

VINDICATION

Peering from the transport window, the Physician felt vertigo as the rugged canyon below came to a sudden end against a massive white wall. A giant wedge, gleaming in the relentless glare of the planet's yellow sun, ascended several hundred *ha'khali* from the floor of the valley, absolutely astonishing in its sheer scale. As the transport approached to land, the Physician could see a large entrapped body of water behind the colossal structure.

"A dam," he whispered to himself, and found his spirit lifting. The Physician's face did not manifest a smile--that was a biological reaction quite alien to his race--but the eyes did narrow slightly in a gesture any other *Malkh'anki* would recognize as satisfaction. He had seen dams before; there were many on his *Malkh'a* and on *Malkh'ank* colonies throughout the known galaxy. But this is the first that he had seen that had been constructed by aliens.

Of course, he thought, water is the most important substance for life on any world. A species could not really be said to be intelligent until it had some measure of control over the vital fluid: for sustenance, for agriculture, for power generation. These beings that lived on this world--khu'munks, as closely as he could pronounce one common word among many they had for themselves--would've sought to control water in this desert region just as those who lived on Malkh'a had a thousand generations before.

This was one of the few artificial features still visible on this world's surface; most examples of *khu'munk* technology and civilization lay buried under a dozen *ha'khali* of soil. The *khu'munks* had died off suddenly almost 700 stellar orbits in the past, the victims of their own tragic divisions. The Physician's mind darkened at the question: *Why do promising young species end up destroying themselves?* First the *Eo'lii*, now the poor *khu'munks*. *If only these unfortunate civilizations held out a little longer, he wondered, might we have been able to help them?*

The transport settled gently onto a flat, broken surface exposed in the terrain near the dam. The hum from the gravitational amps faded as they spun down; a boarding ramp extended with a hiss. The Physician stepped out into the sunlight. *Delightfully warm, but not nearly humid enough to be comfortable,* was his immediate impression.

A large *Malkh'anki* marked with the symbol of a Marshall approached, his body markings immediately identifying him as a kinsman, one of the same *lakh*. In his youth, the Physician had carried a certain disdain for Marshalls; their constant management and direction of the efforts of others seemed to place them on a privileged step above others. Marshalls carried a certain *a'lakhi* smugness because of it. This one reeked of fearfulness that the Physician's sensitive nasal glands picked up immediately.

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"This one is the Physician," he said.

"Physician," the Marshall opened formally, "Your service to the *lakh* is needed."

"Marshall," the Physician replied in the expected form, "This one exists to serve the *lakh*."

The Marshall regarded him scornfully.

"This one has responsibility for the archaeological excavations in this region. This one humbly asks you to overlook the discourtesy of summoning you here on such short notice." The Marshall's apology did not sound apologetic.

"If this one is to be of service, no discourtesy is taken," the Physician replied sanguinely.

"You are acquainted with Scholar of *Telel'akh*."

"Yes," said the Physician, instantly intrigued, "This one studied with the Scholar for several seasons. *The Scholar here? How much time had passed since...*

"The Scholar is in service to this one's project and is not well," the Marshall said, "not well at all."

"What is wrong with him that this one should be brought from so far away? Certainly, other physicians of the *lakh* were closer." The Physician moderated his tone so as not to cast untoward and unwise aspersions.

"The Scholar is not of sound mind lately, and has said...things," the Marshall said, a look of disdain on his face.

"This one would know which things."

"Physician, this one would not repeat them. Let this one simply state that some of them are," the Marshall momentarily weighed the use of the final word, "*a'lakhi*."

The Physician was stunned. The Scholar's accomplishments had been noted throughout the *lakh*. He had been given the honor of being named an One-Who-Should-Be-Emulated. For him to engage in any kind of *a'lakhi*--the word could convey a wide range of excessive offense from sin to anti-social behavior to treason against the hive--was simply unthinkable. *Indeed, it was the Scholar who so long ago...*

"Unthinkable," the Physician finally said.

"The Scholar has held to the highest standard of the *lakh*," the Marshall said. "It therefore surprises this one that he would ask for you. Your record of *a'lakhi* criminality..."

