underfoot nearby. He snatched for one of them and made fast-steppins back to the rock where he examined it.

The stick was much less imposing then a spear might be. It was barely the length of his arm and with two small winglike pieces attached to the back. But the tip was very sharp and he could imagine that if one of them were to fall upon him from a great height he would suffer enormously. The thought gave him even more worry for the safety of the kinsfolk then he had felt before.

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But what could he do for help? It was too late for a warning, and he had no device that might deflect such an attack. There just had to be *something*. He searched all through the landscape around to no avail.

The terrible thought reached him that this might spell the end for his beloved village.

CHAPTER 158

Thanks to Drekulye's warning, they were all stationed at their posts and ready to defend the village with all the strength of Prijnak's spear. But when Truinye looked up and saw the horrible mass of sticks flying straight at them, even she had the fraidness that they might not survive.

When the horrible screams of Ayowaldeyn and several others reached her, she frantically pulled herself beneath whatever cover she could find. This ended up being her 'apata' which shuddered from the impact of several deadly projectiles which struck with a loud 'thwunk.'

"Hurry beneath the protection of your apatas!" She prayed that the warning would carry to her people quickly enough. But the screams of agony told her that the advice was most certainly too late for the kinfolk. She offered more fervent prayers to Prijnak now and peeked carefully from behind the apata when she felt the ground vibrate as it would from a herd of meldabeast. But this approach was more horrible than any mass of animals. She stared transfixed as the evil warriors made fast-steppins toward her with spears raised and fury in their eyes. The first warrior slowed not the slightest as he raised his spear in pure hatred, only to be quickly swallowed up by the pit directly before her. The man's fury instantly transitioned to awe and then to friadness before she delivered him into the hands of Pritlaxtl.

But sadly there were only a few of them who fell victim to the traps, and soon she was putting all of her skill and strength into defending against two women and a man fighting as one against her. With a spear in each hand and every limb flying about with wild abandon, she managed to deflect a great many deadly thrusts. But how long she could hold out against such an onslaught was anybody's guess. It

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wouldn't be long before she would be struggling merely to keep on her feet as the warriors threw their spears with terrifying effectiveness.

CHAPTER 159

“Opé o! We’ve got power Rhumfa!”

She gave Fatima a long hug and repeated it with everyone in the room, pausing exceptionally long with Huso. Somehow she couldn't let go of him. She didn't want to ever let him go again now that there seemed at last to be a real possibility of hope.

“Rhumfa, we’ve got to get out of this before the ship suffers more damage.” The worry in Aminu's voice was a javalin piercing the bullseye of her euphoria.

“Right. I'm sorry Aminu.” She turned to the woman standing in for Saaed as systems engineer. “Ereko, let's pull the ship out. Slowly. We'll get onto stable ground and then load the Gbowee.

“Rhumfa wait!”

“Buru aba.” She threw a hard look at the doctor and was about to suggest that he stick with healing Saaed and keep any comments about ship logistics to himself.” What now Kotingre? We have got to get this ship stabilized.

But the look on his face told her this was no casual interruption. “Where's Kinfe? She never reported in after we got Saeed brought to the medical room. The last I heard she was beneath the ship.”

Damn that olòshì. The woman was miserable practically all the time. She had little patience for the woman by this point. But of course they were a team on the ship. Even for those who were sometimes infuriating, she had to do everything that she could to keep them safe. “Oibo, locate crew member Kinfe.”

The AI showed her location within the secondary airlock, which was good enough. As long as she wasn't beneath the ship when the thrusters fired. She forwarded the info to the doctor and began shunting plasma while offering prayers to a god she didn't even consciously believe in.

At first there was nothing but a heavy vibration throughout the ship. Oibo pointed out that a great mass of dirt and rock had accumulated over the hull. She turned

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a worried look toward Ereeko as if the woman could somehow knock the whole mass off with a wave of the hand. The woman ran quick calculations with the AI and forwarded them to her own screen. It suggested increasing power to 85% which was way beyond what her own instincts suggested was safe. But of course they couldn't just go out onto the hull and knock off thousands of kilos of rock by hand. She had to at least give it her best and pray that Oibo's stress calculations were dependable.

The vibration became violent enough to overcome even the upgraded grav-plating and inertia dampening circuitry. Several people who weren't in their seats had to frantically grab hold of whatever solid item was close in order to keep from falling. But meter by meter, the ship eased itself upward and outward. There was a violent point where despite her vice-like grip on the chair she fell unbalanced to the floor and managed to barely break her fall with an out-thrown arm. But Oibo's cameras showed the cavern sliding away and sunlight gradually brightened as the tumble of rocks and dirt fell off to either side of them. Very slowly they managed to pull free, and finally they were hovering just five meters above the half-buried sinkhole.

Rhumfa had Oibo display an image of their position above the ground to all crewmembers and a great host of cheers sounded back over the interface. It brought to her lips the first smile she'd worn since the plasma lines had been finished. The euphoria was barely hampered by the sight of the ship's satellite launch port laying shattered in the gravel four meters off to the starboard side. With immense relief she set them down a few dozen meters away on ground that Oibo assured her was (hopefully) stable enough. Then she let the thrusters idle down and the vibration settled back to a low hum. She gave a hug to each of them again and ordered Oibo to run a systems analysis of the whole ship to see how badly their escape had effected the ship's structure.

"Ereeko, Anya, and Fatima. At your convenience please work on clearing enough space in the jirgen-sama room for the Gbowee to be brought back inside. Then we're going to get as far away from this cursed mountain as possible."

"Um Rhumfa..."

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The euphoria that had barely gained a foothold within her sounded a hasty retreat as she spun through her mind thinking of what new catastrophe might be in store for her this time. “Is there a problem Fatima?”

“Rhumfa, I hate to be the one to bring this up-”

“Oh just spit it out already!”

“Geez. Well I’m in the jirgen-sama room and the airlock hatch looks like a piece of origami. We’re not getting that door open anytime soon unfortunately.”

“Ewoo!” It wasn’t the end of the world, but on top of the already gargantuan stack of problems flying like a river of arrows each day, she was ready to punch someone. There had been too much upset with the crew by this point for her to risk venting her frustration. With nails digging red crescents into her palms, she marched off to the rec room instead for a long pounding session with one of the weight bags. It was that or do something that would get her confined to quarters.

CHAPTER 160

Ayoprij gave the straighteye into the distance struggling to discern when or where the attackers would appear from. As the time dragged on, he noticed how eerily silent Ubuntu was. Aside from a slight breeze moving through the forst below them, it was as if Pritlaxtl had already taken them all away to the aftertime. Only the sound of his feet occasionally shifting in the underfoot proved that time was moving at all.

Annoyance was beginning to creep into his think’n at the delay. Not that he relished the impending battle, but this dead time of waiting aimlessly was an unrelenting itch. He shifted his grip on the apata and envisioned the many donga tactics which Truinye had repeated for them until he could perform them in his sleep. He thought to himself how their preparations should greatly improve success against the massive number of attackers that Mautide had described. If the man’s see’n was true, they would need all the support that Adeima could provide if they hoped to view the rise of the Saülé tomorrow.

At last his think’n was interrupted by a low rumble within the forst. He gave the strighteye and could now distinguish movement at the nearest edge. He tightened

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his grip on the spear as he watched. But strangely the dark line in the distance came to a stop many steppins away. He couldn't imagine what might be happening at first. But then he saw the massive wave of dark lines flying at enormous speed. He watched with his mouth hung open as the objects rained down toward him. As the only protection nearby, the apata flew upward in his raised hand. But it wasn't fast enough. Blinding pain ripped through his leg and he collapsed to the underfoot. A pool of blue spread out around his new injury, spurting from the point where a sharp stick had pushed deeply into the flesh.

"Chineke ekwela ngwere gbaa aji! Oooo gini di ihea?" The curse was followed by a long series of them as the agony and fury battled for dominance within him. After what seemed like a great timespan, but was probably the briefest moment, he realized that Pritlaxtl would be swift in taking him if something were not done quickly.

Holding a death-grip onto the spear in his hand, he used the other to quickly rip the invading stick from out of his leg. It was less horrible than he expected, and with the aid of his spear, it soon became possible to stand upright again. It was only then that his see'n brought a real awareness of just how vast the wave of attackers was. Their numbers formed an intimidating arc all along the slope below and it seemed impossible that their cruel attack could be withstood. But there was nothing for it but to put everything he had into surviving. To fail was a certain visit to the aftertime, and the kinfolk were all depending on each other here. They simply could not lose the day.

The statement to himself was barely finished when he spied three warriors making fast-steppins toward him and he offered a final prayer to all the gods while he leaned slightly on the apata and held his spear tight. The first man closed the distance at a terrifying rate. The unhappy shining off his face like the glow of a fire. But quickly, he lost his balance when Regina's pit opened up beneath him. A single spear-thrust was all it took to dispense with the man by then. He knew that others would be momentarily caught off-guard by the surprise and he lost no time in grabbing a second spear and impaling a tall woman who was the nearest in the group.

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This stroke of luck at least evened the numbers between them, though his injury still made defense a nebulous prospect. He was still using the apata as a support instead of keeping it for the intended purpose. The final woman stared with the greatest fury as she watched him intensely. Knowing that any weakness would be exploited, he moved little and kept his spearpoint aimed true. The woman was still uncertain if any more surprises waited in the underfoot and also made careful steppings, but without taking her eyes away from him.

It was a long moment before he grasped that something was wrong. There was a strange blurriness to the woman's face which hadn't been there a moment before. He moved to quickly thrust out with his spear, fearing that his injury was causing the problems with his see'n. The woman must have been unaffected because she quickly sidestepped his thrust and swung her own spear at his arm. The move was one that he would normally be able to deflect easily. In fact the escape was successful, but his injured leg stumbled and a sinister grin quickly spread across the woman's features.

'This is it. She knows I'm injured.' It wouldn't be long before he gazed upon Pritlaxtl as he was led along the final path to the aftertime.

But strangely he saw nothing more of the woman's face after that. His vision quickly became so clouded that he could not see anything beyond the joint of his arm. It seems that he had been sent to the aftertime without even being aware of it. For in no time there was only blindness in every direction that he gazed in.

CHAPTER 161

The faery dust slowly dissipated and she found herself in the most confusing place. She was briefly reminded of the white rain high along the slope of Higsthon. But this was a storm the likes of which she had never experienced herself or in any wordsongs from the far back beforetime. She found that she was surrounded by a thick cloud which limited her see'in so completely that she could not even make out her outstretched hand. The Saülè, which normally shone bright and strong for most of the year was not even half as bright as Twiklaryun, as if He were suddenly overcome with the fraidness to show Himself fully. Thin ribbons of mist drifted

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past intermittently, but aside from that she might just as easily have been taken to a world of dreams. The experience soon became terrifying as the shouting of battle and the screams of injured people from many places around became heard. Some of the voices even sounded familiar, which only brought more of the fraidness and confusion. She stooped down to grasp at the underfoot and she was almost more surprised to find only regular soil beneath her feet. What kind of place could this be where everything above the underfoot was a liquid white confusion no matter where she looked? It was almost difficult to even stand back up, for there was no frame of reference of what was up and what was down. The underfoot was the only solid thing that her senses could detect in any direction.

Without being able to see them, she was gaining the sense that there were many people surrounding her on all sides, but none seemed to acknowledge that they knew she existed. It was a great nightmare and the screams from people whom she could not reach for bringing help only made the feeling worse. Each direction that she turned only brought more struggling to make sense of the experience. But not any smartknowin as to what might be causing this enigma.

Suddenly, the idea reached her thinkin of whether this might be caused by the magical hoomaas. For it was definitely their faery column which had plucked her away from Pretvuukra's shelterspace. Plus it had been the stranger Huso that she had seen drift toward them through the white rain in the beforetime when all of them were suffering from the very horrible cold. But while the ability of the evil ones to do this made sense, the reason for creating such chaos was not within her understanding at all.

Whatever the logic, she began to gain the awareness that the heavy mist was bringing an end to the sounds of fighting, and even the cries for help became more muted as people all around her developed fraidness and confusion in their voices. Questions began to fly from all directions now as to who could create such an impossible change in a matter of only moments. This at least told her that none of the voices around were with understanding of what was going on either. There was both some comfort in the communal confusion, but also much fraidness as well. For there was no way to know who the people around might be, or whether they posed a threat. Mayhaps they were all evil people from Pretvuukra's village.

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CHAPTER 162

Freetlak had been filled with confusion. He knew that this lust for the spilling of life-fluid was something that he wanted no part of. But was it a fraidness? Was he a coward for not rushing off with spear in hand and fury in his kaba? The warriors all around seemed to take great joy in rushing headlong after the flying sticks and attacking the line of mountain dwellers. Since he did not share their feelings, it was impossible to know what motivated them in raising their spears against complete strangers. It was not until he saw the first brash attackers fall helplessly into great pits before the defensive line that he realized the strange mountain people must have had more time than he realized to prepare for the attack. How such a thing was possible, he could not say. But it gave him the first hint of a belief that Prijnak might not in fact be standing alongside them this day. So when a large mist began to settle around them, hampering his see'n and making further attack impossible, he began to lose much of the doubt that he had been feeling for himself and instead considered the thought that their leader might in fact have been the one who was mistaken. Before long, any hesitation to join the battle became moot. For it was now impossible for him to bring spear against another even were he filled to bursting with the lust for spilling life-fluid. Now he was not at all doubtful of his fraidness, for it wrapped around him no less completely than the mist itself did. Instead of feeling the worry that he might be seen as a failure compared to his fellow warriors, he was instead dominated by the thought that he might be lumped in as a group with the kinsfolk. Mayhaps the strangers' magic would destroy him along with all his fellow warriors without any discrimination. One thing was certain, he no longer second-guessed Gjintruk's wordsong of the evil magic that the mountain dwellers controlled. It was impossible now to deny the horrid power that these strange beings could bring forth.

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CHAPTER 163

“The manual override controls aren’t working!” Her fingers were moving almost faster than a person could see in her search for some means of activating any type of countermeasure. There seemed to be no action that brought a lessening to the drunken swaying of their attitude display.

Ikasha stared wide-eyed at Anya who’s expression mimicked her own. “How can that be?! The override is supposed to work immediately. Oh god, we’re gonna crash. And right next to the village too!”

“Brace yourself Ikasha!”

Just as it felt like they had reached a velocity which no craft would ever be able to recover from, somehow the Gbowee did recover. Anya’s eyes looked ready to leap out of her face as the craft slowed abruptly and soon came to a hover just above the treetops outside the village.

“Otele mbgeke eeeee!⁴⁴ You did it Anya!” If she hadn’t been strapped down, she would have jumped over and hugged the woman.

Anya’s gaze however was nearly as frightening as the past few seconds had been. Her eyes were two planets fighting to escape the gravity of her face which itself was as pale as the moon. “Ikasha, I don’t think it’s anything that *I* did. The computer still seems to be running things, all on it’s own. There’s some strange kind of program interfering with Oibo. I-” The woman flashed her hands briefly across the interface. “I think it just activated the kefatz.”

In the first instant, her companion’s terror had threatened to envelop both of them. Now however, she began to wonder if it wasn’t the ship itself but Anya who was experiencing some kind of mental issue. She couldn’t possibly imagine what would motivate the woman to say something so completely ridiculous. “Come on now.” She threw a scowl at the woman. “Why would Oibo allow the kefatz to be activated this close to a native town?” She managed to heft herself carefully out of the seat now that the floor was finally stable enough to allow for it. Looking at the interface there were signals flashing across the pad at such an implausible speed that even Oibo shouldn’t have been able to manage it. And one screen did actually show the activation near a tiny structure only a few dozen meters away. Now the

44 Yoruba expression of extreme surprise

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relief at being saved from a horrific crash was again being superseded by a dark foreboding. Things were only getting more strange by the minute and the forecast inspired nothing but a hollow dread within her stomach. All conscious thought though was soon interrupted as the craft rose into the air again and sped off seemingly towards the ship. It altered course slightly and veered instead for the other village on the mountain. She saw the great mass of warriors far below her and everything seemed to slow down.

She didn't know what had taken control of Oibo's systems, but it appeared that the Gbowee was going to set them right in the middle of that ridiculous attack on Ubuntu. Her face paled at the implications of what they were about to do, even if it was through no choice of her own. "Rhumfa's going to kill me" was all that she had time to exclaim before the weirdness level shot off the scale.

CHAPTER 164

Nukremit had been tempted to rush along with the first line of warriors in their attack of the cursed ones. But something near the underfoot caught his eye and he slowed only for the briefest moment. He didn't feel the fraidness. No, there was something not quite graspable that delayed his steppins. It had barely slowed in his excited rush, but that was enough to save him from the fate which Jenvirey fell victim to. He watched in horror as the woman stumbled into some kind of opening that swallowed her legs before one of their cursed warriors used a thick spear to send the woman into the arms of Pritlaxtl.

How could such a thing happen? It would have taken many days to create such traps. Their band of hardy warriors should have taken these fools completely by surprise. He gave the straighteye both to the hole that now contained his kinfolk's body and then to the warrior standing on the far side. It was clear that only the slightest attention from Prijnak had saved him from the suffering the same fate as Jenvirey and he shouted warnings to the rest of the warriors before grabbing even more tightly to his spear. The underfoot quickly fell behind him as he focused partly on the warrior who had killed Jenvirey and partly on the still treacherous hole in the underfoot. The fury grew to a great bonfire within as he stared with

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disgust at the despicable woman. But while he was preparing to swing around the hole to attack there was a strange blurriness to what his see'n showed. It was as if the time of mists had come upon them all, but with a ferocity that soon left him unable to even see his own outstretched hand.

Remembering the great hole in the underfoot, he now was gaining the fraidness of a wholly new kind. That feeling only brought the shame of failure burning within. He backed carefully away from where his smarati told him the deadly void lay. But in barely the time it had taken to make the movement, it became impossible to even know where his own warriors stood in relation to the deadly magic-makers of Higsthon. The howls of confusion quickly drowned out those of distress as both able and injured people joined in the same general disbelief. He was now gaining an understanding for the great folly they had committed. For a few rows of crops spoiled by these people's magic were nothing in relation to a force as powerful as this.

CHAPTER 165

“Pretvuukra are you here anywhere?” She called out for the one person who she hoped might have been brought to this place with her.

“I don't know. I can't see anything at all.” The woman's voice must have reflected as much fraidness as she herself was filled with, but at least the voice was familiar, and it sounded like the woman was close by

“Pretvuukra is that you?! How in all the land could you be all the way out here on the site of battle?”

Nobody could understand what was going on, and even distinguishing peoples' voices was a challenge in the strange almost liquid air which surrounded them. But through much querying, she learned that the other woman was Krietfrup, a warrior of the Xenlarians.

She wanted to tell the other healer of her suspicions that this must be part of the strange magic of the evil hoomaas, but of course that would bring more of the condemnays. Without being able to speak with the hoomaas directly, it was impossible to guess what might be their reason for risking such profound harm to

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both of their people. But her thoughts of the hoomaas were quickly thrown aside when another voice reached her.

“Did I hear you say healer? Is there someone who might help me? There’s a man here who is injured.”

Despite the mist, she was certain that the voice came from Mautide. Could it be? Were all of her kinfolk magically brought to this strange realm together? For the moment she did not care. She searched in vain for the voice, wishing to embrace him. Her arms searched blindly in every direction. But the voice seemed to float magically in front of her without any solid flesh to produce it.

“Mautide. I think that is you. It is me, Gelfetia-”

“Gelfetia?!” Despite not being able to locate each other, the joy and excitement in his voice was enough to tell her that the kinfolk were indeed with her. “By the wondrous hand of Adeima you have been delivered from the clutches of the evil hoomaas.”

“Mautide, please do not speak of their people. I believe that we are also in the midst of outsiders in this peculiar place.

“But Gelfetia, this place isn’t peculiar at all. We are at the edge of the homeland.” There was an uncertain pause then. “Or at least we were. I felt nothing change in the underfoot. Could *they* be powerful enough for such a thing?”

His query only brought gudstrength to her own suspicions. Perhaps the evil hoomaas had decided to throw aside their concern for the condemnays and were now using their magic for some sinister purpose. If this was true, then the group of attacking Xenlarians were a pittance by comparison.

CHAPTER 166

“Alright it looks like things are ever so slowly getting back to normal. Kotingre has Saaed and Kinfu under his care, the ship appears safe at least for the time being, and once we check the structural integrity and get the O₂ scrubbers figured out, we might finally manage to get our sorry asses out of here.”

A low rumbling of cheers filled the ipade and there were more smiles than she had ever seen gracing the lips of the crew. It brought a swelling of pride within her for

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all of these people, to know that they had all met nearly insurmountable odds face on without any one of them succumbing to apathy or futility. Except herself of course. That last realization brought a burning shame to the surface, and she grinned even wider in an effort to compensate for the hollowness festering in her gut.

“Alright, so regarding the O₂ scrubbers, I’m going to start working with Saaed when he gets well enough to put the time in. How are we progressing with the location of the Gbowee?”

She noticed that few eyes in the room seemed willing to meet hers. But one particular set was held rigidly against the table. “Oneyda? Have you found anything?”

Slowly, as though her eyes were being dragged out of a sinkhole, they rose to meet hers. But it was only for a second before the woman’s gaze collapsed again to the table. “I’m sorry Rhumfa. I’ve gone through the satellite data with Oibo for the past two hours and there’s just no sign of it. And no communication with Ikasha or Anya either.”

Now her effort to hold a smile collapsed like an old ship’s sail. She folded her arms and stared back directly at the woman. “So are you telling me that the Gbowee simply vanished into thin air? I can’t believe that Oneyda. Even with all the crazy shit going on out there on the surface. The jirgen-sama has got to be somewhere. Has anybody done a thermal imaging scan or a delta wave scan?”

