

“Come in.” A croaky rasp greeted my knock. I opened the door with one hand, a pot of yesterday's stew cradled against my chest. The fetid twin odors of urine and decay wafted toward me. Labored breathing wheezed from the far corner of the hut's single room. By the light of a flickering candle, I could barely make out the shrunken figure of Yoka Sutu, propped on a stack of pillows. She was failing fast.

My heart, already laden with worry and self-doubt, sank at the sight of how much the crone had slipped in just two days since my last visit. I desperately needed Yoka's wise counsel. For weeks I'd been biding my time, hoping the crone would regain the strength to hear me out properly. Instead, her end seemed ever nearer. Best to speak up before it was too late.

The old woman was too weak to stand on her own anymore. On my last visit, she admitted to conversing with voices in her head. I didn't know whether to believe that, yet surely, she still kept a supply of her hallucinatory Venga nuggets handy. Perhaps the voices were tribal ancestors, channeled to console her.

“How are you feeling, *abela*?” I used the Onwei term for grandmother.

In response, Yoka lapsed into a spasm of coughs and gurgles, ending by spitting a large glob of mucus into a bucket by her bed. She lay panting and wiped her shriveled mouth. “I have been better.” She turned toward me and nudged her head toward the pail. “Be so good as to empty this thing. It seems like my bodily wastes are all erupting from the wrong end.”

Wincing, I held the pail at arm's length and took it to the larger water bucket to rinse out. I felt a twinge of resentment for having to deal with the excretions of this shriveled old woman. How easy it would be to nudge her that last step into the grave and be done with it.

With a shiver, the bitter feeling passed as quickly as it came. I could never do anything to hurt the person who nursed me around the clock for five days when I, myself, lay at death's door after a bullet ripped through my chest. Was it only a year and a half ago? Now the tables were turned.

I dished out the stew and pulled up a stool to feed Yoka. The crone puckered her shriveled grin and reached for my arm. “You are a sweet girl to look after a sick old woman, Keltyn. You are patient. Luz always seems in a hurry when it's her turn.”

“She has lots on her mind these days,” I responded. The truth, I knew, was that Luz Hogarth longed to be emancipated from her mother. She was ready to elope if Trieste did not acquiesce soon, and that would mean trouble for me. I doubted I could handle the role of Trieste's surrogate daughter. “Mama” could be demanding, fussy, self-pitying, overwrought or hypochondriacal, sometimes all at once. At other times she was the salt of the earth.

I watched Yoka dutifully slurp the stew broth and gum

the vegetables. After five minutes, she lay her head back and waved off the spoon. “Done. All I need is enough fluid to keep up with this cursed phlegm.” She stared at the ceiling. “Who would have thought that you could end by drowning in your own discharges?” She coughed up another gob and pulled the pail up to her mouth, eyeing me as she spat. “How can you bear to watch this? Disgusting.” She used two fingers to wipe her mouth.

Good question, I wondered. After my time on the mountain with Luz, I was no rookie at caring for another person’s bodily functions, but experience didn’t make the task any easier.

“Abela, I need to ask you something.”

Yoka raised her formerly bushy eyebrows, now wispy strands.

“Do you believe in premonitions?”

“Ha,” she barked. “You seem to forget my job, girl. For years, I alone guided this tribe’s fortunes, through the gift of prophecy.”

True enough, though the way she wielded this power gained her an ample share of skeptics and outright enemies. I focused on a spot on the wall behind Yoka. “No, I mean, should the average person put stock into their intuition?”

“Of course.” Yoka eyed me closely. “If your powers of reason can’t give you an answer, then you must listen to the quiet voice within.”

“The voice isn’t quiet, and it’s telling me something I really don’t want to hear.” I took a deep breath. As if dreams weren’t enough, badgering me on and off for almost the whole seventeen months I had lived among the Onwei, lately the visions appeared in front of my eyes during broad daylight.

I pressed a hand to my temple, caught in the memory of yesterday. I went to visit Efrain. We sat on the rug facing each other. He tried to purr a melancholy love song — his stock in trade — while strumming his guitar. He halted in its midst, staring at me. I saw herself in his eyes, pale and shaking. At that moment, I decided to seek help from Yoka, ill or not.

“Tell me,” said the crone.

“They’re coming back. Sir Oscar Bailey is plotting a return.”

Yoka’s watery eyes studied me. “I thought you managed to convince him that the stone is radioactive.”

“He didn’t buy it. He could see right through me. I was too nervous to carry off the bluff.”

“Ha.” The crone glowered now, struggling to sit up straight. “If your crazy plan brought all that chaos to our people with no benefit at all on your end, well then, you must be cursed.”

I must be. Yoka wasn’t acting as sympathetic as I hoped. “There’s more.”

“More conflict? I hope I’m gone before it hits us.” Yoka humphed and plopped her head back.

“Do you remember Buck Kranepool?”

“Your pilot? Oh, yes. He stuck out like a sore thumb at Aldo’s funeral, quite ill at ease.”

“When I first voiced an inclination to stay, Buck predicted I should help the Onwei negotiate mining rights. I accepted that, but now this forewarning raises the stakes. In these dreams, I am the one who leads the Onwei to resist an invasion.”

Yoka gaped as she turned to face me again. “Aha. A regular Joan of Arc. Say this for you, girl. You dream big. An invasion.”

“No, Yoka. I don’t want any of this. I’d rather leave things as they are. Sometimes I wish I were still a junior geologist in Ontario. But I fell for Bailey’s promise. When I returned, he was going to give me the cushiest gig that any scientist could ever get.”

“He cast his spell over you,” said Yoka.

“Exactly. It was the ambition of every researcher, too good to be true for a twenty-five-year-old nerd, especially for a Cree person, the first in her family ever to attend college.”

“‘Too good to be true’ means there is a catch,” she observed.

“I thought I had found the best outcome.” My jaw clenched. “I could be dead. I could be in prison in Canada. I could have been exiled to Chinese Siberia. But now, these premonitions tell me I need to prepare for another showdown. I can feel it, deep in my bones. Sir Oscar will send another mission to find iridium here, and this one will have higher stakes than the last.” My head rattled. “The only mystery is why he hasn’t moved yet.”

“So.” Yoka slumped back on her pillow. “Why do you disturb an old woman’s peace with these malicious hunches of yours?”

I chewed my lip. Yoka could be gratingly distant. “I...I hoped you could tell me whether there is any truth to them.”

She sniffled. “Truth? Truth is like history, defined by the winners. You won’t know it’s the truth until afterward. If you would act, you must do so before the truth becomes clear.” She lapsed into another coughing fit, managing only to croak, “Go now. Leave me.”

By the time I cleared the dishes, lit a fresh candle, and filled the water bucket from the rain barrel outside, the old woman had stopped coughing and pulled the blankets over her head.

The crone hadn’t offered consolation for my troubled musings. Indeed, she had only compounded them, but I knew Yoka better than to expect sympathy. It was not in her nature.

What I really craved was daylight to help me feel alive again, but that would be several weeks in coming. If, two years ago, someone had told me I was destined to live the rest of my life in Antarctica, I would have never been able to imagine such a scenario.

I desperately wished this cup would pass from me, knowing all the while it was not to be. My fate was sealed the moment four Onwei rode into our camp, the morning after Bailey Voyager crash-landed in a crater.

“Joan of Arc!” If Yoka’s analogy was correct, I would need a thick suit of armor.