"...is the record of youthful arrogance. It was the Scholar's intervention that led to the purging of my degenerate ideals. This one believes his self-dedication to the *lakh* has been many times reaffirmed since then."

"This one hopes so. It is only out of respect for the Scholar's importance to the *lakh* that this one would accede to his request for one such as you. Accompany this one," the Marshall said, climbing into a groundroamer.

The Physician climbed in to the roamer, saying nothing as he pushed back the memories of his "re-education." Those were better left for the occasional nightmare.

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The roamer glided along a faintly-marked road from the dam and sped toward the archaeological camp in the distance.

By way of small talk, the Marshall recounted the site's history, as it had been recovered. This facility was a hydroelectric dam, with a system of water conduits routed through turbines to generate electricity. The site had been constructed about 800 stellar orbits before the present; the concrete in the interior of the dam was still hardening. Concrete, electric turbines...it was clear, the *khu'munks* had not climbed high on the tree of science, an opinion the Marshall seemed to enjoy imparting. The Physician said nothing, but felt a little sympathy for this race of beings that *almost* survived to become interstellar and, thus, immortal. The *Eo'lii* all over again.

"*Khoo'ver*. That is what the *khu'munks* called this place. *Khoo'ver Daam*," the Marshall said.

"They gave names to their dams?" the Physician asked.

"Yes. This one seems to have been named after an official they called *Prez'i'dent*."

"After an individual?" the Physician asked, smothering the pang of long-dormant perverse delight that asserted itself. An inner voice squelched the joy: *This one must uphold the lakh*.

"Yes. Very *a'lakhi*, isn't it? Of course, that's why the *khu'munks* are extinct. Just like the *Eo'lii*. No sense of *lakh*," the Marshall said, as if passing final judgment.

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The Scholar was stalking around the hut, muttering to himself. The Physician saw that he had aged greatly in the seasons that had intervened. The spots on the elder's thorax had expanded and faded, and the spines on his exoskeleton were chipped and abraded. Even the voice seemed different, raspier and lower-pitched than before. The Physician regarded the Scholar for a long while before the elder realized his former pupil had entered the room.

"Pupil," the elder said with noticeable affection. "Bright Pupil, this one is so glad you have come."

"This one has been accepted as Physician," the Physician said with equanimity.

"Of course, of course," the Scholar said, "Please, come forward. Let this one look at you."

The Physician took a few tentative steps toward the Scholar. The Scholar, as if living a pleasant dream, reached out and touched his former pupil.

"You've grown well," the Scholar said.

"This one is told you are unwell. This one asks how to be of service," the Physician said, re-establishing the distance that had always existed between them, a distance the Scholar seemed intent on closing now.

The Scholar regained a measure of self-control.

"Physician, this one has had reason to recall our earlier history in recent days," the Scholar said.

"Yes?"

"And this one remembers being closed to your ideas."

"This one's ideas? They were *a'lakhi*." *This one must uphold the lakh*, the inner voice repeated.

"Yes! Yes!" the Scholar exclaimed, seeming to lose hold of reality again. "And I've seen those ideas in action!"

"This one does not understand."

"The *khu'munks*! You would recognize your own ideas in their society!"

"The *khu'munks* are extinct."

"Yes, but they lived according to a kind of individuality you prophesized!" the Scholar said gleefully.

Images of his correction flashed in the Physician's mind and he felt once again the thousand pains the *lakh* had inflicted upon him to get his mind straight. This conversation with the Scholar was heading very rapidly into *a'lakhi* and the imperative flashed in his mind once again: *This one must uphold the lakh*.

Still, an ember inside him started glowing and long repressed thoughts came rushing back.

"Self-direction?" the Physician asked, surprised at the words escaping his mouth. A most *a'lakhi* concept.

"Self-direction! Self-affiliation! Self-empowerment! These *khu'munks* lived it!"

"Spontaneous order?"

"Yes!"

"Participatory social regulation?"

"Yes!"