She noticed now several crew members looking at each other, and none were looking at her. Could it be? Every single one of them had managed to overlook such a simple possibility? And just a moment ago she’d been swollen with pride for their crew. How in the world would they get home with such incompetence? No. She had to lead by example and not give in to those emotions. “Well, now that my command interface with Oibo has been restored, I guess I’ll just take care of it myself.” It took a herculean effort to hold back the scowl pressing against the surface of her face by this point. After all, they still needed each other and arguing would only bring on the same bitter feelings from before. She needed to hold out just a bit longer, and hope that the next mystery could be sorted out somehow.

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CHAPTER 167

There were many confused voices and comments. Some voices spoke of being injured, others cried out for people who should be close by, but the dominant subject of course was fraidness. A terror of the magic that halted their attack faster than a great herd of meldabeast. He had experienced nothing like this before. But now he seemed to even be controlled by feelings of fraidness as well. This new terror within felt as unnatural as the mist itself did. It saturated every part of his kaba till he knew not even where to make steppins. Such a power as this would easily supercede even the most generous kindness from the might of Prijnak.

No. There had to be some rational fulltrue. Some smart-know'n hidden within this mist had to contain the revealing wordsong. For a simple village high up along Higsthon to bring the very forces of Azealla down to destroy their enemies? This was utter-

“[Sannu, can anyone hear me?
Ni enikeni wa nibe?”

The sound was some kind of language, but not anything that he was familiar with. It had a singing quality that was like no accent he had come across before. What surprised him was that this was the first voice that seemed close enough to allow him to believe that he could speak with a person. That feeling wasn't definite of course, as he was with the impression that what sounded near or far was not really a sense to be relied on in this exceptional place. He thought on the unfamiliar wordsong for several moments wondering at the meaning of it. The being did not seem to speak Xenlarian, so the only rational conclusion was that this person was one of the evil magic crafters of Higsthon.

Finally he decided that being silent was only an expression of fraidness. It would not do to be seen this way. Responding with strength and forcefulness might at least bring some level of clarity. “Who are you. What is your name?!” He barked the words with his fraidness carefully hidden and pictures of the murdered warrior dominating his smarati.

“Hello. Hello. Please don't be angry. My name is Ikasha. I am one of-”

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The words still did not make sense, but it mattered not. For this was clearly one of the evil ones and it was beyond question that they were terribly powerful. He could only hope to intimidate this one with the deception that he was not in fact saturated with the fraidness.

“You are of the evil mountain dwellers. Grishneevit! Do not think that your trickery will intimidate the chosen ones of Azealla.”

His only hope of salvation through this was to convince the evil ones that the fraidness had not in fact crept like a hundred kulmelon sprouts all over his body

CHAPTER 168

Rather than call for Manuel to make the trip to her quarters, now she relished in being able walk through the ship like a normal human being under normal Earth gravity at last. Under other circumstances she might've even held a spring in her step at the welcome comfort. But today the relief did little to quell the mystery of what she'd watched in the datastream. Just when she'd begun to have the slightest glimmer of hope that the epidemic of madness dominating their time on this planet might finally be in remission, another galactic absurdity snuck in from the most unlikely of places.

The man opened the door to her chime and there was a hint of fear within his eyes which she attributed sadly to the crew's general fear of her tattered emotions over the past few weeks.

She gave an apologetic smile, figuring that she'd just misread the data or accidentally taken the image from the wrong spot. Most likely she'd end up feeling like a dunce when the programmer pointed out some correction in the code.

“Manuel, I'd like to ask your help in sifting through a minor mystery.”

The man offered her a seat and she told him about what she'd gotten from her analysis of the satellite data with Oibo in search of their missing jirgen-sama. “So after going through the visual spectrum, the delta wave scan, and a radiation stream, I finally found this image using a thermal scan.” She paused and instructed Oibo to pull up the infrared view from 8394.3 x 4928.1 “It must be some kind of mistake, Manuel. The data shows the Gbowee smack in the middle of

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that battle between the Xenlarian warriors and the native people in Ubuntu. At first I literally thought those two [pieces of shit] had gone completely off their rocker.” She noticed the man flinch slightly at her words, and she made a conscious effort then to keep her voice calm. “Then I looked back at the visual spectrum, it seems that a dense fog has grown up all around the village and the surrounding area.”

“That’s a pretty strange mystery Rhumfa. But I don’t see how my expertise might help with this.”

She tapped at the interface briefly before interrupting. “Hold on. It gets even more crazy. I took your cue from the last time that oloshi went missing and input the same code to override the craft’s navigation controls, but this time I got nothing in return but this string of code.”

She pointed at the interface, as if that would help clarify things for a man who’d helped write the base code for Oibo’s systems. He turned from her and faced the screen, clearly intrigued. Silence soon filled the room as he scrolled up and down through extensive lines of code for what felt like half an hour. She watched with waning patience as the man scanned his eyes back and forth across the screen with furrowed brows.

It took seemingly forever, but at last she was gifted with a response. “Rhumfa, if I didn’t know better I’d say it was a virus.”

She scooted to the edge of her chair and looked back intensely now. “A virus? Nobody even makes such things anymore. What would be the point?”

His eyes were downcast and he shrugged his shoulders looking even more confused. “Let me spend a few minutes on this and see if we can’t use a similar trick and bring the craft back here again.”

She sat tapping her fingers restlessly on the side of a chair wondering what other insane surprises this planet might cook up for them. The way things were going she was beginning to think that retirement didn’t sound like such a bad idea anymore. She was definitively getting enough adventure and frustration to last three lifetimes in this god-forsaken place. But of course such a thing depended on whether or not they could manage to get back to Earth at all. Despite the massive

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success in extracting the ship, she still couldn't induce much confidence in ever looking out on her home planet again. Not just yet.

"I can't imagine why it doesn't work this time. Oibo can't even confirm the craft's location."

She looked at the man now through a dark screen of fury. "How in the holy hell could it not know the location. Manuel! It's sitting there. Right there on the screen!" She was so infuriated that she could've punched her finger right through the interface.

The look on his face though told her that she'd gone too far, yet again. "I'm so sorry Manuel. It isn't your fault." Seeing the way he looked at her, and thinking back to all the times that she flew off the handle with the others, it finally sunk into her consciousness why the crew had revoked her command privilege with Oibo. No matter how much she meditated or took Dr. Kotingre's sleep aids, it never helped enough. She was absolutely a horrible crewmember. She just didn't have what it took to keep it together when a real and true emergency cropped up. "Manuel, tell Huso that he should be the go-to person for the time being." She immediately fled his quarters and made her way directly to her own. Then she threw herself on the bed and succumbed at last to the mediocre comfort of a profound frustrated melancholy.

CHAPTER 169

"Please." She finally caught on and switched to the language of the natives now that she realized this wasn't a person who understood Yorigbausa. "I promise you that I am not your enemy. My group are simply temporary visitors to this place." The voice that responded though remained saturated with fury and hate. "You must take me for a complete fool! You think that I would believe a person travels to this place of battle simply to stand around and watch?! Ridiculous. Tell me the full truth before I deliver you into the arms of Pritlaxtl!"

Now she wasn't just worried, she was terrified. Even though she couldn't see more than 30 centimeters in any direction, the being spoke as if he would have no trouble spilling her insides all over the ground. Not only would this bring even

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greater tragedy to their mission, it was likely that Kotingre wouldn't find her in time to keep her from dying.

"Please believe me. I swear... I swear on the throne of Azealla that I am not one of the people you are attacking and I did not come to this spot on purpose. I-" what else could she tell though. What could she say in their language that would explain an out-of-control jirgen-sama without compromising their people even worse than they had already?

"You would swear that you are not one of the evil ones and that you simply showed up by accident? Did Adeima bring you to appear magically out of the air?" The voice made a noise that sounded like their version of 'harumph.' "More likely you have no respect at all for the Holy Mother and you slander Her name with your untrues."

"Listen please." She really did feel as if she were begging for her very life now. "I had wanted to visit the people on the mountain in order to make sense of the strange prophecy which their healing woman had offered. She spoke of the two healers coming together and of the false prophet that is filled with fear."

"Where are you! Show yourself so that I may silence your dirty untrues and put an end to your despicable slandering of the Holy Mother!"

Despite the bluster with which the being spoke, she felt a long breath escape her now. This being was no more able to see her than she was able to see him. Somehow the battle had been abruptly halted by the most unusual weather she'd ever witnessed.

"Who is that! Who is shouting out here."

"Hello?" She was becoming confused by the voices that she couldn't see, and by the strange way that their words seemed to come not from any particular direction. It reminded her of one time visiting the Alps on a dare. They had reached very close to the top when a thick cloudbank had rolled in and it became hard to locate people even by their voices because of the way the moist air had distorted the sound.

"Are you one of the foreign visitors?" The words sounded like the woman was trying to determine which tribe was speaking, but the woman was speaking Yorigbausa and this confirmed that it wasn't a warrior from the Xenlarian village.

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“Daalu. It’s me Ikasha. I suddenly found myself here and I don’t know why.”

“A hoomaas?! What kind of madness would make you think it was wise to travel here!”

“Please... please understand.”

It felt like an hour was lost in struggling to convince the native, who she finally discovered was Truinye, that she had showed up on the battlefield against her will. She described her attempts to return Gelfetia to their village, the belief that the healer was destined to meet with the healer from Xenlaria, and the absurd workings of their magic craft.

“What is it that you speak of in quietwords?! I demand that you speak properly and not hide behind this gibberish.”

“Hah! You demand?? Grishneevit. If this mist did not prevent it, I would deliver you and your demands into the waiting arms of Pritlaxtl.”

“Son of Gelf! It is you who would be easily destroyed if this mist would only release me.”

Listening to the two warriors argue, she was beginning to wonder if this mist wasn’t somehow intentionally meant to prevent more killing.

But who could manifest such a thing? Certainly not the natives. And there was nothing of their own technology that could, at least nothing on board the Boabab that was capable of such a thing. For a brief time she grasped at emptiness as if she were one of the warriors straining to take hold of an enemy. But when a new realization came to her, the chill of the mist became a grain of sand next to the frigid cold that raised the hair all up and down her spine.

CHAPTER 170

Rhumfa had gone ‘mental’ again, as the crew put it. He’d gotten word from Manuel to keep his distance, but somehow that never seemed possible. The two of them were like binary stars. Gravity both repelled and attracted them to each other with the forces constantly threatening to tear one or the other of them apart. He still loved her of course, and he wished that they could have stayed together. Yet when episodes like these occurred, he reminded himself why they had decided

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to be just affectionate friends. The love he felt wouldn't disappear, but he just couldn't allow himself to be drawn down, clinging to her as they sunk beneath the waves.

He rang the chime and worried now for how bad this episode had been. But when the door opened, the face behind it appeared calm and reasonable. She looked so relaxed that he wondered perhaps if the report had been exaggerated.

"Huso, I'm glad that you came. I... guess you heard about my screw-up with Manuel already."

He only nodded, but the frown that he wore must have communicated much more. He followed her into the room listening to the heavy sigh of resignation before she sat on the cot and he began to get a sense of something worse going on for her.

She gave him the most intense look he'd seen cross her features since the grav-plates had failed. "Huso. To be perfectly honest with you, I get the feeling that we're never going to be allowed to leave this planet... no matter what we do."

If the first news about the near crash landing on this planet had been a meteor strike, this statement was a planetary collision. His lips fell and he stared numbly at her trying to ascertain if it was she who'd lost her mind or if this was an actual prediction. A statement like this only three weeks ago would've only caused him to berate the woman for overreacting. But the gravity with which she said it, and the strangely insurmountable obstacles that kept popping up at random brought him to wonder if she didn't have the power of those natives' strange prophecy. He said as much to her and the confirmation only seemed to worsen her mood. But instead of becoming furious, he saw something vastly more dangerous in her eyes. They appeared empty of all emotion now. She stared at him with a look of utter resignation and he now had the fear that instead of anger, she might simply waste away into listless apathy.

"Rhumfa!" She flinched and he cursed himself for speaking so harshly. "I'm sorry. But look, you can't just give up like this-"

The woman slammed her fist against the edge of the bed. "I can't? I can't?!"

Really?!!" Even though she was sitting, the woman held her hands on her hips now and a brief flame showed in her eyes which would have aggravated him under different circumstances, but which now was almost welcome. "Who's going to stop

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me? You? The UPC? That ‘god’ that those natives worship? Just what force in this vast universe is gonna force me to hold on to a hope that just keeps shifting the futbol post even farther back.”

“Rhumfa. Love. I worry for you. This...” He paused frantically searching for the right thing to say. “this isn’t you. This isn’t the Rhumfa that I fell in love with. [Sweetheart], I know that you’re better than this. You are capable of being more than just your emotions.”

He saw her pat the bed next to her and he sat down thinking the woman could use a shoulder to cry on. But it was more than that. She wrapped her arms around him and her whole being shook with powerful sobs for several minutes till he wondered just how bad it all must be for her. Officially of course, they didn’t have the old hierarchy of ship’s captain which had been part of so many generations of destruction and war. But Rhumfa was still the first go-to person on the ship when problems occurred, and she was the liaison to the UPC, she was also the one with the most intimate knowledge of the Boabab’s systems.

Intimacy of another sort however began to grow on his mind as he finally noticed her red and swollen eyes staring directly back. It wasn’t a good idea of course. The ship was still in trouble, crew members were missing. But looking into those liquid brown eyes, knowing the history behind them, and remembering how much he cared for her. It was windblown sand eating away at his resolve. Her eyes, still streaked with tears stared back intensely for the span of a universe. Finally the invisible gravity between them collapsed and he lowered his face down to drink from her rich soft lips.

CHAPTER 171

The campaign was supposed to have been simple. The oracle supported him, Gjintruk supported him, even he himself had supported Imotren. They outnumbered the cursed mountain dwellers (from his brief see’n at the outset of battle) quite easily. Even Prijnak had blessed them with the shining light to betray the traitors’ location.

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So why did victory remain as nebulous as this infuriating mist that saturated the air all around them? He wanted so much to reach his hands out and pound upon the cursed people of the mountain who had thrown such insult upon their great warriors. Now one of these Gelf-etans had the audacity to claim that they had their own prophecy from the Holy Mother. The absurdity of their untruths was actually more remarkable even than that attacking river of boulders or their deadly pits dug into the underfoot.

“You speak quiet words and hide in the clouds because you and all the people here are the lowest and most shameful cowards to ever travel upon the land. It is truly a wonder that the great Azealla would even permit your kaba to stain her wondrous creation!”

“[Yoruba for may you rot in the ground!]” He didn’t understand the strange words, but the despicable person’s tone was clear enough. Especially when another of those idiots spoke out in surprise.

“Truinye!”

“What? You heard what that olòshì was saying.”

He listened to the two fools exchange words in their peculiar sing-song language all while wishing he could get on with the fighting. It was preposterous, this massive white mist hid everything from sight no matter how big or small, and his warriors were utterly helpless against it.

In all his many annums dwelling upon this land there was not the briefest wordsong passed down among any in the plutarchy, or even tales from the commoners, of a mist which surrounded a person so thickly and for so long that nothing more than one stepping might be discerned along the underfoot. It was almost reaching the point where his fury was managing to supersede the fraidness. Though neither of course did him the slightest good in this place.

“What is your name?”

The comment was so preposterous that for a long moment he was struck dumb.

What kind of response could there be to such an ridiculous statement. They were in the middle of a battlefield for crying out loud.

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“My name? You ask my name?! Grishneevit, you have no need for such things. I am simply the one who is going to deliver you into the hungry arms of Pritlaxtl. This is all that you n-”

“You are able to do no such thing. Neither is Truinye. All of you, all of *us*, are trapped here somehow and violence either in thought or action is clearly going to bring nothing but futility. So I ask you simply, what are you called among your kinsfolk.”

He was once again left without the ability to respond. As completely insane as the concept was, this silly mountain dweller’s wordsong did have a hint of logic to it. The wait for this mist to break apart was so long in coming that he was beginning to feel bored rather than excited as he should rightfully be. It took several moments, but at last he mumbled his name weakly as if defeated by nothing more than a simple query.

“Very well Nukremit. My name is Ikasha and the other person here is Truinye. We are three people originating from three different tribes. Yet we are all here together in this place high along Higsthon.”

“So what? You are suggesting we just sit down and play chutchuk? Do we suddenly-”

But the other person wasn’t listening. They didn’t know what the young’n game was, however the third person (Truinye mayhaps?) seemed to be explaining it.

“No, I’m not suggesting anything but the brief wordsong that we are currently having. My people do not want to hurt either of you nor do we wish to be hurt in return.”

There was the sound of air being blown out explosively. “Then it was stupid of you to travel here when there was a battle occurring.” The Xenlarian’s voice was as harsh as sandpaper even to someone less than fluent in their language. This whole ridiculous experience was testing the very extent of her patience in keeping from exploding in anger the way Truinye was clearly on the edge of doing.

She herself had to take a deep breath before trusting herself with a reply. “Look. I said already that I did not come to this place intentionally. Secondly, even though we knew the battle was coming, we didn’t-”

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“You what? How could you possibly know the battle was coming. Is this how you knew to create those pits to the aftertime? It was most cunning, but woul-”

“We knew of your evil attack because the great Adeima gave us warning in her prophecy! That is why she has chosen US to be her-”

“Truinye!” She was quickly losing control of the argument and if she didn’t find some means to keep the two warriors from constantly shooting verbal bullets back and forth, the opportunity afforded by this strange weather could vanish the moment that the mist did. She had to keep Truinye quiet long enough to build some tiny nugget of trust with the Xenlarian. How to do that was still a mystery, but there seemed no option but to try. She continued to use Yorigbausa for their own private discussion. “I realize that you are fully justified in your anger right now, but please understand that these people have their own prophecy, whatever it is, that they fervently believe in just as much as you believe in Gelfetia. It’s possible that these warriors don’t know that they outnumber you four to one. It would very much be to your advantage if you allow me to help.”

She didn’t wait for the woman to reply, hoping that the warrior managed to display the faintest sliver of common sense. “Nukremit I apologize for my friend’s angry wordsong. It may not have been a choice to be in this place with your warriors, but it is my fervent hope that I may be able to offer some easing of hostilities as long as I do find myself stuck here.”

“Eekashah, you are a most peculiar person. I appreciate your intention, especially as an outsider. The healers and peacemakers in our home are valued kinfolk, under certain conditions. However this is not the time or the place for such things. Before I would even consider talk of healing, it would be necessary to learn of how you could have been prepared for the attack. Do we have kinfolk among our warriors who share the quietwords with you? Do you possess evil magic as Gjintruk says, to turn our kulmelon sour and our katcha stalks to a sickly lavender?”

“What? Such deception is not the least bit necessary when we have the prophecy telling us of the trees falling flat preceding attack, or the warrior bringing shield against ourays in the field, or the underfoot eating the legs.”

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“Truinye, I swear to all the gods you worship. If you bring the condemnays to those people I will deliver you into Pritlaxtl myself, and hopefully with a great deal of pain.”

She instantly regretted her words, for it only brought the warrior into her own angry retorts. It was looking more and more likely that a truce might be impossible, possibly resulting in death to them all.

CHAPTER 172

“So what the hell are we waiting for? Why aren’t we getting our asses out of here?” Kinfe was just on her way to see the doctor for a followup and hopefully a few more painkillers for the splitting headaches she’d been forced to endure. It was nothing of course compared to what Oneyda had suffered through though. That woman was still trapped in the healing room with Kotingre until her arm and a piece of occipital were regrown and could be used to replace the originals. She’d spotted Fatima in the passageway and wondered what would bring the other woman down to the healing bay.

“The doctor told me there’ve been complications with my recovery and he wants to replace my kidney before there’s a chance of toxic waste leaking into my gut.”

“Ooh fun.” The woman’s comment could easily be taken negatively, but her tone clearly said that she was sympathetic.”

“I swear it’s a good thing Rhumfa hasn’t asked me to take the jirgen-sama out to their village. I’d be sorely tempted to just set it down right on top of that damn native if I managed to spot her.”

She remembered now Fatima commenting bitterly about the painful recovery from being physically attacked by one of the natives that got into their ship. It almost gave her sympathy for Rhumfa in having to deal with those oloshi. Almost. But she never forgot that it was the pilot’s fault that they were here in the first place of course. This little detail would always be connected to the prestigious pilot of the Boabab.

“All I want to do is get as far from those damned [assholes] as we can like, yesterday.”

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“You’ll get no argument from me on that one.”

Kinfe grimaced as her headache let off a particularly blinding stab right in front of her ear. “I hear rumors that our illustrious pilot has been busy doing the horizontal shuffle with Huso.” she said with a mischievous grin. “Could be that the little distraction is what’s holding her back from getting things in gear.”

The other woman laughed at this. “It’s about damn time. Maybe a little hanky-panky will help that woman loosen up a bit. Lord knows she could use it.”

“I wonder if Rhumfa managed to bribe her way past the psych evaluation for this mission. It’s the only way I can imagine the UPC giving such an important position to that mental case.”

Fatima nodded her head in agreement, though with a barely noticeable scowl passing over her features.

CHAPTER 173

These strange people were becoming more and more of a mystery with each segment of the wordsong and despite his anger, the intrigue was beginning to get the upper hand between the two. Obviously they had known of the attack well beforehand and put many preparations in place to slow his warriors’ march toward victory. The means by which they had gained the smart-knowin were not yet clear, but if there were no betraying quietwords whispered by one of his warriors then magic was the only other possibility.

The question was, how could they possess magic more powerful even than the beneficence of Adeima or Prijnak? After all, he had listened to the wordsong directly from Pretvuukra of the oracle’s prophecy that the Holy Mother smiled down upon their attack. That Adeima and Prijnak would stand with them to bring a magnificent victory. The evil ones then must have terribly powerful magic indeed, for in the entire beforetime no force had ever been capable of thwarting the blessed Mother.

The spearpoint must lie with the other person, ‘Eekah-sha.’ For that person had spoken of a strange thing called a ‘condemnays’ and from the tone, he perceived that there was hidden fulltrue which that person did not wish revealed. What that

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fulltrue was, and how he might discover it were still things which he could not recognize yet. He would need to induce more wordsong from both of them, as this was the only weapon that could be wielded in their present situation. He needed to draw out the fulltrue from this, no matter how difficult or frustrating it might be.

“Whatever magic your people are in possession of, it cannot ever withstand the might of Prijnak. For He lifts high his spear to lead the way for us to bring you defeat with gladness!”

“Your people are a mere requibug next to the strength and might of Adeima. And if you had the smart-know’n then this would be understood by all your people. The Holy Mother even told us that your oracle quakes with fraidness that her untrues will be revealed!”

“One more damn word Truinye! Don’t you dare say another word or I swear on the throne of your God that you will suffer pain as you’ve never felt before!”

There was no more think’n now for him. This ‘Truinye’ had dared to accuse the holy Oracle of false wordsong. If it took the entire rest of his days, he would bring that person to suffer endless agony just as ‘Eekah-sha’ had threatened. As much pain as was denisovanly possible.

CHAPTER 174

Everything was a fog of confusion wherever she gave the straight-eye. She had been wondering how the other healer Gelfetia might be motivated to speak the untrue when everything began to sparkle around her as the dust of the faerie. Soon the dust became so thick that it was not possible to see anything of the forst around her. As her see’n became obscured, a great itching and some pain grew all over her skin such that she almost screamed aloud from it. But when the sparkling finally dissipated, she was surrounded instead by this strange mist. For some time she wondered if her eyes had now failed her until, calling out, she discovered that she was somehow in a strange place surrounded by the kinfolk. There was Krietfrup and Ejunrayb, Opreed, and even Freetlak the coward. How

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this could be was very strange to her. But the wonder of it all eventually fell to the wayside when she heard her own name spoken in strongvoice.

“Pretvuukra is not a speaker of the untrue! Not in a thousand annums would she defy the will of Adiema so blatantly!”

The voice was clearly Nukremit, but the reason for his anger and his strongvoice were no more clear then the great mass of Higsthon. She momentarily thought of answering him in order to bring greater healing and peace. But that only caused the think’n of Gelfetia and the great conspiracy of which she had recently been forced to consider. If his strongvoice was related to that, it would be most unwise for her to reveal that she was nearby. And if Nukremit was as blind as everyone else she had spoken with, then it would be a simple matter to remain hidden within the mist.

“Nukremit. Pretvuukra is here with us now. You need only ask her yourself if you wish.”

Curse you! It wasn’t clear who had shown the audacity to speak on her behalf, but since she was not a speaker of untrues (as the oracle seemingly was), it would be impossible now to hide within the mist.

“Pretvuukra is here?! That is impossible. How in all the land could the healer travel so quickly past forst, morass, and river when it had taken us more days then I might count.”

“I do not know that great warrior. I can only say that she was speaking to me only a short while ago.”

Finally she grew tired of the warriors speaking of her in the third-person. There was no point in delaying the inevitable at this point. “Yes Nukremit. Somehow I am here with you. Please do not ask how because I would not be able to offer any wordsong to describe it. It was a most powerful magic indeed. For my see’n all around became filled with a dust like faerys until I could see nothing at all and then I was here in a strange place that is equally blinding.”

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CHAPTER 175

‘Damn you Anya!’ It was all she could do to keep from yelling it out loud. Obviously the other woman had used the kefatz on the Xenlarian healer. But why? Not only should that oloshi have known better, but there was no obvious purpose other than to contaminate even more of the natives than had already suffered an awareness of their technology.

‘Curse this mist!’ If only she could find some means of locating the woman and making her way out of here and away from the natives. What would happen if it began to dissipate and one of them saw what she looked like?? It really did feel to her as if there was some malicious power holding them all hostage now. She was little more than a pawn to be moved around between ship, village, and jirgen-sama with no possible chance of staving off disaster in any one of them. The thought sent chills through her that somehow managed to supersede the chill of this infernal mist.

The increasing volume of the yelling finally broke through her inner dialogue and she allowed her regular curiosity to focus back on the situation nearby, even if only for the sake of distraction.

“It is not a matter of fraidness or not. Either you are a speaker of untrues or you are not.

“Nukremit, of course I would never speak the untrue to any of the kinsfolk, not you, not Imotren, not even to Ejunrayb. You may know without question that my loyalty is always to the Holy Mother and to the kinfolk.”

“Then you will tell this, grishneevit, of the Oracle’s trustworthiness in all matters. Of Adeima’s blessing on our warriors and on Prijnak’s support for Gjintruk the wise.”

‘Oh no. Please don’t.’ She pleaded silently with the healing woman to remain silent. It would not take any kind of prophecy to recognize how the knowledge of their political deception would throw the other village into complete chaos. She felt enormous sympathy and worry for the other woman now. The healer was clearly stuck between a rock and a hard place. Even if the mist would protect the woman from physical attack by her superiors, that couldn’t possibly last forever. Which only reminded her of her own frailty among these giants all around.

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“I can say, Nukremit, that I did hear the Oracle speak of Gjintruk’s wisdom and of Adeima’s blessing-”

“You see there! You are like Gelf the cursed who attempts to bring doubt to the kinfolk, but we are a strong people chosen directly by Azealla to succeed in all battles.”

“Oh yes. I can clearly see the Holy Mother ensuring your victory right here. Nukremit you are a fool who surrounds yourself with yes-women too full of the fraidness to speak the fulltrue! It will be a glorious and wondrous day when I can stand gazing down on your lifeless corpse.”

CHAPTER 176

There was no insult he could think of that might be able to fully express his rage at this disgusting little requibug. “If I could reach out to you Gelf-etan, it would be to bring a spear swiftly and directly into your breath-hole! It is an evil magic that you possess and none of it can, in the end bring defeat to the chosen of Azealla.”

“What? You are the greatest fool ever to walk the land. This mist could not be created by any of my people. It is the will of Adeima, and if it were possible to banish it then I would happily do so in order to bring painful defeat to your frail young’n limbs!”

Was it an untrue? He had to put great struggle toward look’n past the haze of fury for this warrior. But unless this Truinye was showing deception, these people were not in fact using an evil magic to prevent victory.

But if not them, who could possibly do such a thing. Pretvuukra herself had stated the Oracle’s prophecy of support from the Holy Mother. No, this Gelf-etan must be throwing the untrues in place of a spear.

For what purpose though? If he were in the place of these young’ns, it would seem very advantageous to claim possession of such magic for use as a tool of intimidation. So why would she so blatantly exclaim a shortcoming like that? The land of Higsthon was clearly a place of unimaginable confusion, and the great cloud of vapor surrounding him was merely a physical manifestation of that. Somehow the fulltrue had to be extracted from all this.

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“Pretvuukra! You will hear me and respond.”

There was some delay, but he knew the woman could not refuse. Not if she wished to retain the honor of her trade. “Yes, of course I will.”

“Would you swear on the spear of Prijnak that the Oracle spoke not a word of hiding our victory from us?”

With his query stated, there was a quick and satisfying response. “Of course Nukremit. I would wholly swear on the spear of Prijnak that the Oracle declared our cause to be just and victory certain.”

“You see there warrior! Not that you deserve the title. Your people are the cursed of Prijnak which is why we shall deliver you all to the aftertime.”

“It is not we who quake with the fraidness. Oloshi. We are the clever builders of traps which allow us to defeat anyone who poses a threat. You however remain as a requibug shuddering from lack of gudstrength. It is clear to anyone, even through this mist that you are a fool and those you listen to are saturated with the fraidness. It must be your healer who spouts the untrues!”

“Truinye!” The word shot out with the force of forty orrays, but they all fell ineffectually through the mist.

“I wish you to swear on the throne of Azealla that you and the Oracle both are with the complete certainty of the Holy Mother’s support for our campaign. We can assure these Gelf’etans once and for all, who Adeima considers to be the chosen people.” This, he was certain would destroy all doubt as to which people Adeima wished to see victorious. His only sadness was for the mist which would hide the defeat when it became visible on this Truinye person’s despicable face.

“I humbly ask your forgiveness brave Nukremit, however I cannot.”

He almost spun around in his surprise. But of course there would be of no use since it was impossible to understand where the healer was standing.

Nevertheless such hubris on the part of the healer was an arrow straight into his breath hole. “You *what*??! How dare you speak the untrue directly to my face!”

“I am so deeply sorry Nukremit, for not being able to provide the wordsong which we all wish to hear. However I cannot speak the untrue in the name of the Holy Mother.”

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If he lived for nine hundred annums, he would never be as awestruck as he was at that particular moment. What impossible magic could be created that shrouded the entire battlefield in mist, brought their healer to the same place in less time than any of the strongest warriors, and convinced Pretvuukra to speak such impossible things?

Perhaps their healer had become a traitor. What if it was Pretvuukra who brought the knowledge of their attack?

No, that was impossible. He had seen the woman cheering them all from her shelterspace. Back in the beforetime she had seemed wholly supportive of this campaign. Plus it would not have been possible for her to travel across the morass without being seen by the warriors, even were she swifter than the fastest wingsqurel.

What strange mystery was it then? Somehow the fulltruth must be brought to light. But what means could he employ? He didn't have the authority of Gjorngad, nor the people's devotion as the oracle did. And he could only command those people close enough to be within the hear'n. This did, thankfully, include Pretvuukra though. Perhaps this was something which he could exploit. He prayed once again to Azealla that a new tactic might bring greater victory.

CHAPTER 177

She was feeling a little better at least. The comfort of Huso's strong arms around her seemed to melt away at least a few slivers of her dejection. She still couldn't understand the situation with the Gbowee but it was clear to her, as if she'd just pulled back the curtain on her window back home, that constantly struggling to put out the plume of fires that cropped up almost daily was going to wear down her resolve like a fly in a dust devil. If she wanted to keep hold of any influence among the crew, if she wanted to keep even a shred of faith in herself, then the things that were out of her control just couldn't get priority.

None of the critical systems were threatened anymore, and there was no threat to any of the people she shared the Boabob with. And so she relaxed the work schedules in order to give everyone some much needed recreational time. Anyone

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who wished to stay busy could focus on the communications array, the outrigger landing strut, the starboard satellite bay, or the O₂ scrubbers. The last of course was the highest priority since they couldn't leave the surface without it, the others wouldn't be terribly important until they returned to Sol.

She herself lounged around with Huso just snuggling and comforting each other which was the best thing she could focus on. Wrapped in his arms, it felt like her worries and frustrations were just not so crushing.

That was until the call drifted in from Shadai. She'd put off responding to the woman's initial chime, too tired from being the go-to person for so many dozens of slings and arrows. But now a second message came in from her and it really wasn't responsible of her to keep procrastinating so much. She rubbed her hand lightly on Huso's back before sitting at the edge of the bed and looking over the message.

Rhumfa. I'm sorry to bother you with more problems. I know we've all had more than our fill. But I've been helping Saaed with the O₂ scrubber. He's really brilliant, that man. Anyway it seemed like the whole system should have been working just fine. All the pieces seemed whole and undamaged. But it wasn't until we put the vent tubing through a microscopic analysis that the issue became clear. The whole interface from the scrubber to the duct system is riddled with holes. But strangely those holes are only 5% larger than an O₂ molecule itself. It's just impossible for me to imagine how such a material as the bio-geltium could become damaged as precisely as this.

Like a meteor striking a gas giant, her calm took a fiery nose-dive. "Chineke me. I really think that there's some force here which doesn't want us to lift off from this planet.

"What's wrong Rhumfa." The comment was muffled by Huso's face being half-buried in the narrow bed. But just the sound of his beautiful baritone ratcheted down her fiery emotions.

She summed up the message for him along with her own suspicions and ponderings. It helped enormously to at least have the benefit of another intelligent person to bounce ideas off of. At least it kept her from striking out from her quarters in a huff.

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“Oibo, please send a structural analysis of the bio-geltium for the ship’s O₂ scrubbers to this terminal.”

His comment was a perfect example. It was something she hadn’t considered exploring until the words left his mouth. But when she made her way to the terminal, it showed that all twelve of the scrubbers were structurally intact, yet none of them were delivering the desperately needed oxygen to the ship.

“Huso, in the full extent of my studies on extrasolar missions, I’ve never read of a single one as destined for failure as ours.”

She looked back at the lovely man, but without really seeing him now. “I think it’s likely that none of us are going to make it back to Earth alive.”

CHAPTER 178

“Pretvuukra! You will speak the fulltrue. The entire full wordsong. Nothing will be left out, and no half-truths or deception. Now tell me why in all the land why you would be unable to exclaim the support of the Holy Mother for our brave warriors.”

What could she say? The leader of the warriors had backed her into a corner as surely as if he held her at the point of a spear. Nobody could save her here in this place. Not the foreign healer, not the oracle, and it seemed, not the Holy Mother Herself. Yet still she paused, wishing or hoping for some means of escape. But even if she were somehow able to make fast-steppins, where could she escape *to*? Would the people of Ubuntu be able to hide her? Or would she simply flee blindly through the mist and directly into the arms of the man she wished to escape? It seemed that there was no choice for her now. She began the wordsong, slowly and reluctantly, of reaching the temple and discovering a stranger within. It wasn’t long however before Nukremit interrupted her demanding that she speak loudly enough to hear.

She continued speaking of the strange things shared by the unknown healer and as she spoke it became clear that her kaba was bound for Pritlaxtl no matter what she did. Obeying Nukremit most certainly would. But not obeying would also likely cause the man’s anger to flare up strongly enough that he would destroy her.

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Thus she decided that if this was to be the end of her existence, then she would spend her last moments in fealty and honor to the Holy Mother, bravely sharing the fulltrue as her title precluded. She spoke more forcefully now of how the strange healer had claimed a different prophecy, one which always came true eventually and how her prophecy had spoken of the attack, of the two meeting within the temple, of the trees falling flat, and of the oracle who quaked with fear of being discovered as fraudulent. She concluded with her own observation that the oracle refused to swear in the name of Adeima that she spoke only the fulltrue. Then how she had later found herself magically brought to the place of battle. It was possible that this would be the final wordsong that she uttered. And strangely she felt within her a lightening in her body. As if the ground-force had become suddenly less strong from being relieved of her burden.

CHAPTER 179

He stood behind Manuel frowning at the display. He felt the embodiment of Rhumfa with his arms folded in front of his chest and a frown dominating his features. The code on the screen was obviously gibberish to him, but then so was the situation related to it.

“All I can say is that there’s no human being that I know who could overwrite a jirgen-sama’s systems this completely and leave not the slightest opening in the code for some external control. I’m sorry that I can’t be of more help in this. But a hack like this, it’s completely beyond me.”

Beyond the ability of Manuel? The man who’d personally written half the code for Oibo’s base operating system? Such a thing was...

“That’s impossible. Couldn’t there be some kind of back door that’s hidden in that screen somewhere? There has to be something we’re overlooking, some kind of worm within the code. I mean it looks like it would’ve taken days just to write all that, nevermind figuring out *how* to do it in the first place.”

The voice sounded both confused and awed at the same time. “I don’t know what to say. Nobody but myself could even begin to put together something like this,

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and as you know I've been far too busy helping build the circuitry on the grav-plating.”

“Manuel, there isn't any other capable person in this entire solar system. It's not like the natives would understand advanced artificial intelligence software.”

“Well I'd certainly agree with you there-”

“Who then? This 'Adeima' deity they worship?” The moment he said it, there was a cold feeling in his gut. Just as Rhumfa had mentioned to him the night before, something was screaming within for them to get this ship off the planet as fast as humanly possible. If only, he thought regretfully, that instinct had struck Rhumfa back when she'd received the distress signal in the first place. At least then it would have been possible to make a line straight back to Earth. But as it was... Now they were stuck here, as crippled as the native aliens until the O₂ scrubbers could somehow be repaired. And that would require a patch at least as complex as this code appeared to be.

CHAPTER 180

“How could you betray your own people so blatantly!” His voice wasn't merely enraged, it grew higher in pitch until it came to resemble one of the great elders who had lived so long that he was no longer able to speak coherently. But at this point he cared nothing for such things. “You bring the disgrace not only to yourself but all of us here with your ridiculous wordsong! Would you even dare to swear on the spear of Prijnak that you speak the fulltrue? Of course you wouldn't.”

It was impossible now to imagine how he had once viewed the healer with courtesy and honor. How he had visited Pretvuukra in times of challenge for the gaining of wisdom in resolving his own difficulties. For now he wished nothing more than to destroy her completely as he had earlier threatened the evil Truinye. How could such a devoted servant of the kinfolk suddenly relinquish all smart-think'n like this? ‘It did not escape my see'n that the oracle did not wish to swear that her prophecies were divinely inspired.’

Like the healer, it did not escape his own recognition that Pretvuukra's wordsong claimed the oracle's refusal to swear in the name of Adeima. Was it possible?

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Could their healer be turned so far astray that she would claim the untrue regarding their own oracle? Of course it couldn't possibly be the fulltrue. The oracle was their most hallowed kinfolk, one chosen with painstaking thoroughness by.... Gjintruk!

NO! The man was wise and kind towards all the people. He would never- But the very campaign in which he'd led the warriors spoke otherwise. If these people of the mountain did not create the mist, and they did not use their own magic to learn of the attack, then was it possible they were not responsible for Itroveepu's disappearance either? He had to learn the fulltrue!

"Pretvuukra! Would you truly swear, on the spear of Prijnak, that the whole of your wordsong is the fulltrue completely?"

"Nukremit, I cannot-"

Aha! Now he had her.

"-claim to understand all of the strange happenings or even state that I believe it fully. However of what I saw and heard, the wordsong is exactly the fulltrue. I swear it."

Impossible. Nobody would swear thusly and still bring the untrue. "You would swear then, on the throne of Adeima, even on the power of Higsthon that the oracle would not promise the fulltrue herself?"

"Yes Nukremit. That is precisely true."

"And you, Truinye. Assuming that you hold even the slightest respect for the Holy Mother (which he doubted), would you swear that your people did in fact kill Itroveepu and the warriors who wandered out this way in the far back beforetime?"

"Of course we didn't, grishneevit! Our people do not blatantly attack people at random with no reason for the unhappy. Not like *some* warriors I could mention!

"Truinye! What in all the land are you doing?!"

He did not recognize the voice, but clearly the other warrior did, for she spoke a horrid name yet with a sound of great delight.

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CHAPTER 181

The outrage was radiating off of Truinye strong enough that the warrior was able to be located simply from emotions alone. It seems that she had located her people not a moment too soon, for the woman was strong-focused on destroying any faint chance there might be to keep from inviting Pritlaxtl purposefully into their village.

“We were with the fraidness that your kindness and wisdom would never grace our kinsfolk again. Praise be to the Holy Mother that we were wrong.”

“Gelfetia?! What a despicable name. No wonder your people hide away out here like the fragile raquibug.”

“We are not cowards! I will be showin the gladface to give you the point of my sp-”

“Truinye! I beg of you to let me speak with the man before we descend into the same fury which brought these people to send warriors in the first place. It is my fervent belief that the great mist surrounding us is in fact a gift from the Holy Mother to prevent us from sending people to the aftertime.”

“What? It is not a trick of the evil hoomaas?”

“No Truinye. Even their magic is not powerful enough for such a thing.” She was careful in speaking of the magical ones to only use the ancestral language. For it would be so very destructive if these cruel warriors learned of the magic boat beyond the white place.

“Gelfetia. I... I’m afraid that you may be right.” There it was again. The many doorway entrances revealed by her sense-readn. But despite her attempt to be respectful, there was the image of the hoomaas Eekahsha delivering their magic power device to the holy temple. It was a miracle! The hoomaas had risked everything in order to return the gift of prophecy to the land.

“Eekahsha! Thank you. Thank you so much, from the depths of my kaba. From all of us, through the many generations. We are eternally grateful for the risk and the sacrifice that you have undertaken.”

“You see. Even your wordsong is hidden as if you are too saturated with the fraidness to even speak directly.”

“Nukremit. None of the people here are filled with the fraidness. It is necessary merely to protect the people from great danger, just as Gelf the wise did in the far-”

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“Gelf the wise?! You mean Gelf the traitor. Gelf the cursed. Gelf the indignant.” Despite her general serenity, the man’s words were pushing her dangerously towards a level of fury which, only moments before she had berated Truinye for. It was finally dawning on her why the warrior would hold such strong unhappiness for these evil ones who brought the attack.

“You meager hutzfly! How dare you insult the greatest healer in the whole land! Grishneevit I will pound you into the dust on which you stand!”

As if she had summoned the warrior by mere thought, Truinye’s words spoke out of her own barely restrained anger. It bore no repeating now that she had to somehow bring some restraint here, and she said as much to the warrior hoping fervently that just this once the woman’s unhappiness could be quelled.

CHAPTER 182

“Gelfetia, may I attempt to share wordsong?”

Without waiting for a response, she haltingly set off on a speech so dangerous that the most likely outcomes would be extradition by the UPC. Losing her career at this point was obviously of trivial concern if the blossoming hint of understanding hidden within her gut proved true. “Nukremit. I recognize that your people do not hold the same belief of what happened in the far back beforetime as Truinye’s people. It is easy for me to understand the means by which history is shared between mother and daughter, between father and son over the many generations. Yet most kinfolk do not grasp the full extent of the wordsongs spanning over many many annums because the smarati is not a perfect scribe.”