Simultaneous waves of joy and nausea crashed together in the mind of the Physician. His old ideas had been vindicated. The ideas the Physician had dared to speak of openly in his youth. The ideas that the Scholar had...had...

"This one was corrected for such ideas," the Physician said with some anger rising in his voice, "This one remembers that it was you who demanded the correction."

The Scholar lowered his head in shame. "This one," he said after a long time, "had always accepted the *lakh* without question. This one heard your brilliance, but would not listen. This one felt only a desire to uphold the *lakh*."

"All of this overturned by the validation of my ideas?" the Physician asked skeptically.

"That was the first fissure in this one's beliefs: knowing your ideas *could* work. What this one never imagined is that a discovery here would show that they *should*."

"What discovery?"

"Let this one show you," the Scholar said.

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If one imagined a layer of muscle tissue over the skeleton, one could almost see the khu'munk in the bones. The form of a biped was clear, even with the remains being quite fragmentary. Like a *Malkh'ank*, the *khu'munk* had two manipulator arms and finger appendages to grasp tools and manipulate objects. The remnants of cloth were indicative of clothing.

"They seem about the same height as us," the Physician said.

"Yes, but more massive. This one was a male and would've been very strong. This one doubts we would defeat them in single, unarmed combat."

"Any idea of his function?"

"It is unclear, probably a technician of some kind," the Scholar said, sounding much like the professor the Physician had known in his youth, "What we do know is that he died in the calamity that killed all the other *khu'munks*. He was found in a well-sealed chamber inside the hydroelectric plant. As luck would have it, he was covered in lubricating oil shortly after his death. That, in combination with the dry air and closed environment, preserved the remains well."

"What killed them?"

"The very question this one intends to answer for you," the Scholar said, his enthusiasm peaking once again. "The very question."

The Scholar lifted a tablet from the examination table and handed it to the Physician.

"It's an analysis of the biological agent that killed the *khu'munks*. Remnants were found in this one's body. It was a virus, airborne, very short incubation period."

"A weapon?" the Physician asked.

"Almost certainly."

"Perhaps this one's ideas..." the Physician started.

"Here is what is so interesting," the Scholar pointed at a chemical symbol on the tablet's screen.

"Kordazine," the Physician recognized it immediately. "An amino acid."

The Scholar nodded.

"This one does not understand," the Physician said.

"Do you remember what killed the *Eo'lii*?"

"A plague of some kind, as this one recalls."

The Scholar smiled and touched a control on the tablet. The screen changed, showing an analysis of the *Eo'lii* superplague virus. Once again, the kordazine symbol was present.

The Physician felt a wave of fear. *This one must uphold...*

"Kordazine," the Scholar said, "though fundamental to life on our world, is unknown among organisms on the *Eo'lii* or *khu'munk* homeworlds."

The Physician felt the brands of correction on his flesh again. *This one must uphold...*

"So, now you understand! You know why I have sent for you!" the Scholar thundered, "You have seen the formula for a new order! And I have discovered why it must come!" The Scholar swooped around the examination room. "The *lakh* must be brought down!"

After a moment, the Physician spoke. "We must be cautious with this information."

"Of course, of course," the Scholar said. "This one is so glad you came. You are the only one that could understand--truly understand--the significance of this. My very Bright Pupil."

"This one is gratified that you chose to share this only with me," the Physician said.

The Scholar's face manifested a look of joy. He never saw the syringe the Physician held.

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The Physician exited the examination room and encountered the Marshall.

"The Scholar is dead," the Physician said without emotion.

"Dead?" the Marshall asked, surprised.

"Yes. The *khu'munk* body is contaminated with residue from the biological weapon they killed themselves with. Exposure to it, even all this time, led to the Scholar's degenerative psychosis and, ultimately, death. Dispose of the *khu'munk* remains and the Scholar's corpse immediately."

The Marshall looked at the Physician skeptically.

"Immediately," the Physician repeated. The Marshall sensed that he should obey and marched off to gather a crew to remove the two bodies from the examination room.

The Physician walked back toward the dam, to the waiting transport, and the inner voice that reminded him to uphold the *lakh* had gone back to sleep.