She carefully repeated for the man the ‘wordsong’ discovered within the Nneka, of how the native Gelf had discovered the group of people whose memories had been erased and who’d been struck with a plague caught from a group of animal-eaters and how she had obtained help from a powerful tribe in order to bring health not only to her own group but to the people of Xenlaria as well. However the chief at the time had become convinced that Gelf had been the one to bring the sickness to begin with. She spoke carefully of how the stories had only been shared through song and speech over many generations.

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“Through a collaboration between Truinye’s people and my own, we were able to discover the fulltrue from the far back beforetime. It offers great wisdom of the devotion which this woman ‘Gelf’ had for Adeima as well as all of her ‘kinsfolk’ within Xenlaria.”

“And you expect me to just believe such ridiculous wordsong? Are you followers of Adeima that you could be asked to swear on Her glorious throne? Of course not. You merely spout more untrues.”

Of course she couldn’t expect that the man would come to utterly change his point of view. But his comment brought to mind another troubling issue. Could this whole situation turn her into a follower of their strange deity? Was it possible that some force connected to this planet had compelled Rhumfa to bring them here? Was that same force responsible for crippling their ship so that they could not leave until the energy crystal was delivered to the temple? There was no way to know for certain, but there were far too many coincidences to allow her to assume their whole adventure could have been a random spin of the dice. Even the strange mist here which allowed her to connect with the natives without the risk of them seeing her felt, just a little too convenient. As she considered her situation, and what the strange energy on this planet might be capable of, the chill shiver returned along the middle of her back. Such a power was more terrifying than any force of nature that their crew might encounter anywhere in the galaxy.

CHAPTER 183

“Well?!” Are you too saturated with fraidness to respond?” The whole ridiculous wordsong was no more believable than the stories he told to the young’ns before bed.

“Nukremit. You have no need to demand such a thing. Gelfetia has the powerful sense-readin and she is able to know when a person is speaking the untrue.”

This at first seemed nearly as difficult to believe as the wordsong of this ‘Eekahsha.’ Yet when he examined his smarati, it seemed that there were stories from the beforetime of more powerful healers with strong smart-knowin who were skilled in discerning who was a speaker of the fulltrue and who was not. It was

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rarely of value except to the chief who sometimes requested their assistance. But how could it be that this foreigner could be a more powerful healer than their own Pretvuukra? Of course he made certain to test this foreigner most diligently with many questions and attempts at the untrue. Yet he could not help but admit that the woman's ability was indeed quite profound.

With much hesitation and against his better judgement, he requested of this 'Gelfetia' to share which parts of Eekahsha's wordsong were the fulltrue and which were not. However the entirety was even more strange than he might have imagined. Not only was this 'Gelf' figure indeed considered by the stranger to be an honorable person, but she and all the people of this tribe were all descended from his own ancestors in Xenlaria. Their people and his were all of one kinsfolk. More strange than that even, the man Itroveepu had never been killed in battle. He and his group had attacked the village and had been exposed to something, it was difficult to grasp the meaning of it, something like a sickness of the eyes. They could not allow Itroveepu to return to Xenlaria and spread this sickness to the other kinsfolk. For his own protection, and for the gudstrength of the people of Xenlaria, he had been forced to live out the rest of his days up here along Higsthon.

Nekrumit grabbed his head and shook it back and forth, as if he could somehow shake this insanity from out of his head. How possible might it be, that everyone he knew, even Gjintruk and the Oracle were so wrong? And what would the ramifications be for the kinsfolk if such a belief were to spread? Assuming it was true, would any be willing to believe such an absurdity?

He did not know this, but he did know that there would be enormous danger for the kinsfolk. Perhaps Gjintruk would even be forced to leave? Where would that put *him*? What might happen to the plutarchs?

Much of these questions would depend on the chief's opinion of Imotren. It was certain that Imotren would remain a staunch enemy of any reconciliation. The man appeared wholly consumed by the lust for the spilling of life-fluid without regard to the cost born by the other kinsfolk. If Gjintruk chose to side with him, then it was doubtful the warriors could be steered from the path already embarked upon. But if the plutarch seemed malleable, then he decided the chance for

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dropping spears would be more valuable to both sides than the spilling of life-fluid. The cost however, of bringing the chief or the other kinfolk to acknowledge such might be high indeed. Perhaps tragically so.

CHAPTER 184

A breeze touched her skin and she noticed that the wind was picking up. “Oh shit. The minute this mist gets blown away, it’s all gonna come crashing down. There’s no way in hell that I’ll be able to keep them from seeing what I look like.” The fear and terror wrestled between themselves for dominance within her thoughts. She wanted to turn on the way and scream at Anya for transport. But what then? It would easily be a thousand times worse for one of the natives to see her disappear into thin air right next to them. There was seemingly no choice that wouldn’t result in catastrophe, and she felt helpless even to try. Her thoughts were interrupted by the awareness that the mist somehow looked different now. At first it was so subtle that she didn’t recognize it. But soon it was clear that instead of dissipating, it seemed instead to become heavier, whatever it was began to take on some tangible quality. It was like a thing alive, wrapping hundreds of thin fingers over every square inch of her body. The fear for what the natives might see vanished now only to be replaced by a different feeling of unease as she felt her skin begin to itch.

Soon, and with enormous relief, she found herself back on the jirgen-sama along with Anya who looked as bewildered as she must have appeared. With the sight of the other woman, her relief was quickly eroded by the fury for the totally unnecessary risk that Anya had taken. The moment this happened, she felt adrenaline flood through her she very nearly pushed herself against the force of gravity just to have the satisfaction of smacking the other woman senseless.

“Really, how could you?!” She stared at her companion with flaming eyes until she realized that the same question had been lobbed back. It was only this, and the look on the other woman’s face which stayed her hand.

“How could I? How could you!”

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“What?” The whole situation was flying along at light-speed and she was stuck in orbit trying to grasp the meaning of it all. It took several minutes of questioning before they could stop interrogating each other simultaneously. “You mean it wasn’t you who transported me out there to the surface?”

“Me? Of course not. I thought you had send *me* out there.”

But there was barely more than an instant to explore what had happened. She quickly clicked her mouth shut when the craft began slowly to rise without either of them having touched the control strip. Anya’s fury dissolved into a pinched, half-starved look that mirrored her own trembling fear. The craft was rising higher into the air, acting with the same casual maneuvering that had taken them both to the battlefield in the first place.

“Is this the end for us Ikasha? I mean... has, whatever this ‘thing’ is finally used us for whatever purpose it had and now plans to dispense with such trivial visitors?”

The woman shook her head, a little too vehemently. “No. Of course not. There would be no reason to harm us.” But the words were empty of emotion and she noticed Anya’s hands wrapped around each other like a snake eating it’s own tail.

CHAPTER 185

If he had felt isolated during the long trek to reach the people of the mountain, now he felt even more completely alone, if such a thing were even possible. Not only could he not find it within himself to speak with the kinfolk, but now he could not even see them. He gave the straight-eye most diligently all around to no avail. The phenomenon was so impenetrable that he couldn’t make out his outstretched fingers. He listened though, with fascination as the battle which had only just begun was quickly fading as the warriors found that they could not locate the mountain dwellers no matter which way they searched.

This mystery was quickly superseded though by even more puzzling conversations which seemed to be coming from only a few steps away.

First he heard that Pretvuukra was nearby even though he and the warriors had passed her many days journey in the beforetime. Then he heard wordsongs from a

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healer and another warrior from this mysterious place. The things these people said were deeply confusing, but as he spent time considering the phenomenal wordsong there did seem to be logic nestled within it.

The question now for him was, could he find the fortitude to speak out? Would he become a pariah among the kinfolk for saying the unspeakable? 'But I am already an outcast. What more could they actually do to me?' The thought finally solidified as he recognized the disheartening situation which, in reality had been his existence for many annums.

"Pretvuukra. I believe that your wordsong is the fulltrue. I was feeling the strong worry that this campaign against the mountain dwellers was not in fact supported by the Holy Mother. Could it really be, that the advice which you gave me was-" "Freetlak oh by the glorious crown of Azealla I have failed you so deeply." There was enormous sorrow in the woman's voice and it took him a moment to consider why. "You came to me with the smart-know'n that this attack was wrong and I merely took the oracle at her word. Not only did I myself follow such untrues blindly, but I advised you to hold trust in Gjintruk as well. I am wholly unworthy of any title within Xenlaria. This deception that I have been part of shall forever be a stain upon my reputation, to be spoken of with the deepest unhappy for countless annums."

"But healer, you did not speak an untrue did you? If you in fact speak the fulltrue, you were merely offering wisdom that the oracle had shared with you."

But it wasn't wisdom at all Freetlak. It was..."

"Propaganda."

The voice was one that sounded different from any voice that he had heard before. Something about the way the words came out struck him as alien. Beyond that though was the word itself. It was absolutely not part of any vocabulary he had been exposed to. He repeated the word slowly, feeling the strangeness of it as he would explore some unfamiliar fodiens. "Pro-pah-gahndaa"

The voice continued, but more gently now. "I'm sorry. It's a word that we used in the beforetime for a 'chief' who uses made up stories to ensure that the people follow him."

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The unfamiliar healer's voice now spoke up. "Pretvuukra, the only treachery to the Holy Mother would be an untrue in Her name with some purpose of causing harm. You could not have known that she was a false prophet."

"But I did Gelfetia." The woman paused for a timespan before continuing. "Or, at least there was a feeling. I did feel, deep within my kaba, that something was wrong. It was just not enough to overcome my faith in the oracle. She has been our guide since the beginning of time. Oh Gelfetia, how could this ever be made right?"

He was briefly puzzled at why any woman could be named after the cursed one. This distracted him for a timespan. But soon enough he thought again of Pretvuukra's anguish. He also worried over some amount of bitterness within himself from having visited her in search of smart'knowin over his unease only to have it dismissed just as easily as he was dismissed by all the neighbors. This last he expressed with the unhappy of a man who had not experienced validation in many annums. The words felt bitter in his mouth, like the dkulchut stalk sometimes added to jadzabean. But almost in spite of himself, they tumbled out of him and into the surrounding mist.

If he had possessed the sense-readin, he would have felt the pain of her expression and the overwhelming guilt. But as it was, the healer's words were her only clue. "Oh Freetlak, you were so right. I failed you in every way, you and all of the kinfolk. We should never have supported this horribly ruinous campaign." But the blindness was soon mitigated a small amount by the unfamiliar voice of a different person. "Freetlak, you may not be aware of this, but your healer Pretvuukra has been racked with the huge weight of the guilt from this mistake from the moment it was made clear to her. She has such a deep caring for you and the other kinfolk, and this realization is tearing an enormous rift into her kaba. There is a saying among my people from the far back beforetime. 'You will achieve more in this world through acts of mercy than you will through acts of retribution.'⁴⁵ It has happened many times among the kinfolk that one or another experienced the unhappy. However if we let small disagreements take control of

45 Attributed to Nelson Mandela

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our kaba, then the gladface soon begins to show more rarely as it generally becomes replaced day by day with bitterness.”

He did not know who the voice belonged to, but it was clear that the person was gifted with enormous wisdom. He thought to all the times that he felt his own hurt from being isolated from the kinfolk and how much joy might have been gained if the kinfolk would only show kindface. As such, it was also within his power now to release Pretvuukra from her own burden of guilt. She was kinfolk after all, and as such it was highly destructive to choose a path away from reconciliation.

“The stranger is right Pretvuukra. If we are to choose to live in honor of Adeima, then we must adopt Her values of kindness and mercy.” He then spoke to the stranger in thanks for the great smart-know’n that was shared.

“You are welcome Freetlak. I am called Gelfetia and I-”

But he heard nothing more that she said, for he was too distracted by the woman’s name. That so much wisdom might come from a person with such a horrible title. That was nearly as strange as the mist which shrouded everything in shadow. Why, in all the land would any respectable Xenlarian name a young’n after the most cursed kinfolk to ever live?

However soon enough there were far more worrisome issues pressing his think’n.

CHAPTER 186

“There it is! The Gbowee is headed for the jirgen-sama bay.”

“Saaed, Fatima, and Kinfe please join me in the jirgen-sama bay.”

“Oneyda I don’t see that you need four people just to take care of Anya and Ikasha.”

“Huso, UPC regulations require two security members for the apprehension of a crew member accused of insubordination which those two have absolutely committed. If you would like to file a formal complaint then you are welcome to do so. However I will observe the required regulations to the extent that our situation allows.”

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The man simply shrugged his shoulders which she took at face value and marched off to the jirgen-sama bay with enormous satisfaction. However it was several minutes before she saw anyone and the nagging thought crept into her mind that perhaps she'd overestimated the loyalty of the crew. What happened if Huso was not in fact so respectful of the UPC? I mean he was in bed with Rhumfa who clearly didn't suffer a breach of conscience over an in discrepancy or two.

The bay actually began creeping open centimeter by centimeter before they finally drifted in one by one. The long wait almost brought her to some terse comments. But in thinking about her earlier worries, she decided that it wouldn't be wise to raise animosity given their precarious situation. Hell, they still hadn't even found a way to leave the planet's atmosphere with the O₂ scrubber still out of commission. Whether she liked it or not, they were all stuck here. Still. Which continued to buzz against her mind like the mosquitoes back home. The thought once again surfaced within her that UPC regulations might in fact be pointless if they weren't able to get that last element repaired.

Instead she just thanked them for joining her. Meanwhile they all watched the craft enter the bay and set itself down mechanically. There was no hesitation and no flare in this landing. Everything was as routine as if they had been scouting for a colony site. But the doors opened on two women who were drenched either from sweat or something else and seemingly unaware of what was going on around them.

"Anya, Ikasha, you are both charged with insubordination under UPC code 59247-31a. You will accompany us without resistance to your quarters where you will be contained until it's time for us all to enter stasis. When we return to Earth, you will be brought before a review committee to provide explanation for your egregious acts."

Oneyda noticed with some surprise that two not only didn't resist, they barely nodded their heads in acknowledgment before allowing themselves to be led out of the corridor. Oneyda walked along with the whole group of them in dead silence which felt as oppressive as the gravity out on the surface. They passed through the maze of corridors without the slightest incident and finally got each of the two women sealed within.

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When the second door finally closed, Kinfe let out the first comment. “Damn, I was almost hoping one of them would put up a fight.”

Now that the deed was done, she could allow herself to throw a scowl at the woman. “Kinfe, official code says that there is to be no use of force unless a suspected crewmember attempts escape or violence towards others.”

The woman raised her eyes to the ceiling, but she ignored that. “I know, I know. None of us are looking to break the precious regulations Oneyda. It’s just, you know we’ve been stuck here even longer than we should have thanks to those oloshi.”

“Oh come on Kinfe. It’s not like we could’ve just lifted off and gone home by now. There’s not only the O₂ scrubber, but the power lines to the thrusters still have to be checked, and the main drive has to be calibrated before we can do more than that short hop outa the hole.”

“Saaed is right Kinfe. We have far more important things to worry about than blood-lust right now. I suggest that you take your aggression out in a workout session instead.”

The woman mumbled something under her breath, but nobody paid her any further attention.

CHAPTER 187

Something was changing around him. At first it was too subtle to put a finger on, but little by little he noticed that voices were becoming just slightly more clear. The sounds of the people around him were starting to have direction and when he put a hand out straight in front, he could now see the fingertips clearly.

It was breaking up! The cursed mist was finally loosening its hold on them. At last, he could get on with the defeat of these...

These what though? If their healer and the stranger Eekahsha spoke the fulltrue, these people were the long lost kinfolk of his own Xenlaria. They were a group who had done no harm to anyone except to prevent that strange sickness of the eyes.

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Speaking of eyes, it did seem that he could finally make out the shadowy forms of other people around him. He moved swiftly towards one of them and found it to be Bletneydfim.

The man turned toward him quickly and raised his spear respectfully. “Nukremit pleas’n to see you with gudstrength.”

“And you Bletneydfim. I see that you are uninjured.”

The man gave an amused laugh. “It would be quite impossible for those puny Gelfetans to bring harm when they cannot see a thing.”

“The same is true for us as well I see.”

Soon enough, the warrior next to him solidified enough to even be able to observe his face and read the emotions playing across it. Bletneydfim was a trusted kinfolk who had never wavered in their long trek to reach this distant village. He believed that the man would continue to be without fraidness and he respected the man’s devotion to the values of Xenlaria.

Momentarily a shadow began to solidify out of receding mist and he gazed at the face of a stranger now for the first time. Both of them gripped their spears more tightly until he noticed that the other one had no weapon at all, which was most strange in the middle of a battlefield. But perhaps this was the stranger who claimed to have been brought here against her will.

“Cursed magicians of Higsthon, prepare to greet Pritlaxtl!”

Bletneydfim raised his spear and made is if to lunge forward. This brought about the strangest experience. It was as if the actions of these people slowed down and he could watch both the warrior and the stranger prepare for the offensive strike, yet at a more leisurely pace.

Clearly Bletneydfim would attack the other woman. But as she was unarmed, he began to see that the attack was not an honorable one. He quickly stretched his arm out in front of the man and motioned for him to be still with his spear. Then he turned to the stranger and asked if she was the one called Eekahsha. It did not escape his see’n that the woman paled briefly as if with fraidness, before responding. It turned out though, that this was the strange healer Gelfetia.

Even hearing that name now, with all that he’d learned still made him feel like the woman was insulting herself and Bletneydfim made no effort to suppress a laugh

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at such a name. However he gave his fellow the straight-eye and the man went silent.

“So you are the healing woman for the strange people up here on the mountain.”

“Yes. And you I see are a wise leader for choosing wordsong before the spear.”

“Hold on now. Gjentrük is the chief of Xenlaria. I am merely the leader of the warriors.”

“For now mayhaps. Who is to know what may come.”

“Nukremit! What are you doing sharing wordsong with the evil ones? We should be sending them to Pritlaxtl as is our right.”

He turned impatiently to look at the young warrior. “Bletneydfim if this woman is the healer for their people, then she poses no threat. She is an experienced woman who possesses much smart-know’n. She is also able to know who speaks the fulltrue and who does not.

The warrior of course did not believe him and brought much insult before Nukremit silenced him. With waning patience, he shared wordsong of Krisvenup the healer from his own days as a young’n. The woman would always know when he had been attempting to hide an extra portion of jadzabeen when it was supposed to be left with the shared fodiens. It had been most bothersome he remembered from his days as a young’n, but the valuable lesson of speaking the fulltrue and sharing equally with the kinsfolk had stayed with him.

“There is one of them now! Victory will be with Xenlaria!”

Instantly, his eyes shot up and towards the sound. The fraidness saturated him as he watched Jenvirey make fast-steppins towards them. She seemed momentarily confused, but only for the briefest of timespans before she launched a flying stick. Nukremit gazed in horror as he deduced far too late the target of her attack. He moved with a speed he had never thought possible and shoved the healer out of range only to see, an instant later the shaft sticking from the side of his chest. This was the last image that graced his see’n before a different type of mist grew around him and everything went dark.

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CHAPTER 188

Frustration continued to saturate her, bringing a dark cloud over her emotions until she just took the calibration tool and slammed it against the side of the O₂ scrubber.

“Rhumfa! That’s delicate equipment you’re working on.” Saaed grabbed the tool from her and told her to go do something to calm down.

She left the access conduit in a huff, the anger barely dissipating all through her trip back. There wasn’t enough yoga or relaxation music on the whole damn ship to dissolve the fury she was feeling at not being able to get their last few systems running. Half a dozen times now it felt like they were just on the cusp of escape. One problem would get solved and it would seem like there was reason to hope. But then a crewmember would hit yet another impenetrable wall, and she would wish for nothing more than a scrap piece of metal to slam something against. Now she’d gotten her hopes up when they finally managed to get the ship a couple of kilometers away from those damn natives, but the O₂ scrubber couldn’t be brought online and despite some of the brightest minds in the Sol system, not a single one of them could figure it out.

Halfway back Oibo notified her of a request from Manuel. But fury was still wrapped around her like the cloud of a kefatz. She ignored him and went to the common room instead to take out some aggression. With the gravity set to 1.75 standard, the weights offered enough of a challenge to distract her from the emotions that were two tectonic plates scraping against each other. An earthquake on the edge of erupting grumbled within her unmitigated by any faint hope that the tension would dissipate.

Half an hour later her smartwatch reminded her of the man’s request and she finally grabbed a nanocloth and wiped her face and neck before returning to the corridor and climbing up to the data lab. The door opened and Manuel was in his usual position hunched over a triple display from Oibo’s base code set up in a panorama like some old-fashioned sun reflector.

“Well there you are Rhumfa. Didn’t you hear the message I sent?” The voice was innocent, but her bubbling anger was still not completely worked out of her system and she snapped at him. “I’m sorry to not immediately cater to your demands

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Manuel. I've spent the past two hours banging away at our completely useless equipment so we might somehow return to Earth before I die of old age."

"Okay okay." He held his hands up in surrender. "I'm sorry, I know you have a lot to deal with. Look, it's probably better that we waited. There seems to be a light at the end of this infinite tunnel after all, though don't ask me to explain it."

She took a deep breath and apologized for the outburst before asking him to elaborate. She was almost too far beyond the ability to hope at all, yet the temptation was like a glimpse of the surface to a drowning swimmer. It was terribly difficult to resist.

"Well I first thought we might have a catastrophic problem. It seems that when Oibo did a routine check of the Gbowee's systems, it confirmed that there was a virus onboard."

"So it was a virus? How the hel-" but the man held up a hand and she squelched the comment.

"Don't ask me how a jirgen-sama could be infected with a virus out there, because I've never even seen a virus in any modern AI system. He paused and gave a dramatic sigh. Anyway the virus had taken complete control of the craft at some point and, well whatever Ikasha and the other woman set off to do, it's likely that they got into more than they planned for because in the place where that craft set down, both of them were transported out onto the surface."

"Right in the middle-"

"Exactly. Why it happened or who was in control is an utter mystery. Anyway when Oibo interacted with the onboard computer the virus appeared to infect Oibo's systems-"

He must have watched the blood drain from her face as her jaw fell to the floor because he quickly reassured her.

"Now hold on Rhumfa, there's a happy ending to this story."

But his words were just a fingertip dab of aloe on a massive sunburn. There had been so terribly many false hopes and dead-ends for her to continue even a semblance of diplomacy.

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“Alright, alright. Get on with it then.” She frowned as she saw the man flinch and she gripped her white-knuckled hands together hoping to keep them from flailing around like stray meteors.

“Okay so anyway I’ve been going through the code in an attempt to isolate the virus and was briefly worried that I might have to reboot the ship’s systems from a backup, which if you didn’t know is a process that takes seven or eight hours. But strangely, there didn’t seem to be anything destructive in the virus for the Boabob. On the contrary, it included data on our drive system with efficiency upgrades and detailed manufacturing instructions for adjusting the nano-lattice of the O₂ scrubber, advanced nutrient replication, and microfiber-neuralnet recalibration for stasis management.”

“Manuel, I’m a pilot not a programmer. Can you please explain it in plain Yorigbausa?”

“Rhumfa, this wasn’t a virus exactly. It wasn’t harmful. It actually gave us instructions for making repairs and upgrades to several ship’s systems. With this knowledge we’ll be able to cut our return trip to Sol by 15%.”

“But how-”

“I told you Rhumfa, I don’t-”

“Oh yes right. It must have been the natives’ magic god out there which took over the jirgen-sama and gave us instructions for repairing all our system-”

But despite the sarcasm, a nagging in the back of her mind silenced the comment and she put all her concentration into stifling a terrible concept.

What if the natives’ crazy tales were true? Was it even possible? Some weird deity several dozen light years from Earth, subtly manipulating the fate of visiting starships for some unknown purpose? As soon as the thought manifested itself, she felt a knot within her stomach turn to liquid nitrogen and the air was vacuumed from her lungs.

CHAPTER 189

“Nukremit, what in all the land are you doing?!” Her shout was almost a shriek, suffused with intense fraidness, anger, and frustration all at once.

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She turned from the fallen warrior to the other female who was making fast-steppins toward them. Now that the initial threat had passed, she had the fraidness for what that warrior woman might do with her face so full of the unhappy. Would she throw another of those deadly sticks? Was the time for greeting Pritlaxtl now upon her?

Another warrior must have heard the shout for he seemed to appear almost at the same instant as the female. “Nukremit? What happened? Are you alright?”

The man seemed to hold stronger emotions for the injured man than the other attackers for he quickly turned his attention to her.

“Did you do this? I swear on the spear of Prijnak that you will not see the end of this day if it was you.”

“Hold it Lrexduk.” A man who’d been standing next to Nukremit held out an arm to stay the two warriors’ intentions. He then gave her the straight-eye with fraidness dominating his kaba. “Healer, if you are indeed a gifted healing woman as Nukremit claimed, would you have the smart-knowin to save him?”

The attention of the man shifted her own gaze. She looked down more critically at the one called Nukremit who was now as if in a slumber, but with the slender stick poking directly out of his chest. In the beforetime a healing such as this would have been impossible. There was only so much that she could provide from the use of mushrooms and plants for the bringing of gudstrength. But now, things were very much different. During her time in the great boat of the hoomaas she had been blessed to speak with the one who was not alive and gained much smart-know’n of how the bodies of both hoomaas and denisovians worked. There was much information about things called ‘organs’ and the movement of life-fluid.

There was also a kind of memory from conversations between Gelf the wise and the healer Seffee in the beforetime. The great healer from back then had known many plants that her own kinfolk did not recognize.

With this wondrous gift she felt confident that the man could be saved and she told the two warriors so. She instructed them to take her own cloak and wrap it around two long sticks to create something the hoomaas called a ‘stretcher.’ The three of them then brought him up the slope to her own shelterspace. It was a

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great challenge for them to give trust to a person they considered to be ‘enemy.’ Yet their emotions of concern for the man, who they held in high esteem, overwhelmed their unease. It was clear that a great deal more than one man’s life was at stake here and she put all the more effort into prayers for healing. She told the female warrior to bring Pretvuukra and told the man to build a fire and put water into a vessel and set it in the fire until it was saturated with the hot bubbles. While the two of them went out to fulfill the request, she examined her smarati for the many things she had learned from the voice that spoke but was not alive. It had shown her pictures of how the ‘organs’ were laid out in her own people. It had also described for her the way that tiny creatures too small to be seen were able to bring the unhealth if a wound was not cleaned properly. At the time it had seemed both difficult to believe and difficult to understand. But with time and careful thought, there came a greater level of comprehension and she was able to develop a plan for bringing back the man’s gudstrength.

Looking down at him she felt along the width of what she dubbed the ‘breastbone.’ It was much broader than in a hoomaas and formed more of a shell than the spindly ‘ribs’ of her more fragile kinsfolk. If this man had been one of the hoomaas he would certainly die from the injury, for their people had a long breath organ which extended down to the spot where the ouray had struck. But her own people had a single breath organ which spanned the whole chest and sat higher, just between and below the arms. Thus the ouray had glanced off the breastbone and lodged itself in soft tissue along his chest muscles. It was going to hurt very much, but it was unlikely that his critical ‘organs’ were punctured.

A mild groan escaped from the man, informing her that his sleep of sickness was not complete. This was both good and bad. It meant that his injury was not irreparable, but it also meant that steps must be taken to protect him during the healing.

Pretvuukra entered with the female warrior trailing closely behind. She ignored the latter for now and instructed the Xenlarian healer on which plants would be needed. The man would need to be sent into an altered state in order to prevent his body from suffering catastrophic shock when the stick was removed. Then they would need to mix the chopped root of the mowdretl into very clean water.

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Thankfully Pretvuukra noted the urgency of this healing and did not seek explanation for the process as she provided assistance. But the moment she disappeared Gelfetia sensed the other warrior step close toward her and the unhappy was like a cloak wrapped tightly around her. The sense-read'n was not at all needed though, for the voice left not the slightest doubt as to the woman's feelings. "Our chief and Imotren have been sent to Pritlaxtl. If Nukremit does not survive this, then I promise healer, neither will you."

CHAPTER 190

Of course there had to be a solution. It was so obvious. But that did little to mitigate her tumultuous feelings. Obviously she was thrilled to know that the false hopes that Rhumfa had been so upset about were finally past. But how could this information be? Where could such fascinating knowledge like this have come from?

She just didn't know what to make of it. The instructions which Manuel forwarded to the crew were completely beyond what any human being was capable of developing. At least any human that she had heard of. It would take an absolute genius to engineer such beautiful complexity as Oibo now described. Even after the fifth or sixth time looking over the chemical formula for these alloys, the wondrous ingenuity still brought her to stare at the diagrams in awe.

Manuel had repeatedly assured her that he didn't have the slightest clue how the formulas had been developed and Rhumfa was taking some much needed time in the rec-room. That left Huso or Saaed, but neither of them were answering at the moment. When she looked at the chronometer it finally became clear why. She'd let herself work until 1am again. But the excitement of what all this would mean to the engineers back at the Mars shipyards would make sleep impossible, so she shrugged off the idea of help and spent another few hours working with Oibo and feeding instructions into the 3D printer until she was rewarded at long last with one functional O₂ scrubber. It was the final piece in a puzzle that would at last give them the chance to break their ties with this mysterious planet and return home.

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As much as she had relished in the many challenges and discoveries to be made here, she also longed for home and the wide open cerulean sky that stretched out it's thin fingers toward the Atlantic's far horizon.

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The mist had finally begun to thin enough for her to see shadowy outlines, and the first person she saw had an unfamiliar face, but strangely with no weapon in her hands. The first brought her to prepare for attack. But the second gave her the slightest pause.

But her hesitation was like the mist blown away in the wind when she watched in horror as one of the deadly flying sticks raced toward their blessed Gelfetia. She screamed the healer's name in horror, but the warning was as useless as a spearpoint tossed in the dirt. It looked as if their precious leader was in danger of being swept off to Pritlaxtl. Yet the woman amazingly was saved by a man unknown to her. She watched open-mouthed as someone who was clearly not of her kinfolk leapt in front of the weapon, suffering the fatal attack in her place. For an eternal timespan she found herself unable to say a word, or even move. But soon enough a shout from the evil warrior who had launched the attack brought back the fire to her eyes. As she once again lost the freeze on her limbs, she began making fast-steppins toward the despicable creature with spear raised and a shout thrown from her lips.

"Truinye you will halt your attack immediately! I order you to make no threat against these people!"

She all but fell to the underfoot as her feet were thrown into confusion. Was her hear'n damaged? Were these actually the words of Gelfetia the wise healer?

"You. What?!"

As if she were standing high along Higsthon and hearing an 'ekoh,' her comment was repeated many times over by several people nearby.

"Truinye, I have never brought an order such as this before. But these are exceptional times, and this goes for every one of the kinfolk. You will not bring attack against the strangers unless they attempt harm first."

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Had Gelfetia suffered a kind of unhealth in her think'n? What did she believe these despicable ones had traveled all this way to do? They weren't here to play chutchuk after all. She couldn't, for the life of her figure out what was happening with the woman. But soon enough she came to notice something else. The warrior who she'd been about to attack stood with spear at the ready, giving her the straight-eye, but not making any other movement. As she gazed around, it was now clear that others of the attacking tribe were acting in a similar way. They looked as if they expected to be attacked, but were not ready to manifest an offensive themselves.

What could have happened to bring about such an enormous shift? Surely they wouldn't reverse their tactic because of Gelfetia. They knew nothing of the woman's wisdom (though this part she was beginning to question) and dedication to the kinsfolk. She didn't know what it was, and this brought a very strong unease within her kaba.

She searched within her smarati and considered the wordsong spoken within the mist. She remembered that Gelfetia had spoken of taking great effort to avoid conflict with a tribe that held a deadly advantage in warriors. There had also been a degree of confusion by the one she had hurled curses at. The man had started out being saturated with the unhappy. But with much exposure of the fulltrue, there came an understanding from the man that perhaps he was not correct in his reasons for bringing such attack. She began to sympathize then with the foreigners' caution and instead merely watched them with a similar wariness.

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Pretvuukra watched the other healer take hold of the ayajow root and treklut. The woman with the strange name put ayajow root into the bubbling water and took it off the fire. She then carefully put small bits of the treklut leaves into Nukremit's mouth. She questioned Gelfetia about this last and was told that their leader must be put into an altered state so that he did not suffer shock from the pain of removing the ouray.

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Though she knew nothing of the plants that were used, the woman's logic was completely sound. She made a point to emphasize this to her own kinfolk nearby and asked that they share the smart-know'n with the others. If these people were harmed, then it was likely that Nukremit would fall into the clutches of Pritlaxtl as a result.

After a very long moment the man's eyes seemed to glaze over and he somehow managed to become even less responsive than before. Gelfetia assured her that this was because of the treklut leaves and not from a release of the man's kaba. The healer then shared that she was going to carefully remove the ouray from his chest.

It wasn't until the pain reached her think'n that she realized how tightly she was holding her hands together in worry for the man. She made a point to loosen them as she watched the other healer firmly grasp the shaft and with a movement that was too rapid to follow, pull it free. Instantly blue life-fluid began spurting more forcefully from the wound and Gelfetia made the point of dipping a cloth into the pot of water before pressing it against his chest. The whole thing was fascinating to watch. She had never seen anyone use heated water on an injury. Her own teacher had instructed her merely to put wardbreath leaves around the wound and speak the healing prayer four times.

"I cannot say for certain if he will recover full gudstrength or how long this will take. But I think that he has a very good chance of being well enough to speak in a few days. It will be necessary for us to change this covering two times each day, and be sure to soak it in the water that has been with the hot bubbles."

She was surprised at how little time the man was expected to take in recovery. It made her think of Ikchyuto who had fallen on a branch that pushed itself through his leg. The man had spent weeks in pain and he never walked comfortably again after that. It was true what the people of this village said, Gelfetia was indeed an impressively skilled healer. It made her wish that she could remain here and learn more smart-know'n from such people as this.

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“So does this mean we can FINALLY, at long last, get this bucket up and out of here?”

“Yea! Haven’t we been through enough torture on this rock?”

“Hang on everyone.” Since taking over most of the diplomacy work with the crew, he had come to understand just how much time and effort was necessary to keep everyone at least somewhat mollified. It had never really penetrated his conscious mind just how much of herself Rhumfa had put toward keeping the ship and the crew functioning properly. Now that she was teetering on the edge of emotional collapse, he wondered if the stress of dealing with all this might have a similar effect on him. No, that couldn’t happen. He reassured himself that now there was at least an end in sight. He would likely be able to steer them all toward the escape that every one of them yearned for like the coolness of the evening on a July afternoon.

“Yes it’s true that we should be able to get out of here. But I can’t say exactly how long it will take to repair and double check every one of the O₂ scrubbers.

Remember that the lives of each and every one of us depends on that equipment.

Even the ones who have the most extensive experience with starship equipment have made it clear that these schematics have an eerie degree of complexity. So we’re not going to jump off the handle trying to get into orbit prematurely. Saaed, Anya, and Shadai will work with the rest of you in teams so that we can have multiple sets of eyes working to interpret the information in Oibo’s database.

When we feel reasonably sure that the systems won’t crap out halfway home, then we’ll sit in orbit for a few days to test everything out.”

“Alright Huso. I guess we can’t argue with that logic.” Fatima glanced down at the pad which must have held something quite captivating. “But the bigger question for me is, how did we suddenly obtain exactly the information we need to get out of here, just out of the blue?”

He knew they deserved to have the truth, but that wasn’t going to make the explanation any less contentious. He inwardly braced himself for the assault before finally sharing the most plausible, but also the most ridiculous theory to ever have materialized out of Rhumfa’s lips.

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Pain. He woke to intense pain saturating his chest. At first it was impossible to even form words or think of what was happening. But a moment later the sound of prayers being spoken reached his hear'n. The prayers became interrupted by a face that was not familiar to him. She spoke apologetically about being distracted and offered a few leaves, instructing him to chew them. The kindness within her eyes brought him to accept the leaves and chew them slowly.

A strange feeling began to fill him as it spread from the center of his kaba and out to his limbs. Things began to feel distant, as if each of his limbs were three armspans long. The voices of the woman and of another man farther off became muddled as if they were spoken outside the wall of his shelterspace.

“Nukremit, you will feel a bit strange for awhile. This is not something we can avoid. The leaves are necessary to dull the pain from your injury and allow your body to heal.”

There were some other comments which he found difficult to comprehend, and soon a more familiar face came into view and it was a beautiful sight. Within his smarati was the knowledge that this was Lrexduk, the man he was in love with. He tried to tell the man how joyous it was to see him again, but the words came out poorly, and he found that speaking at all was like performing a new and complex dance. But the voice of the healer must have spoken the situation for him, for his lover smiled and gently rubbed a knobhorn along his cheek.

There was confusing blackness for a timespan. How long, he could not say. But the next time he looked around, there was less pain. That was at least until he attempted to get up. Then his being was flooded with agony.

“Please don't try to move Nukremit. Your kinfolk are all here supporting you and they are impressed by how much gudstrength you show already. But that weapon pushed deeply into your chest and caused much damage to your insides. It is only by the grace of Adeima that it did not strike your breathing organ. With more rest and several doses of Murteelup, I believe that you will be able to sit up tomorrow.

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Pretvuukra is assisting in your healing and she has promised to stay by your side when the time comes to return to your home.

Someone must have entered unexpectedly, for there was wordsong spoken in a language that he didn't recognize. The words sounded increasingly panic-stricken, and despite the calming of the medicine, he noticed his own muscles tightening from the tone of their voices.

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It seemed impossible, but there he was staring directly back at her. It was a hoomaas, that was clear. There was the usual head hair, not as curly as her own kinfolk. The strange horn on his face which pulsated as the hoomaas did when they were charged with emotion. The man even had the face hair of a slightly more pale color than Kwandic. But strangely, this hoomaas was one whom she had never witnessed before in her life. She tried speaking to him in Yorigbausa, and the man seemed not to understand at all. He was very belligerent, and she thought he might even be dangerous if not for the fragility of his body. Even compared to her own hoomaas kinfolk, this man acted so tired that he soon collapsed to sitting on the underfoot, as if he had just traveled from the stones of remembrance.

“Are you one of the hoomaas from the magic boat?” She tried their own common language and this time the man at least comprehended.

“What in all the land is a ‘hoomaas?!’ Why do I feel so weak and puny? What strange magic have you inflicted on me? Grishneevit! You will pay most dearly for this despicable act!”

Now this was incredibly puzzling. How could the man be a hoomaas, but not know what a hoomaas was? And why was he so angry?”

She tried many more queries. She asked where he had traveled from, who his kinfolk were, and what his name was. But the wordsong he shared was beyond any magic she could have ever dreamed of, even from the incredible ones from the magical boat of the visitors. He claimed that his name was Gjintruk and that he was the chief of Xenlaria. He insisted that his attack on their ‘puny tribe’ would be

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swift and complete. But if this was true, why did he look as the hoomaas did? He had no knobhorns, looking carefully she was able to count a full five fingers on each hand, and of course there was the obvious imú on his face. The evil ones couldn't possibly have hoomaas among their kinfolk. Could they?

In short time, there was a second man who joined him carrying a thin cloth. He looked at the first man and gave the straight-eye unceasingly for a long moment.

“What in all the land are you giving me the straighteye for?”

“Who are you? What kind of being are you? What is that strange horn in the middle of your face?”

If she were to live for a nine hundred annums, it would be impossible to top the bizarre experience of watching a hoomaas stare aghast at another hoomaas as if they had never seen such a thing before. Yet apparently this is precisely what was happening. The other hoomaas claimed to be someone named Imotren, who was also from the village of the attacking tribe. But how there could be hoomaas among their people was not something she could discern from the strange wordsongs. The words might be able to be grasped, but the meaning behind the strange conversation was utterly lost to her.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed Drekulye carrying a jug of water and quickly called him over. She gave a brief wordsong of what she understood (which was not very much) and instructed the man to share the information with Gelfetia. As soon as she spoke the name though, the two hoomaas erupted in hateful exclamations for their beloved Gelf, bringing her to finally smack the nearest one of them hard across the shoulder. She must have struck the man harder than she intended, for the man was unable to hold his balance and tumbled to the underfoot.

“Son of gelf! And if I weren't as sapped of gudstrength as a requibug, I would certainly pound you into the underfoot!” He had turned to face her now, but the man's idle threats were of no consequence coming as they did from such a frail being. All that she could do was to keep an eye on the two, as if they were young'ns, and wait for the healer.

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If Drekulye hadn't sworn on the throne of Adeima, she would never have believed the wordsong could be possible. Two hoomaas just appearing on the edge of the village but who claimed to know nothing at all of what a hoomaas was? Even the visitors from the magic boat had considered their own appearance to be normal. What, in all the land could bring these strange people to act so different? As much as she wished to focus on the healing for the injured warrior, that issue was at least stable for the time being. There was nothing for it but to go and discover the truth for herself.

But soon the fulltrue became impossible to deny. For after she passed the last shelterspace, the angry comments flew quickly to her hear'n and it was clear that something extraordinary had happened with these two. She saw that Ayoprij was attempting to reason with them as much as she could. But the woman was short-tempered and she had little hope for the situation unless careful words and what the hoomaas called diplomasee were used.

She assured Ayoprij that she would be able to help the two hoomaas and suggested that the other would be more valuable collecting fodiens for their hoomaas kinfolk hiding above. She then switched to the common language, but before she could even breathe a word something more astonishing became clear. It was the picture within her head of the vast field of shelterspace entrances. The same ones that she experienced with the hoomaas kinfolk.

If she had expected this, there might have been time to focus on the priyvasee of the hoomaas, but as it was she experienced the picture of a grand hall built of elaborate patterns of bricks with many small fires burning in nooks all around the perimeter. There was a vast table to one side with many fodiens and a man was on the underfoot in front of him showing much fraidness. What did this mean though? Where was the image from? It was certainly not a place she had visited before.

Speaking carefully with the two strangers, and assuring them that no harm would come to them was of little use, for there remained the strong unhappy and the belief that their kinfolk would defeat their enemy swiftly.

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So, just as she had done with the angry man in the heavy mist, she worked to reduce the unhappy and asked the man his name. Not surprisingly both of their responses were of little help. They remained saturated with a mixture of fury and confusion, even more than the man before had been. Neither of them knew of the hoomaas, or where their people had come from, and yet here they were as plain as the imú on their faces.

The question remained now, what was to be done with them? There were too many hands needed to help with providing repair in the village to spare a kinfolk to keep watch on them, and many of the evil attackers still remained, with a tense stalemate as everyone waited for Nukremit's recovery. However they obviously could not be sent back to Xenlaria, as this would only bring the condemnays. It seemed that the only solution was to escort them to be with the hoomaas kinfolk at the cave of Aye-yoobay. It felt to her like a highly unkind thing to inflict upon their hoomaas kinsfolk, and Regina would most assuredly struggle with the newcomers. But what else was there for her to do? It seemed that Adeima still held many challenging lessons for her to endure. The Holy Mother certainly acted in mysterious ways, and this was only further proof.

Finally she left the two strange hoomaas, who still remained preoccupied with their uncanny transformation, and returned to keep an eye on Nukremit and the fragile truce which remained between their tribes. Ayoprij or one of the other kinfolk could be asked to watch over the two and see that they didn't expose themselves to the Xenlarians until such time as someone could escort them up the mountain.

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She didn't relish the trip of course. The long steppins up to the stones of remembrance was meant to be taken only once each annum. But with the evil attackers still among them in the village and the risk of harm still hanging above them like a sinister prophecy, she had little choice.

Pulling off her traveling pack, she offered each man a kulmelon before describing for them the journey they would be taking.

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“You cannot instruct me on what to do and where to go. I am the leader of Xenlaria. The chief of over three hundred kinfolk. I am a respected leader full of wisdom and gudstrength.”

Her eyes must have opened up to the size of the kulmelon in her hands and she gave the straight-eye then. How could it be that the leaders of the evil attackers were actually hoomaas? It brought so many queries to her think'n. Had the ancient ones allowed hoomaas to visit other places? Or was it the recent visitors who brought the condemnays to them despite their strong-words of protection against exactly that. The whole situation was far too confusing for her to gain smart-know'n. This challenge required Gelfetia's strength and wisdom. But their great healer was very busy with providing healing to the evil warrior and working to halt the lust for spears among his people. Thus she had little choice but to try her best to tease out the fulltrue of what was happening here. It took many long moments and a seemingly infinite amount of patience as the queries flew back and forth between the oddly belligerent hoomaas. But eventually, and most unbelievably, she came to understand that these two had once been denisovian just like her. Somehow as they had been struck down in the attack on Ubuntu, their gudstrength left them and they each found themselves in these frail hoomaas bodies. How such a thing could happen was utterly beyond anything she could imagine. Even the strange visitors from the sky certainly could not cause a thing like this. Only Azeala in Her infinite wisdom could do such a thing. It struck her then that perhaps their endless wandering in the darkness was past, and the Holy Mother had consented to share Her benificence once more. Perhaps Gelfetia's discovery of the prophecy had influenced Her. Nobody here could ever truly know, and it mattered not why. Only that the awesome power of Adeima and Azealla were once again with them mattered.

This however still left the issue of the two new hoomaas. They were obviously not going to take direction from one as humble as she, but of course they could not be allowed into the village either. Given the lack of gudstrength in their bodies, even seemingly more than her own kinfolk, it felt acceptable to leave them be until hunger or thirst brought them more respect for others.

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She lay on the bed, just tapping out a game of Fofuzi with Oibo. There just wasn't enough emotional energy within her for anything else now. There seemed to be no point in trying to do anything at all. How long would it take before the gravity of this place, or some as yet unknown calamity finally overwhelmed the structure of the ship. And would it happen before or after the crew went insane from the constant efforts to simply stay alive? There weren't any answers to those questions. But the sordid thought seemed regularly to pop up, like a hedgehog escaping it's burrow, that some vindictive force surrounding this planet would not allow them to leave unless she did it's bidding. That no amount of technology or human inventiveness could save them from whatever it was on this planet that held them in it's merciless grip.

The door opened and she barely even glanced up to see. If it wasn't Huso, then it would have to be some crew member insisting that she help them through yet another mysterious problem. Thankfully though, it *was* Huso. He sat down next to her and rubbed her shoulders with his beautifully strong hands. Just the touch of him gave her the strength to finally look up into his smiling face.

"Rhumfa, would you come with me for a minute? There's something I'd like to show you."

Normally she wouldn't be willing to bother with any new information. She'd had more than enough of that for a lifetime. But the tone of his voice spoke it's own language, and she found herself almost unconsciously putting down the smartpad and offering him her hand.

Very gently, as if she were some invalid, he brought her to the far wall of the room where the porthole sat closed. She looked into her face reflected in the polished titanium. There was a haunted look in her eyes, her cheeks were pinched as if from starvation, and there were tree branches of wrinkles sprouting from the sides of her eyes. It wasn't her anymore in that image. It was only a hollow shell of what she had once been, long before the near fatal landing on the most hostile planet in the known galaxy. Huso requested the AI to open the porthole screen, as if he knew how much that vision was upsetting her. She closed her eyes to slits,

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expecting the harsh amber sun of the planet to stab brilliant beams through the nanoglass. But instead a wholly unexpected sight showed through. It was the endless sea of pinprick stars against a midnight background. At the very edge she saw the mixed brown and turquoise of the planet hovering far below.

“We actually made it??”

Even saying the words felt like an invitation for the ajogun to come destroy everything. It brought her to shut off her voice and say nothing more.

“Yes Rhumfa, we really made it. I’ve decided to keep us in orbit for several days just to test the O₂ scrubbers and be completely sure that we won’t find them copping out on us while we transition back home.”

Home. Just the word had felt like an impossible fantasy. Some dream found in an old Nnedi comic or computer animation. Would it actually be possible to stroll along the banks of the Osogbo? To eat yams picked only a few days before? To stare into a sky which actually looked normal again? It felt like a crime to even imagine it. To hope was just too far out of her experience right now. She felt her spirit crumble from the terrible risk that it felt she was taking.

“No. No it’s not going to work Huso. Something is waiting, just around the next orbit. It’ll come along and cripple the ship again. Or maybe we’ll just get blown apart out here in space. That would certainly be quicker-”

“Rhumfa.” The man pulled at her tightly clenched fists and rubbed his thumbs gently along them. But this time it just wasn’t enough.

“No! No Huso. I just can’t believe that whatever malicious force is out here hasn’t kept yet another hidden attack up its sleeve.”

“Rhumfa, everything on the ship is working perfectly. As soon as we feel assured that the scrubbers can be depended on-” She was staring at the floor, but he gently lifted her chin up toward his own face. “Rhumfa as soon as we feel confident about the equipment, we are going home.”

But she’d stopped listening to him and stared past his ear instead. There just couldn’t be a possibility of safety for them anymore. She’d let them down, and brought the whole crew to a land more deadly even than the wastelands of Yorup. This just had to be some trick to get her to raise a smidgen of hope so that it could be collapsed yet again. There just had to be something they weren’t seeing yet.

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CHAPTER 199

Peeking into Gelfetia's shelterspace Truinye saw with gratitude that the injured warrior was sitting up and his mate was there with him holding the man's hand. They almost looked peaceful sitting there on the raised platform that two of the kinfolk had made. That was only however if she looked past the visions from her smarati of the man leading a group of hateful warriors in the attack on their beloved village. This was something that she would not do. Not at all. For the thought of how close their beloved Gelfetia had come to Pritlaxtl's realm would be seared forever in her smarati.

Thus she instead went back to her duty of watching over the two fragile hoomaas while they all waited for the men to learn their place. Several times they had tried to order herself or Lluchra to bring them something. But it was useless to show them any kindness until their hubris was stunted enough for them to integrate into proper denisovian society. Much as the thought disgusted her.

It was amazing to look at them and realize that they seemed even more lacking in gudstrength then Regina. In sharing wordsong with Lluchra, she had joined the woman in wonder for the awesome power of the one who had brought about this change.

"You there. Do not ignore me. I am a leader of hundreds and I have instructed you to bring me a drink! You will follow my orders or-"

"Or what? You are puny as a young'n. You have no more ability to bring harm then Eekasha or any other of the hoomaas visitors. You have no magic and you have no gudstrength. You could not even lift an apata in the state that you are in. Somehow that shut the man up and she assumed that there would be no more attention needed. But instead he gave query about the word 'hoomaas' and referred to someone named Anya that he had spoken to. At first she was confused, until she searched through her smarati. The name did have a familiarity to it. Yes! It was one of the hoomaas on the magic boat. She felt the life-fluid drain from her face at the thought. "Gjentruk. Had you spoken to this one named Anya before?"

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“Of course I have. She must be one of your puny kinfolk. She was right there in the middle of battle, after the see’n became confused by whatever magic your warriors created.”

Suddenly the fulltrue became clear to her. Adeima’s wisdom was clearly without bounds. Not only had the Holy Mother brought forth the confusing mist to end their battle and save Ubuntu, but She had brought in two of the hoomaas during the one time when the arrival would not cause the condemnays. That solidified for her the fulltrue that these two were indeed who they claimed to be, and had somehow been transformed from leaders of a Denisovian village, to a pair of hoomaas utterly lacking in gudstrength. It was, she thought, a very worthwhile punishment for them and with enough time the pair might even become trustworthy kinfolk. This meant that it would be acceptable to give them the fulltrue of the magical hoomaas and of the earlier people from the sky. But not just yet. First they would need to gain the modesty of Lluchra and Gelfetia. Only then might they become the least bit tolerable to share wordsong with.

CHAPTER 200

Ikchyuto felt the worry holding him with gudstrength in it’s grip. Their leader had spoken proudly of what great celebration the people would enjoy upon the warriors’ victorious return. He had inspired the many women and men to take up spear and stick launcher before departing for the great morass. In the beforetime while the kinsfolk were all together, he had been filled with gladface for the cause and even some envy for those with gudstrength to make the harsh trip across the morass on their path to victory.

However the plutarch Pelfeyn who was left to lead the people had clearly not been graced by Adeima with the skills enough to fulfill his role. Even with only a third of the kinfolk left in the familyland to watch over, tasks were being neglected in many places. The jadzabean were full of requibugs, the dock had been damaged by a wudfell drifting downstream, and many arguments were being left to simmer in the unhappy without resolution. For several days he had watched the situation become worse in small degrees without feeling confident enough to develop a

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means to slow the deterioration. But with things looking as they were, he clearly needed to seek greater smart-know'n

It was time to make the painful trip to visit the healer. Pretvuukra would help to bring kindface back to their people, or at the very least to offer them the wisdom of Adeima. If nothing else, the peaceful solitude of the surrounding forest might bring enough to calm his feelings of the unhappy.

His steppins were slow since the time of that cursed stick that cut through him, but this was not the time for self-pity. Something needed to be done, and there was nothing for it but to keep on with the slow steppins until he reached the distant shelterspace.

The trip was both wondrous and bitter. As he only managed to distract himself from the ache in his leg intermittently. But when the discomfort did manage to leave his mind, the wondrous beauty of the soaring trees speckled in the faery light of from the diffused Saülé performed wonderfully in chasing the unhappy from his kaba. He stopped many times to rest his leg and found that each time it became more difficult to continue moving with the majestic tapestry of Azealla spread out in all directions.

Once while crossing a small brook, he turned on his bad leg and required an unusually long timespan before the agony dulled to a somewhat more tolerable ache. But there was nothing for the bringing of relief other than to wait out the discomfort. Pretvuukra had tried everything she knew of to help him in the beforetime. Now he could only pray that she would have the smartknow'n for the unhealth of leadership as she had before brought moderately effective smartknow'n for his leg.

CHAPTER 201

Drekulye morosely took the slow-steppins out to the strange men sitting just beyond Regina's shelterspace. For most errands, any one of the kinfolk would happily support Gelfetia as the woman never asked of them unnecessarily and never without very good reason.

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This time however, he had already witnessed the smug unhappy from those two and wanted no part in the sharing of company with them. But, then he thought of Mautide of the beautiful knobhorns and he told himself that their village was a network, with each of them playing a critical role. If the other man could find the gudstrength to make steppins all the way across the great river for to gain smartknowin of the attackers, then the minor task of leading some unruly hoomaas up the slope of Higsthon should be of little consequence next to that. Thus he suppressed his unhappy and took the final dozen steppins toward them. The two had moved little since he'd last seen them and they now sat strong-focused on convincing Umkobo to provide them with fodiens. This had been their wise healer's plan from the beforetime. She had considered that the unruly men might become more agreeable if they were denied fodiens for a time. None of them were with the sureness that her tactic would bring success, but there was no alternative plan that any kinfolk could provide. After all, a little hunger never caused any of the kinsfolk serious harm.

"How could you utter such disgusting untrues?" Adeima has chosen the people of Xenlaria for the placement of Her temple and She has watched over us for all the annums of our lives. Your people have no influence with the Holy Mother to match that of our great Oracle."

"It would seem from your appearance that the opposite is true."

Umkobo turned his face at the sound and the unhappy briefly disappeared as the distant Higsthon would during the time of mists. The man must have correctly assumed that his time of watching the two was finally complete.

"It's so good to see you Drekulye."

"Thank you my brother. You are welcome to return to the village. Our healer has requested that I bring these two up to the cave of Aye-yoobay in order to prevent damage to the other Xenlarians."

The man let out a puff of air through his breath-hole. "I wonder if even Kwandic will be able to tolerate these oloshi."

It brings me no great pleasure either. But they must have a place to live somewhere, and there are too few of us to even complete the tasks here in Ubuntu.

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Until Nukremit gains more of the gudstrength, we wont even be with the sureness that the warriors will let the spear lie.”

“I pray to Prijnak that they do.”

He turned quickly then to the strangers, for one of them was doing a strange motion with his imú.

“What is this sensation? There’s some kind of weird feeling within this horn on my face. You will tell me what it is.”

For a timespan he was mystified as to what the hoomaas referred to. But as he thought about it, an image appeared in his smarati of Aninniyi putting his imú close to some jadzabean and making a pleasurable sound. “Hoomaas, it must be your ‘smell.’ Our own kinfolk feel this when there are fodiens nearby.” He then pulled out two kulmelon from the pack and showed them to the hoomaas.

“You have brought fodiens! The two struggled to get up and managed this only, but the two continued to display little gudstrength, which was a great relief. If Gelfetia spoke the fulltrue, and even with her flawless reputation it was difficult to believe, then these men would have been formidable adversaries before Azealla’s fantastic lesson in humility.

“Our healer has suggested that you be brought to the slope of Higsthon to be with others who look as you do. These kulmelon are yours once we reach that place.”

“You cannot instruct me on what to do and where to go. I am the leader of Xenlaria. The chief of over three hundred kinfolk. I am a respected leader full of wisdom and gudstrength.”

“You are most certainly not. You are a puny hoomaas with no more gudstrength then Eekasha or any of the other magical hoomaas. If you would prefer to stay where you are, then I will keep the fodiens with me and you may simply go hungry.”

He put the kulmelons back in his walking pack and sat on the underfoot watching the other two. They each stared at him with fury carved distinctly on their features. The one who claimed to be a leader continued to make the ‘v’ with his eye-hair while the other seemed to be conjuring something in his head, but without any action to reveal the strategy.

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They each remained this way for a timespan, before the gurgling of hunger from the others' seemed to decide for them.

“FINE, grishneevit. We will take steppins with you to this cave of Eye-yu-something.”

He was about to correct the infuriating men, but decided that just getting them up there and far away from him would be enough of a reward. Thus he motioned for them to make steppins up the slope and guided them forward while also keeping the sharp-eye for any chance of attack.

All the while that they climbed, he continued to be awestruck by how little gudstrength the two had. If it was true that these hoomaas were with as little gudstrength as the visitors, that would speak much about the fraidness that the man Huso had felt in the beforetime. It gave him relief that he would not have to worry over an attack by those people anymore.

CHAPTER 202

He gave the straight-eye all around upon waking, but there was nothing he could discern beyond blurred shapes. It was as if he were back in the place of the crippling mist. There were a few voices, but nothing clear enough to be recognized. He did feel a pain in his chest which grew to a bright flame when he attempted to move. But soon a shape moved towards him which solidified into a hand. The hand laid gentle pressure against him and he relaxed back upon whatever he was on.

“Please do not attempt to get up yet Nukremit. The injury is healing well, but there is still much damage to you inside.”

Finally after a moment more he became able to recognize the face of the woman staring down at him. It was the strange healer of the mountain people. She held an unfamiliar device that looked horn-shaped and placed it against his chest.

“Please take a deep breath Nukremit.”

He did so and wandered through his smarati to try and understand his situation. There had been the aftertime stick flying towards the healer. He had felt a

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wrongness about it and made a barely formed decision to push her away from the danger. Then the gudstrength had left him as a pool of blue seeped upon his chest. “You. It is you from the great blinding mist. The healer from the people of the mountain.”

“Yes Nukremit. And I am also the one whom you saved from the realm of Pritlaxtl. I am deeply grateful for the kindness you showed to me in the beforetime.”

He puzzled over that for a timespan. What in fact had caused him to try and save the woman from harm? She was one of the cursed people on the mountain. The people whom Gjintruk had professed to be bringers of evil magic. So what had changed? For a brief moment he felt confused. There was something teasing at his smarati, something not quite graspable.

“Healer, where is Pretvuukra?” Somehow his smarati had the impression that the woman was here, though how such a thing might be was unknown.

“Nukremit, your people’s healer is washing one of your bandages. She will likely return shortly.”

“Yet we are still without the smart-know’n for how the woman became able to travel all the way to the slope of Higsthon in less time than I did.”

“I’m sorry to say that Pretvuukra has no greater understanding than you do. The ways of Adeima are mysterious as the shimmeri at night.”

He got the sense of brief fraidness in the woman, but ignored that for the time being as he waited to speak with the only trustworthy kinfolk in this strange land of mystery. He laid back and offered a prayer to Prijnak and Azealla that his kinfolk would not be harmed by these peculiar magic makers who had managed to defeat a great flood of warriors single-handedly. It would not be the last of the unexplainable wonders that he was to witness from the strangers within this far away land.

CHAPTER 203

Ikchyuto finally reached the shelterspace and sat once again to let the ache in his leg calm itself. Knocking on the entranceway would have to wait a moment until he could again stand with comfort. In the meantime he gave the straight-eye

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around at the peaceful surroundings and allowed himself by slow degrees to relax. The cool aqua leaves above and the chartreuse stalk-like flowers of the gnupi did a great deal to bring peace to his kaba.

Finally, with the fire cooled to a dull ache, he got his legs under him and knocked gently on Pretvuukra's door. Oftentimes such a thing wasn't even necessary, as the sense-read'n would bring her to the door almost as soon as a person arrived. But they all felt the deepest respect for the healer and this was just a small way of showing it.

Strangely however, the one time that it felt oh so critical to gain smart-know'n, their healer was not answering. He called out, since she rarely traveled far except to reach the temple, but this also brought silence in reply. Now he began to consider the peculiarity of the situation. It wasn't midday, so she wouldn't be at the temple, and he would have known if the woman had visited one of the kinfolk. Therefore the smart-know'n behind her absence was puzzling.

It was several moments before he spotted it. A basket of wardbreath leaves sitting near the base of a tuqtuq tree. He called out again for the healer now with more desperate concern, getting nothing but the angry response from a wingsquerl. Now he was becoming worried. Even giving the straight-eye all around the shelterspace provided nothing beyond that one clue. This meant that she was either injured and out of hear'n, or that she was in the realm of Pritlaxtl. Now despite the discomfort, he made fast-steppins back to the kinfolk for the raising of alarm.

It didn't matter how few kinsfolk were left in the village, a few hands would have to be spared in the search for their beloved healer. Aside from the plutolatry and the oracle, she was the most valuable of all the kinsfolk.

CHAPTER 204

"How could all of this have been so very wrong?" He gazed in confusion at the foreigner with the strangely insulting name, all the while trying to imagine how one might unravel the enigma of her people.

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The woman gazed back with more kindness than he deserved. Like Pretvuukra, she showed so much caring that he could almost imagine her showing the same degree of warmth to him that she might've displayed for one of her own kinfolk. "Freetlak, it might seem to have been unfortunate, but as followers of the Holy Mother we can also see this as a beautiful transformation. You may know that there was a tribe, far back in the beforetime, who knew nothing of the blessings of Adeima. They lived in darkness and ignorance of Her majesty. These people had suffered through countless conflicts with many many kinfolk sent to the aftertime, most likely because of their ignorance. We however can consider ourselves blessed to have been saved this day from the hubris of the man who was strong-focused on bringing the deepest tragedy to this village.

Instead of allowing one man's lust for the spilling of life-fluid to send a great many people to Pritlaxtl, that man instead has been judged and punished most appropriately by Azealla.

As you can see, that man is nowhere within the see'n, yet we all remain with our kaba intact. This, if nothing else should convince you that it is not one tribe or another that is blessed by the Holy Mother, but all children who dwell on the land. That is the profoundest expression of Her kindness."

"The woman most certainly spoke a convincing wordsong. And unlike Gjintruk, hers was one of peace and a true devotion to the Holy Mother."

He could only imagine the great tragedy that might have been wrought on the land if the blinding mist had not given Nukremit long enough timespan to be choosing wordsong over the spear. It brought him to consider the many ways in which the lust for harm had been averted. From the false trail, to the holes in the underfoot, to the mist, and finally the disappearance of the two most ruthless members of Xenlaria. All of it had acted with cohesion to bring an end to a horrible situation.

CHAPTER 205

"Ah, Drekulye, pleasin to be see'in you. What news-"

"Shàngbá ò!"

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The shout from Ayokush brought her to move towards the cave's entrance. There she saw Drekulye leading two unfamiliar and scrawny hoomaas behind him. They were far too lacking in gudstrength to be from this land. "Yeeee!"

"Grishneevit! You would dare show your dispicable faces here, in the most holy of places?! Have you not sullied the blessed ones enough?"

"What is it Aninniysi?"

She was about to respond, but Kwandic was more quick share his observations. "It is two of the evil hoomaas from the magic boat. Though how their puny limbs could manage to get here-"

"Mayhaps they used a magic flying box like the one Regina described."

The great avalanche of comments was soon followed by menacing steppins as three of the kinfolk moved to close in around the strangers.

But Seffin spied something even more intriguing. The two people being led up by Drekulye looked no different then they did, yet the men showed the wide eyes of astonishment when they gazed at her kinfolk. The two were as lacking in gudstrength as Huso and Ikasha, yet they seemed utterly without the confidence provided by the magic and the smart-know'n. That peculiarity however was soon eclipsed when one of the strangers spoke.

"You. How in all the land is it that you appear just like we do? How could so many disfigured people exist in one place?"

It wasn't clear whether the man was speaking to her or to his companion. But the other hoomaas responded as if it were the latter. "They must all be cursed by Prijnak. Perhaps these are kinfolk who performed inadequately as warriors."

"Are you saying that *I* performed poorly? Do you think me a coward. How dare you speak such wordsong!"

"My liege please forgive me. I only offer theories. None it seems, have the smart-know'n of the Holy Mother's plan in all of this."

The whole interaction was beyond anything that she would consider sensible, so instead she queried Drekulye for the fulltrue while the more vigrus kinfolk moved another step towards the strangers.

But Drekulye held his hands up for peace. Please give pause my kinfolk. The wordsong is a great deal more puzzling then we could ever understand."

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The man paused a moment then, as if he were suddenly without a mouth. But soon enough he managed to share a wordsong so incredible that it could only have been caused by the evil visitors that these two resembled. He spoke of how it was believed that these were the leaders of the attack on Ubuntu. That Gelfetia spoke of them being turned into hoomaas as punishment for their cruelty and lack of smartknow'n. He said that their smarati held visions in the beforetime of the village that lay on the far side of the morass.

“So you are telling me Drekulye, that these men, these puny hoomaas, are actually the leaders of the vigrus tribe which brings attack?”

“Kwandic, did you put the man up to this as a joke?”

“Does this mean that those two are allowed to know of the condemnays?”

She found the whole wordsong utterly ridiculous. And yet, she could not deny the great surprise on their faces and the quietwords flowing between the strangers.

Drekulye gazed back at the kinfolk in reverent wonder. “As baffling as it appears, we cannot dispute what stands before our very eyes.

CHAPTER 206

With worry saturating his kaba, he watched the beautiful Nukremit at last open his eyes as confusion soon filled his features.

“Where are the kinfolk? Where is Lrexduk, where is Pretvuukra? What has happened to our great warriors?”

“You are awake my love!” Despite the unhappy, his mate’s voice was like the Saülè showing near the peak of Higsthon. He took the man’s hand and stroked it lovingly.

“Lrexduk. Is it really you? Praise to the Holy Mother that you are not with Pritlaxtl.”

He noticed now that the man’s voice held little of the gudstrength that he showed upon leading the warriors on this journey. It brought him concern within him for his beloved mate, and he prayed that their faith in allowing a foreign healer to help him was not the mistake he feared it to be.

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Spying one of the kinfolk nearby, he called to the man joyously. “Bletneydfim! Our leader is awake. Come see”

Meanwhile he stroked the man’s hand, seeking to offer what gudstrength he could through touch alone. “How do you feel my love? Is the pain worse?”

He was almost surprised to hear Nukremit speak of feeling less discomfort than he had the last time he woke up. The cloth around the man’s chest still soaked through quickly from the injury and required regular changing by Pretvuukra or the foreigner twice each day.

His thoughts were interrupted then by someone entering the shelterspace. When he saw Bletneydfim, he shared the situation and his own worries of their trust in the mountain dwellers.

“I still have the doubt as well.” He shortly turned to focus on their leader.

“Nukremit, I have the fraidness that you have risked far more than you should by trusting one of these magic-makers to heal you. What in all the land could have brought you to treat them with kindface when they are clearly the enemy.

Nukremit’s voice held little vigrus, but the wordsong was full of assurance despite his lack of gudstrength. “Their healer has shown that they hold the same fealty towards the holy mother as we. The one named for the cursed traitor has spoken of hearing prophecy from Adeima even despite being far from the holy temple. She speaks of knowing things to come even before they happen. It-”

“That is because they speak the untrue!” Bletneydfim showed the strong unhappy as he slammed his fist on the wallside. “Nukremit, how can you be so blind as to ignore this?”

He placed a hand on the man’s shoulder and used quietvoice to plead with the other for calmface. It would do their beautiful leader no good to be shouted at. But despite his pleading, there was no denying Bletneydfim’s logic.

“Warrior, I have myself listened to the foreign woman discern who speaks the fulltrue and who does not. I have also witnessed her swear on the spear of Prijnak that her wordsong is the fulltrue.”

Nukremit went on with his ramblings, but to him it all sounded more like the raving mumblings of a man struggling to stave off Pritlaxtl. He could not in any way understand how such wild claims could have any validity.

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Bletneydfim left quite suddenly and after some barely heard arguing he returned, surprisingly with the foreign healer in tow. The man told her of their leader's condition and of their own continued doubts of the ridiculous wordsong.

Lrexduk decided to test the stranger with many wordsongs to see if the other actually could discern the fulltrue. He made every attempt to bring deception to the woman with subtle half-truths and distractions. The woman however insisted that she could not focus on his wordsong while she remained strongfocused on the care for Nukremit.

As frustrated as he was to be sidelined by one who was not even kinfolk, his own lover insisted that he listen to the woman. It was as if an unhealth of the head were now in charge of their whole tribe and he spoke exactly this in the quietwords to Bletneydfim. He began to consider now that they might have to renew their attack on these cursed ones without Nukremit or Gjintruk to lead them. In quietwords with the other, it did seem that victory would still be possible, as the tribe here along the mountain was few in number and there was no longer the danger of the ground-openings to cull their numbers.

“Lrexduk. What is the quietwords of which you speak? I will not be insulted by your wordsong hidden in the shadows.”

“Love, do not concern yourself now. You are in need of rest and the regaining of gudstrength.”

“Nukremit, the only fraidness that I have is that you will be delivered to Pritlaxtl, in which case this one named for the great traitor will be sent to make the journey alongside you. This I promise.”

The prone man turned then to give Bletneydfim the straighteye. “You would show such offense?! Here, directly in the company of the one who devotes herself so diligently in the returning the vigrus to me?” The man then lifted himself partly to sitting with no small difficulty and despite the protests from the healer. “Know this Bletneydfim, and you to my love. I would consider any attack, or even quietwords of planning attack against this woman to be an act of treason. Despite the absurd name, Gelfetia has shown nothing but a selfless devotion to me, to both our kinsfolk, and to the Holy Mother. I have no doubt that she speaks the fulltrue-”

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“You have no doubt?! Nukremit have you lost all gudsense?” The man shook off Lrexduk’s arm attempting to calm the unhappy wordsong. “Where could that certainty come from? What proof do we have. What even gives you the sureness that she even feels devotion to Adeima?”

The moment it was said Lrexduk could tell the man had gone too far. He witnessed the healer grow instantly still and saw at the same time that Nukremit showed the strongest unhappy that he had ever viewed on the lovely man’s face. His lookin was almost grotesque in it’s fury. Despite the lack of vigrus, his words now were colder then the great river in mid-winter.

“Bletneydfim. You are stripped of all titles. I refuse to speak of you as kinfolk, nor should any Xenlarian for as long as your kaba rests within that body. Leave my presence, now.”

He watched the exchange in shock. The same man who had spoken of utterly destroying these mountain dwellers, who had raised spear and aftertime stick triumphantly, the same man who marched alongside the warriors for so many days merely to bring this attack. This man was now showing strongvoice for the first time only to speak in defense of the foreigners. It brought even deeper conviction within him that the plutarchs who had led the warriors here were not to be relied upon and that some alternative method would have to be employed for defeating these puzzling magic-makers.

CHAPTER 207

Ikchyuto finally made it back to the familyland, which was often a depressing scene these days as it remained so strangely empty. Less then half of the kinfolk remained to keep watch over the djengoards, to pull fish from the river, or to repair shelterspaces.

Even when he spoke with Trimdup of his experience at the shelterspace of Pretvuukra, the woman had no time to spare with puzzling through the mystery. She spoke of the great hillside of tasks left to her aging body while the vigrus folk were gone chasing magic-makers.

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Finally he decided that if the kinfolk were busy and no healer could be found, then it was in his hands to break tradition and visit the great Oracle. Not that he was without fraidness for sure. None but the healer had ever dared travel to the temple except at the feast of blessings. It was likely that he risked the great wrath of the Holy Mother in his effort. But with so little vigrus within the familyland, there seemed no other option but to endure the task himself.

His steppins were slow and reluctant not only from the aching of his leg, but also from the terrible fraidness of what he was about to do. The sight of the grand columns marching unwaveringly to the height of the magnificent temple did nothing to diminish his unease. The journey remained fraught with apprehension from Azealla and what punishment She might exact for this sacrilege. His thinkin was so distracted that he all but leapt into the air from a sound so utterly alien to this hallowed space that he spun around to give the straight-eye in a desperate attempt at clarity. But once he found the cause, he became even more confused. It was a meldabeast. One of the largest he had yet seen. But more exceptional even, the beast was hobbling down the grand steps with obvious difficulty. It hobbled and moved, as if it were somehow drunk on the celebratory fire-water. Even when it finally reached the bottom the animal merely stood there, now that it had spotted him, and gazed back with mournful eyes.

It uttered a great roar and made it's way directly towards him. But the animal was not charging (it was not the mating season anyway). It seemed to stride with purpose, as if he were completely familiar to the beast. Then it paused only four steppins away and watched him.

Ikchyuto stared back in utter befuddlement. There was something about this animal, some unusual degree of smart-knowin behind those eyes. But without any ability to comprehend the strange look, he was left only to guess how the animal could have possibly ended up on the steps to the great temple. It didn't seem possible that the animal could have climbed up on it's own, but neither would any kinfolk have ever been willing offer such assistance. It was a mystery which no amount of consideration seemed likely to resolve.

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At last he abandoned the effort and moved to take a path around the beast in order to reach the temple and discover what could be learned. But strangely the beast gave a challenging roar and moved to place itself between him and the grand steps. No matter which side he chose, the animal stood its ground to prevent him from reaching the temple. This highly unusual behavior was a mystery to surpass even the previous one. Such a thing would never have been spoken of in any wordsong by any healer in the beforetime. It sent him to a flurry of confusion as he made slow-steppins back to the familyland in confused defeat.

CHAPTER 208

Saaed stared at the readout for the main drive plasma shunt. Just as the data confirmed, there was fracturing around the exterior. It wasn't catastrophic yet. In fact there was at least a chance that they could have made it back to the Sol system without incident, but that was by no means certain. The coincidence here was too much to ignore. As loath as he was to admit as much, it seemed that Rhumfa was right to be freaked out by whatever weird shit held influence on the planet below. It wasn't just the plasma shunt of course. There was the nano-carbon lattice now holding the satellite launch strut in place, the 4D truss supporting the primary landing pad, not to mention the eerie transformation to their now functional air-cycling system. All of it spoke of something utterly beyond reason. Each and every time without fail, the data coming out of the strange virus infecting Oibo had provided information not only of where the Boabab was damaged, but also schematics showing the best method for repair.

Where before it had felt like a ten kilometer hike through marshland to even keep basic ship systems functioning, he was now finding almost miraculous engineering specs buried in files all over the Boabob's operations data.

Looking through energy expenditure calculations, he now saw another mysteriously positive readout. Not only was their return trip expected to be 13% faster, it would also take 20% less power. How such a thing could be was an utter mystery. With confusion spreading across his features, he pulled up the drive system diagnostics, the power flow, and even the mass calculations for the ship.

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That's when it struck him. The Boabob had lost weight, by a full 17%. "Chineke me. How in the world could that happen." He searched through the mass index for every section, but didn't come upon anything obvious. So finally he just had Oibo do a search for all changes in the ship's mass since they got their ship extricated from the sinkhole. That's when his jaw hit the floor.

CHAPTER 209

He waited outside of the shelterspace until the peculiar healing woman finished with Nukremit. For he intended once and for all to learn the fulltrue regarding his lover's most unconventional trust in this healer who they should be treating as the enemy. He did much pondering in his head for what should be said and which tactics he might employ.

Yet, like a young'n on his first hunt, the healing woman caught him by surprise while his focus was distracted with the wordsong within his head.

"You seem to be feeling an upset within your kaba Lrexduk. Is there something which I might help you with?"

He gave her the straight-eye, as if through mere look'n he might draw from her the fulltrue of so many strange happenings in this foreign land. He pondered within his head for a moment before finally finding within his smarati the wordsong of Bletneydfim earlier. "My beloved warrior Nukremit claims that you not only have great wisdom as a healer, but that you may deduce who speaks the fulltrue and who does not." He saw the woman nod, but continued unabated. "Yet how are we to be certain that you yourself speak the fulltrue. How are we to know that your swearing on the crown of Azealla may be trusted."

The woman's face revealed a shadow of unhappy, like a puff of mist passing in front of the Saülè, even as she displayed a clear effort to remain calm. Despite giving her the straight-eye, it was beyond his ability to discern what tangle of emotions played out behind those foreign features. There was concentration on her face as she seemed in deliberation for the proper wordsong. But momentarily she turned her attention to the side and called for Pretvuukra to join them. She then invited them to sit on the underfoot together.

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“Pretvuukra. Your kinfolk remain unconvinced that I may be trusted.” He saw the unhappy spread briefly across the other woman’s face but Gelfetia lifted her hand for silence. “If we are to continue the fragile trust developing between your kinfolk and mine, we must be with the understanding that both of us remain committed to the fulltrue, always. The people must recognize that we all are children of Azealla, with recognition that She is the supreme creator of this land.”

The healer then returned her gaze before continuing. “Lrexduk, if I were to speak the untrue many times, would there not be fraidness within me? That the untrue might be discovered?”

This he could not be certain of. For such a question had not ever been asked in the beforetime. All of his own kinfolk were humble devotees of the Holy Mother. There never had been a need for confirmation. He remained with some fraidness of accusing this healer after what Nukremit had done, and so he held his thoughts inside.

“You remain with the uncertainty. Very well. I assume that you have no doubts of Pretvuukra’s devotion, would that be so?”

Now he nodded, for he had the fragile ponderings for where the foreigner’s wordsong was leading.

“Very well. Pretvuukra, would you please relate what happened in the temple when we first met, and how the oracle reacted to my unconventional presence?”

The wordsong itself seemed innocuous. The healer spoke only that she arrived at the temple after a request for help from Itrenput. She was surprised to see another within the temple and was at first filled with the unhappy. However she heard the woman speak of being a healer and show strong devotion to the Holy Mother. How the oracle seemed to have the fraidness of her, rather than being with assurance as would be expected. The more that Pretvuukra’s wordsong played out, the less believable it sounded. But when she spoke of the prophecy heard far off along the slope of Higsthon, that the two healers would meet by the statue he was unable to withhold a snort through his breath-hole.

“Pretvuukra. You would swear on the crown of Adeima that such a thing is true? The fulltrue?”

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As unbelievable as it sounded, the woman swore most fervently that this was precisely what the foreigner had said.

“And you Gelfetia (it still jaded him to even speak the name), you are with the assurance that you experienced this prophecy from the Holy Mother fulfilled?”

“Yes Lrexduk. Adeima provided many prophecies including the trees falling flat, the apatas offering protection from the flying sticks, and the holes delivering some of your unfortunate kinfolk to Pritlaxtl.”

It did not escape his focus that the healer spoke with remorse even for the ones strong focused on attacking her own kinfolk. He said as much, wondering what might cause a group of evil magic-makers to concern themselves with denisovians who were not even their own kinfolk.

“Lrexduk, there is a term. It is a very old term from the far back beforetime, called Ngumuntu. It roughly means that none of us are truly whole without the people around us. We only shine with the knefet of Azealla through our kindness towards others. For me, being the healer for this tribe means having a deep fealty and devotion to the Holy Mother. That devotion involves respecting all life. Hoomaas, denisovian, or even meldabeast. You, and your kinfolk are precious, as you are all creations of Azealla.”

He thought over what the woman had said and found himself deeply impressed. Even Pretvuukra seemed respectful. For she gave the straight-eye to the other healer. But she surprised him by changing the subject instead.

“What is hoomaas Gelfetia?”

Instantly there was fraidness upon the woman’s features and he once again pondered the hidden smart-know’n behind her face.

“Such a thing is trivial at this moment. Just a disfigured being.”

Clearly there were great mysteries up here along Higsthon. Not the least of which was the means by which a tribe might bask in the prophecy of Adeima without making steppins within the holy temple. But one thing that he felt assured of, was that these people were not a vindictive tribe. Gjingtruk had clearly been wrong. This however brought him to a new path of think’n. “Wait a minute.”

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CHAPTER 210

He gave Pretvuukra the straight-eye showing the strong unhappy now. “You do know of course that Gjintruk was only strong-focused on this attack due to consultation with Imotren and more importantly by yourself. Your smart-know’n of course originates directly from the Oracle.

The healer’s gaze showed the fraidness now, which brought him to consider that he might be treading on some dangerous underfoot, but his momentum was a meldabeast at full gallop, unable to halt for something as vague as intuition.

“Pretvuukra, if Gjintruk’s campaign to this village was a mistake, then how could it be that the Oracle spoke of Adeima’s support for our attack in the beforetime? The Holy Mother is not one to make errors for She is the knower of all. So, query-you what smart-knowin am I missing in all of this?”

The woman turned toward the foreigner with even stronger fraidness showing, however this only stoked the flames of his curiosity further. There was clearly a powerful untrue buried among the many confusing wordsongs. Not only had Gjintruk been involved, but their own healer as well. It was clear that whatever scandal existed, it must be exposed quickly before it threatened the whole of Xenlaria.

The woman’s voice was small as she made a pathetic attempt to sidestep the fulltrue. “Lrexduk, it would be more practical for you to query your mate. For he is the leader of the brave warriors.”

For a brief moment he was incredulous. Was she actually suggesting that he query Nukremit who struggled to fend off Pritlaxtl while she stood directly in front of him. He rested his hands on his waist, unconsciously mimicking the body language used by the mountain people. “Pretvuukra you know full well that my mate is in no position to be queried. We are talking here about the prophecies of the Oracle which is very much your responsibility. You will provide the fulltrue right now! Or must I use threats to achieve my goal?”

Finally the woman responded that she knew not what occurred within the think’n of the Oracle and that she could only relate what was said. This at least was understandable, for who among them could grasp the fulltrue of the wise Oracle.

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“So you would swear that you do not know the fulltrue regarding this strange discrepancy?”

“I am so sorry Lrexduk, I cannot do that.”

Once again he got the faint impression of fraidness from the foreign healer, but such a minor feeling was trivial beside the shock of his own healer’s obstinance. What, in all the land could have turned her from the devotion to her kinsfolk like this? He gave her the straight-eye most intensely, yet she refused to offer more. Instead his focus was interrupted by a pleading from the foreigner to let the matter lie. This brought him to turn and face her with the strong unhappy.

“If you wish to avoid a spear through your breath hole, you will leave this matter to proper Xenlarians.” He then turned to Pretvuukra with a voice dripping with immense unhappy. “Now, as the highest ranking Xenlarian left in this whole foreign place I order you to provide the fulltrue of the strange happenings with the oracle.

The wordsong at first was utterly ridiculous. He had to query them both about the strange term ‘wolee-ekee’ but only when both of them together swore on the spear of Prijnak that the oracle had been unwilling to swear the fulltrue did he consider the implications. And what profound think’n did they cause! That the oracle might have been speaking prophecy that did not originate from the Holy Mother? It would completely overturn the plutolatriy of the familyland. But as he turned the wordsong over many times within his head, there did seem to be logic to it. Pretvuukra had always shared prophecy which benefited Gjintruk and he in turn had always provided support for the oracle, including the long speech at the feast of blessings. Then of course there were the other prophecies shared by the foreigner such as the trees falling flat. None of Pretvuukra’s wordsong brought from the temple had ever come true in the later-time. The irony now did not escape him that instead of the foreign healer being with the fraidness, it was himself. At last now did he understand the cause of the womens’ fraidness, it was a horrible concept to recognize.

“Both of you. This fulltrue must be held in quietvoice. We cannot allow such a destructive wordsong to spread among the kinsfolk. Our whole leadership could be destroyed.”

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At this the foreigner with the insulting name chose again to boldly offer unrequested advice. “Lrexduk, it is unlikely that you could have success in that. Others will likely follow the same path of think’n that you have just displayed. Besides, as followers of the Holy Mother we all have a commitment to the fulltrue.” He looked at her then with new eyes. As much as he wished to show her the unhappy, it was impossible to deny the devotion that this healer had not only to Adeima and all the people around her, but even to the politics of Xenlaria and the plutolatry. It was quite beyond anything he could have expected even three days ago. Nevertheless, she wasn’t a true Xenlarian and she did not understand the plutolatry as he did.

“Gelfetia you are partly correct. We do as well remain committed to the fulltrue. However Gjintruk is no longer with us, and the oracle will be a simple matter to deal with. Therefore I can choose simply to keep silent in the matter. It is after all the best option we have remaining.”

Pretvuukra then took his hand, with surprising delicateness. “I only pray to Adeima AND Azealla that such think’n be correct.”

“As do I healer.” Was the only reasonable response.

CHAPTER 211

Seffin took it upon herself to ask the men what their names were, but in the holy Yorigbausa language as a test. As difficult as it was to believe, there was no denying that the two strange hoomas looked back at her as if she were speaking gibberish. They could not possibly be from Ubuntu or from the magic boat of the foreign hoomaas.

It took much time and extensive wordsong to provide the strangers with the fulltrue. It was most challenging, as they showed a deep disdain for her culture and all of her kinsfolk. Everyone in the cave continued to give them the straight-eye, for despite the lack of vigrus these visitors were still quite obviously the enemy.

She did her best though to keep the peace, and told them of how her own group had not been transformed by the Holy Mother, but that all of them had been born

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as hoomaas' and they all lived side by side with Gelfetia and the others in Ubuntu. The two not surprisingly were completely unwilling to accept her wordsong as fulltrue. It was not until she brought out little Ayozealla that the men became willing to consider the idea. They gave her daughter the straight-eye most intensely while Kwandic and Aninniyi stood close by them in case they chose to act with cruelty.

"It seems that the Holy Mother has chosen to make you residents of Ubuntu permanently." Aninniyi said this with the deep regret that she could imagine was shared by the whole group.

"But why?!" The shorter one finally yelled in strongvoice. "Why would Prijnak choose to make me, us into this disfigured 'speeseez' utterly lacking in gudstrength? Why, when we have always shown the deep fealty towards the Holy Mother and acted on Her behalf?"

Kwandic looked as if the unhappy was becoming permanently carved upon his face. The lines of hair above his eyes were drawn down into a 'V' and his mouth sides were drawn down as if unable to resist the ground-force. "Acted on Her behalf?! Grishneevit what nonsense! Your people are right now attacking our beloved kinfolk. Your whole tribe is strong-focused on wiping Ubuntu to dust!" The man took menacing steps forward and she briefly saw fraidness in the two men. She laid a hand gently on her lover's strong shoulder to remind him that they should not act in the same way that the evil ones did. She noticed that the other one, Gjintruk appeared to show less of the fraidness. Despite his lack of vigrus, he spoke forcefully.

"It is not our kinfolk who created the unhappy. Imotren and I became strong-focused on the bringing of revenge for the attack on our people and the murder of Itroveepu. It was YOUR people who brought on this attack in the beforetime!" Nasara! At last there was the slightest hint of clarity in this vast hidden mess. She gently pulled Kwandic back and gave the two men the straight-eye.

"Itroveepu? Buru aba, you really think that we delivered that man to Pritlaxtl?" It was absolutely insane, that someone could be motivated to send such a huge number of warriors on an attack to avenge one single person who the kinfolk had

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treated with far more respect than he deserved. According to the wordsong of her father, the man had always remained unruly despite the great patience shown him. Two things then happened at once. First three of her kinfolk made menacing steppins towards the two men who unconsciously took a half-step back. But then the one who was not a chief found his voice, and used it most unwisely.

“We may have been sapped of our gudstrength, but I promise you that I will stand with Gjintruk in defense against you murderous magic-makers.”

Now she found herself completely unable to reign in the strong unhappy from her kinfolk. Both men were lifted physically off the underfoot by Aninniyi and Mautide who wrapped their fists around the men’s tunics which swam upon each of their newly diminutive figures. Her friend now showed the strongest unhappy, his face only a handspan from the stranger. “Listen carefully now to my wordsong olòshì. WE are not murderers. WE do not deliver innocent kinfolk to Pritlaxtl. The one called Itroveepu was among a group of foreigners to discover who we are and what we look like. As followers of the Holy Mother, to protect against the condemnays, the man was kept in Ubuntu in order to prevent him from bringing knowledge of our existence to your people. Itroveepu lived out his days in gudstrength as one of our kinfolk. He-”

“What?! Itroveepu wasn’t killed?”

“Did you not hear what I just said you wèrè?⁴⁶ We do not commit such crimes against denisovianism. That behavior is reserved for stupid oloshi who march against innocent kinsfolk.”

The two men stared back in disbelief. Their mouths hung open for a long silent timespan before one of them opened and closed it in obvious attempt to speak. But soon enough, she joined the disbelief when she saw one of them throw his fist into the other and the two became embroiled in their own conflict.

“Son of gelf! You were so strong-focused on the revenge of your grandfather. Now I am cursed forever because of you.”

“Everyone knows the wordsong though. It filled my lineage with the unhappy for all my days. You were just as strong-focused on the attack as I.”

46 Yoruba term for lunatic

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Everyone was perfectly content to let the two Olóríburúkú⁴⁷ fight among themselves and not bring harm to the kinfolk. But the fighting suddenly came to a halt when a small dribble of life-fluid ran down the face of one man. The other stranger stared back at the first and now gently put a finger against his companion.

“Is this life-fluid?” But the man immediately answered his own question. “No. Such a thing isn’t possible. There are no creatures in the whole land with a life-fluid like this.”

The other put a finger to the same injury and stared at the red spot on his finger. “What kind of magic is this? How could we have life-fluid that is red?”

The stupidity which the men had shown was finally wearing away her patience. “Buru aba, that is just the way it is. Do not keep making such ridiculous queries.” She then turned to her kinfolk with disdain. Drekulye why did you stick us with these oloshi?”

But the man replied simply that Gelfetia had asked for the men to be brought away from Ubuntu. She was at first saturated with the unhappy, but that dissolved to mist when Drekulye related the defeat of the cruel ones, and how the Holy Mother had blinded everyone so that no spear might be brought up in attack.

“Aninniya, Seffin. It is another prophecy of the Holy Mother fulfilled!”

At the sound of Kwandic’s voice, she turned to give him a questioning look.

The man turned to her excitedly, but used the common language so the strangers would also see. “Remember in the place of prophecy, Gelfetia related that hatred fed leads to insides of red? This must be what the Holy Mother meant.”

However the man barely finished before a fist struck him directly in the soft place above the waist.

CHAPTER 212

He knew better then to bring this up with Rhumfa. She’d only go flying off in a fit of rage the minute she found out. But Huso was in bed with the woman, literally,

47 Yoruba term for an unfortunate person

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which didn't inspire confidence for him. It was a difficult choice. Other than Ereeko, there wasn't really another person who knew the ship as well as Rhumfa. In thinking it over though, this wasn't actually an issue that required intimate knowledge of the Boabab. Really there wasn't any particular area of expertise that he felt *would* be useful. So instead he called for ipade with Ikasha and Shadai. This of course meant meeting in the former's private room. Oneyda had insisted the woman not be allowed to leave and for once he was inclined to agree wholeheartedly.

Saaed watched the woman's face, searching the terrain there for clues to what might have led to the most egregious perfidy any member of the UPC had ever committed. What surprised him more than anything though was the absence of any expected emotion. She didn't guiltily avoid his gaze, but she didn't stare back with knowing disdain either. She looked back at him like someone who was completely unaware of her own guilt.

His thoughts were interrupted by the door opening to Shadai's lovely face.

Instantly the room became several degrees brighter.

"Hello Shadai. It's good to see you."

"It's nice to see you too Saaed. Thank you for all that you've done to help us get the ship back up into orbit."

He quickly dismissed her kindness, as it had obviously been a group effort. He then invited the woman to sit down and went through the findings from his analysis with Oibo. It took almost no time for Shadai to then turn and stare at their host

"That was an incredible risk Ikasha. Is that why you were out in the Gbowee?"

"It wasn't just an incredible risk. She's exposed a neolithic tribe to the most advanced technology known to humanity."

The woman threw her arms out like comets slingshotting out from a host star. Finally displaying some degree of emotion. "Chi moo. Don't you think I know that?!"

And, at last, there was an admission of guilt from her. He smiled inside, knowing he'd set his waya to record the whole thing. Oneyda was going to be swooning.

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“That ride out to the natives’ temple was the most terrifying thing I’ve done in my whole life.” She took a deep breath before continuing. But the story she offered was even more phenomenal. It was so absurd that he would have dismissed it without thought if not for the eerie coincidence with Oibo’s systems.

“So you’re saying that this virus which infected Oibo and seems to have given us answers to every structural or electrical problem showed up only moments after you delivered a replacement crystal to that... temple?” Shadai seemingly could do nothing but stare at the woman aghast.

“I think Rhumfa was right to worry over this... entity. It does seem as if whatever power exists here would have just kept sabotaging our systems until we finally gave in.”

“Saaed. I just can’t believe that some random force, or whatever it is could be so malicious.”

Shadai was a beautiful human being and the kindest on the ship, but she often went overboard with her empathy. “You can’t?” He stared back at the woman, wondering just how much she might be capable of forgiving. “Look they somehow undermined the rock underneath us, invited a group of natives to come barging into the ship, hell they probably damaged the air-cycling system as well.”

Despite showing no small amount of frustration, Shadai’s voice remained unusually calm. “We don’t know that it... or they caused all of this. All we know is that they told the native about it when she stared at the power crystal. Maybe they simply ‘saw’ things and provided us with clues. Look, we really don’t even know they exist much less what motivates them.”

He turned to the woman with a rare look of disdain. “Then why are we even here Shadai? What else besides these... beings would cause Rhumfa to receive a 500 year old distress signal in the first place?”

Ikasha then interrupted. “Frankly, I think that Saaed is right. Remember the record of that anthropologist, Ayube, who entered the natives’ temple? He said that the being claimed to have brought the Nelson Mandela, *our very first FTL ship*, all the way out here. And for what? Simply to deliver a power crystal? It doesn’t make the slightest sense from a teran perspective, but it does fall perfectly in line with what we’ve experienced on the surface here.

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Listening to Ikasha finally acknowledge his own fears only made him more anxious to put this place behind them as fast as possible. It seemed that their pilot hadn't been overemotional after all. She in fact had recognized the terrible danger long before the rest of them were able to put the pieces together.

CHAPTER 213

There was still much pain. However he at least was capable of standing up now. It was deeply impressive how much smart-know'n the foreigner had. Only a few days ago he was not even capable of moving without being overwhelmed with agony. Yet now, with Lrexduk at his side he could even make one or two steppins without the waves of black spots. The healer had even suggested that he might regain enough gudstrength to travel back in a few more days. Just knowing that his mate and his best warriors would share the journey with him ensured that there would be no fraidness for him. The only concern he need worry about was fodiens. Gelfetia had spoken ardently of the Holy Mother's edict against harming Her creations. It was something utterly foreign to his think'n and certainly would be the same for all the warriors. Yet with all of the many prophecies spoken by this enigmatic person, he found himself incapable of dismissing her advice even when it ran completely opposite his own logic.

That reminded him of the very challenging wordsong with his mate regarding the healer's experience with the oracle. The risk that such smart-know'n presented would mean that he would have to work closely with Pretvuukra throughout the return trip in navigating the very dangerous queries from the kinsfolk. It almost brought him to wish that Gelfetia were the healing woman for Xenlaria. For she clearly was blessed with much smart-know'n in the guidance of her people. His thoughts were interrupted by Pretvuukra's entrance. It was clear that the unhappy was dominant on her face, but who it was directed at was not yet clear. "Lrexduk, would you give me some time alone with your mate?"

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The beautiful man helped guide him to the sleeping mat before lightly rubbing a knobhorn and strolling casually out of the shelterspace. He then turned to the healer with the curiosity dominating his face.

“Nukremit.” She paused, clearly struggling to find the wordsong to properly express her inner turmoil. However he could offer nothing that would entice her to speak, as he remained ignorant of the cause for her struggle.

“Nukremit, the oracle back in the familyland. She will be confronted by you upon our return will she not?”

“Of course she will. If these inscrutable wordsongs are to be believed, it would be more than justified for us to deliver her directly to Pritlaxtl. The woman has committed the most egregious treachery ever undertaken by a member of the familyland.”

“I see.” There was another long pause as the woman digested this. “And then. Who will we choose to be the new oracle? With Gjintruk no longer among us, there would be no one to choose a successor.”

Ah, now the query was able to be seen. It would indeed be a challenging situation. There was no smart-know’n of what qualities the chief sought when choosing the oracle in the beforetime. One thing he did know with complete certainty. If the matter was not resolved before they returned to Xenlaria, the unrest might very well spark a political uprising, especially without Gjintruk to inspire the peoples’ confidence. He now held a newfound concern for their kinsfolk.

CHAPTER 214

The pain was barely noticeable. But more terrifying than that was Kwandic’s reaction. It took barely an eyeblink before the man had the offending foreigner on the underfoot with his hands wrapped around the poor oloshi’s throat.

“Kwandic!” She had never used such strong voice with him in the beforetime. But of course, such a thing had never been necessary until now. In all the time of their mating he had always shown great kindness and patience with all the kinfolk. It very much surprised her therefore to have to repeat the comment a second time before the man loosened his grip on the unfortunate man.

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“My love, I am sure that you wish to defend me.” She laid an arm now on his strong shoulder. “It is not at all necessary. These imps are without the slightest gudstrength. They would be lucky to even make it back to the village, much less bring harm to any of us. The only unhappy will be the need to care for them as we would a young’n until the two become able to contribute.”

Kwantic finally pulled himself off of the underfoot, not even concerning himself with the stranger now. But the unhappy remained deeply carved upon the terrain of his face. “It’s bad enough that we have to constantly remind Regina to devote time to the iran ologo. Now we will have to provide fodiens for these two [insulting term or pathetic].

“That reminds me. Where is Regina? I haven’t seen her in a couple of days.”

She turned at the sound of Adeeway’s voice. The comment brought her to wonder the same thing now that the woman’s absence was mentioned.

“She’s probably sleeping off another five servings of that fire water she devotes her life to.”

“That stuff’s more important to her than her own kinfolk.”

She was saddened at how the unhappy was now focused on the most destitute of their companions. But it also brought her to worry for the woman who generally didn’t go missing for more than a day or so, even when the cloud of fire water brought her to wrinkle her imú from the smell.

CHAPTER 215

Despite what Nukremit said, Jenvirey could not find it within herself to trust them. They were nothing but evil magic-makers and if the man hadn’t expressly forbidden it she would have taken much joy in sending their people to Pritlaxtl. This likely was why their warrior stood nearby and watched her carefully. What could possibly have brought the man to rescue such people would forever be a mystery within her smarati. She occasionally stole glances at the warrior, but the shocking wordsong from Bletneydfim stayed her hand from taking any action beyond this. She thought back to the quietwords spoken among the warriors, that if Gjintruk were still with them, it was more likely that the group would follow him

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and simply banish Nukremit. However without anyone else of influence, the peculiar truce continued to hold.

She therefore focused instead on packing her meager supplies along with the other kinfolk, bitterly thinking of the grand stories of plunder they had all been expected to enjoy. Instead, her pack was not the least bit heavy. In fact it was more barren than the slopes of Higsthon high above her. If she or one of the other warriors did not have the blessing to spot another meldabeast for fodiens, they would likely be incapable of surviving the trip back home. This brought her even more bitter thoughts of these magic-makers and the harm she so ardently wished upon them. Momentarily another of the strangers made steppins towards them and handed something to the warrior with quietwords passed between the two. She wondered what kind of sinister plot was being spoken of by the two before one of them reached out and handed over an exceptionally large kulmelon. It had to be the most beautiful crop she'd ever seen. Even Plujafa could not have grown something as luscious as this appeared to be. She tapped it and found it to be perfectly ripe, which was all the excuse she needed to break into the fruit and begin devouring it. Only when she'd consumed nearly half the fruit did she consider that maybe their people had put something with pouison inside. Just the mere thought turned her life-fluid cold and she instantly grabbed the other and told her that she would bring him great pain if the warrior did not eat some of the fruit too.

However the woman seemed most happy to do so. She spoke wordsong of their tribe being blessed with a doubling of the food stores only since the time of the attack. She then said that their healer insisted the extra be shared with the Xenlarians who might be short on fodiens after such a long trip. She queried the woman intensely as to how their fodiens might increase so profoundly, yet the woman claimed that there was no understanding at all by their people.

This brought her to insist that the woman swear on the spear of Prijnak that she spoke the fulltrue. How, in all the land could it be that a woman who faced attack by her people would then offer extra fodiens out of concern for her enemy's supplies. It brought her to consider how Nukremit had sought to protect their healer even despite the horrid name. How he even stole away the title from Bletneydfim when the man spoke quietwords of a clandestine attack.

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The whole experience managed to bring a great confusion within her. Had their people worked some odd magic on Nukremit? Or. Could it perhaps be that Gjintruk was mistaken in his brilliant speeches.

No. That was impossible. Their leader cared very much for every one of the kinsfolk. He was a wise and powerful man.

How could... How could she rectify the contradiction between the two?

Pretvuukra. She was the only one who could speak with authority on the matter.

She would absolutely query the woman most carefully throughout the return trip.

Chapter 216

Rhumfa woke up from another of Kotingre's artificial naps. The pills were sometimes the only thing that slowed her racing heart enough to make sleep at all possible. But it was clear that she was developing an addiction to them. It was all becoming clear to her. The barely stifled breakdowns, the pushback from the crew, and now her inability to get any kind of relaxation without this artificial crutch. It was a genetic defect that would curse her bloodline forever.

Unless.

After all. There really wasn't anything left to stay alive for. Once she got the ship set on course for the Mars colony, the rest of them wouldn't have any need for her. The moment they got back to Sol and all this absurdity got to the ears of the UPC, her career would be in the toilet anyway. She could just set an automatic timer to wake up Ereeko when they approached the Kuiper belt and there'd be plenty of time to slow the ship.

Her macabre thoughts were interrupted by the flashing light from the interface. It didn't even seem worth the effort to respond to such things now. But a beniseed of curiosity moved her fingers anyway.

Strangely, the message was labeled 'unknown' which caused her to sit up on the mat in confusion. How could the sender not be known by Oibo? The AI knew every single person on the whole ship. Now the tiny seed of curiosity grow to a coconut, and she told Oibo to play the message.

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“Rhumfa. It is understandable that your experience on this planet has been deeply challenging for you. It is most unfortunate that you were forced to endure such a drastically confusing change in your understanding of the universe in what, for you, would be considered an exceptionally brief period of time. Your species has shown magnificent progress since the incorporation of extrasolar technology among your people. It is only with the kind of strength that you have shown that people such as yourself will continue to bring positive change to your people. You are a wonderful leader and a uniquely gifted being.

You may be with the assurance that there will be no retribution by the United Planetary Council. All of you have performed with the greatest courage and honor throughout this experience. It is hoped that your people will continue to grow and mature with similar grace as your culture evolves. The time shared with your crew here has been a gift which will be treasured for many of your lifetimes.”

Her jaw hung slack as she stared at the words on her pad. What kind of strange hoax was this and who could've written such a thing? For that matter, how could anyone have known that she was-

Huso. Nobody else could've guessed her state of mind but him.

But pinging his quarters only brought the groggy voice of someone clearly yanked unceremoniously from the depths of sleep.

Next she messaged Manuel.

“I need to ask you an unusual favor Manuel.”

There was a suspicious pause before the man answered. “Ooo-kay. What is it Rhumfa?”

“Can you trace the origin of a message transmitted-” she glanced over at the screen for a timestamp only to see the screen was blank.

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“Buru aba!”

Now the suspicion was replaced by the more regular concern. “What is it Rhumfa?”

Afraid that her voice would start shaking, she took a careful and slow breath before answering. “Manuel, can you look at the logs and see if there was any transmission sent to me in the last hour?”

There was a short pause while he ostensibly checked into Oibo’s logs. “I don’t see anything Rhumfa. Did you get an error on your pad?”

“No Manuel. I absolutely received a message, from who is the question.”

“Rhumfa, it’s nearly midnight. Most of the crew is in bed.”

“Well. Okay, have there been any messages sent to my quarters in the past 24 hours?”

“Hold on. I’ll look.”

There was a pause that seemed long enough to justify entering stasis before a much slower and more confused voice came through her pad. “Rhumfa. You’re not going to believe this-”

“Oh, believe me Manuel. At this point I’d believe we’ve gone back in time or something.”

“Well. It’s nearly that inexplicable. Somehow Oibo’s systems have been completely wiped of all data from the point where we left NewMali.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I can’t say for sure what’s going on yet. You’ll have to give me some time to look through the backups. But there’s no record of any kind to prove that we ever visited that planet.”

Her spine turned to ice then at the thought of what kind of power they’d been dealing with. She couldn’t imagine any technology at this point which could bring the degree of frightening changes that she’d seen over the past few weeks. The fear and adrenaline pulsing through her brought with it the fear that she wouldn’t be sleeping ever again.

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Chapter 217

“You don’t understand Shadai. There was nobody else outside the ship.” Kinfe stared at him with hard eyes. “How could someone have known that I’d struck my head? I don’t even remember giving Oibo the command to open the airlock door.” “Oh I don’t think it’s so puzzling. Kotingre said that your little escapade was pretty bad. Chances are you just managed to crawl inside and don’t remember it. Head trauma can do strange things to our memory.”

She stayed carefully hidden until the two left the room before making her way through the hallways and into a place that the strange voice said would be empty. Then Regina spent much time sharing wordsong with the voice that spoke yet was not alive. She learned about the ground force and why it was different on this magic boat then in her own village. She also learned how to use one of the fantastic ‘med-ee-kul’ tools to examine her body and learned that her hip bones were too fragile for properly giving birth. More importantly though, she learned that with the lower ground-force on the magic boat she might finally circumvent such a problem. This of course would have to wait until the magical ones went into their long sleep of travel. But the learning that she was getting from the strange voice was enough to bring her vast levels of understanding, far beyond even what Gelfetia possessed.

The greatest thrill of all though, was that the magic boat of these hoomaas would soon travel to the mysterious land of Urth with the vast waters of an ‘oh-shun’ lapping on the shore of Lagos and the shelterspaces stretching far into the sky. She continued gaining smart-know’n from the one called Oibo as she waited for the visitors to finally submit to their age-long sleep. She stared at pictures from their magical world and listened to speeches and conversations from countless Yorigbausa leaders. Soon, very soon indeed, she would set her bare feet upon the underfoot which had given birth to every one of her hoomaas kinfolk. The dream, of all of her people, would at last become a reality.

The End

‘we be no-avoidin disaster if the nature of our peril’ mayhaps Pleasin to be see'in you. Deedins Saùlé – drummed her fingers on the desk, a habit as old as time itself – exotic –the unspoken [conclusion] hung in air btwn them like a... smile dissolved into a pinched, half-starved look .. he just stood, staring after her the constant force both of gravity and the realization of what she'd done was like a [x] dragging her shoulders down to the floor Kinfe sat bolt-upright suddenly. Realizing she didn't remember getting into the airlock she felt queezy with nerves, as if a poisoned ocean sloshed within her belly The ship seemed different now, it's meaning altered, before at NewMali everything had had a feeling of purpose, now it felt more like a tomb