

MEDICINE FOR HOPE

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Fiction

Fog, like dust, clung around Ana as she stood on the peak, looking down to the oblivion of gray below. It was just starting to snow and the fat flakes disappeared and blended into the gray scenery around them. Ana clutched her bag of medicine close. It wouldn't be long now before she and her companion, Afwer, reached Hope, the small human settlement to the west of the peak. It would be quite a journey down the rocky, icy hillside, but Ana knew Afwer grew up climbing and exploring the mountains. She didn't know much about it, but she trusted the Nihonian.

"Ana." The pale young man appeared through the fog, running his fingers through the feathers he had instead of hair. "The clouds are dark. A storm is coming."

"Then we need to hurry."

Ana took one last glance into the fog below and stepped away from the edge.

"There's a way down this way."

She hoped to the gods and goddesses of the planet that they wouldn't have to go back down the way they came. It would take too much time, and they had to get the medicine back to her home as quickly as possible. Then, after all was well, maybe they could finally work on an alliance between the humans the Kurhytians.

When Ana's grandmother first came to the planet of Niho, relationships between the Kurhyt tribe and the human settlers were quite rocky. The humans hadn't meant to make their landing on the rocky planet nor meet with the natives. Though the Kurhytian tribe, which had settled in the mountains above where the humans had crash landed, were friendly enough, the humans were still on guard and defensive. This led to many years of indifference between the people. Now at last Ana could show Ivan and all the rest of her people that it was possible for the humans and Kurhytians to work together towards a greater good.

This first task between them was to save the humans from the fever that was now infecting them. The Kurhytian Council had sent one lone

adventurer with her, Afwer, which she had been grateful for. Afwer knew these woods and cliffs a little better than she did. Together they would carry the medicine home to Hope. Kurhytian and Human. It was history being made.

“Let’s go this way.” Ana gestured for Afwer to follow her along the cliff’s edge and into the fog. The Kurhytian nodded and pulled his medicine bag closer around him before following Ana into the thick, gray clouds. “Can you see anything through this?” Ana asked. She knew that native Nihonians had better eyesight than humans. Their eyes were better adjusted to see through the thick fogs that were often present against the slopes of the mountains.

“No. Not this.” Afwer said. The fog gave way partly, as they walked. Before them was a long slope, down from the peak with a cascading waterfall of boulders, and mounds of snow and ice.

“There.” Ana sighed with relief. “That should take us down quickly.”

“I agree.” Afwer said.

“You lead the way.” Ana said, “You can see better through the fog than I can.”

Afwer nodded and took a step ahead of her, leading her down the slope of jutting boulders. The fog grew thinner as they made their way down. Where it had once choked the air and clung to the earth and ice like a cloak, now it was only swirling wisps among the drifting snow. Despite the scene being so familiar, the boulders, the ice, and the fog, Ana still took a moment to admire its silent beauty.

“Ana, your people... when we arrive back at Hope, they’re not expecting me are they?” Afwer said, jumping off a tall boulder down to solid ground.

Ana didn’t answer at first, she sat on the edge of the icy rock, looking down at him thoughtfully.

“No. They aren’t.” He held out his hand to her and she took it. “I went without permission. But you must understand, it was the only way. Ivan is the leader, he never would have let me go if he knew where I was going. He’s stubborn and arrogant, and... he won’t ask for help. He thinks that we can find a cure on our own, but I know we can’t. Besides, why can’t humans and Nihonians work together? After all, we share the same planet now... I kept trying to tell him... Your tribe, Afwer, you Kurhytians are our neighbors. I believe it would benefit all of us if we could set aside our small differences and work together from now on.”

He helped her jump down from the tall boulder.

"I've thought so too." Afwer said.

"It's why I've studied your language for so long." Ana said.

"Some of the ways you say things is funny, though." Afwer said with a grin.

"Hey, I have limited resources." Ana frowned.

The rest of the way down was a long incline, leading straight into a grove of towering coniferous trees. Ana sighed, the rocky grove reminded her of the place her ancestors had made their homes from the scraps of the mothership. They had to hurry. Today had been wasted on small talk.

"Come on, Afwer! This way."

It was late afternoon by the time they reached the roaring rapids of Wyatt's River, as her people called it. She wasn't sure what name Afwer had for it. It was an enormous, freezing river that frothed and roared across boulders and ice, coming down from one of the mountain range's many glaciers.

"This river leads through Hope?" Afwer said.

"No, not through Hope. Near our village we used a piece of the mothership to build a bridge across into better hunting grounds, but it will take too long to go around. We must find a way to cross near here. There must be a place where the water is shallow..." There was silence for a moment as Ana led Afwer along the rocky riverbank.

"Ana? What is a mothership?"

"It's how we came here. It's like a boat for the sky."

"A boat for the sky..." Afwer looked up wonderingly. "My people always assumed that perhaps you were our sibling race, sent to us by Ayog and Oia."

"The God and Goddess? Maybe we were," Ana said. "Look! A log!"

Ana pointed over towards an enormous fallen tree that spanned across the river. "We can cross there!"

"Is it safe?" Afwer said.

It looked safe at least on the outside.

"We don't have a choice. We must cross here, Afwer. There may not be another opportunity for hours. We're running out of time."

"I understand, here." Afwer pulled a long rope out from his bag. "We can use this. If one of us falls in the river..."

"The other can pull them out," Ana said, taking one end of the rope and tying it around her waist. "You go first."

Ana gestured towards the log. Afwer shook his head.

"You lead." He replied.

Ana offered him a smile and then shakily climbed up onto the top of the log. She held out her arms for balance, trying not to look down at the rapids below. The rope was long enough that Ana was able to cross first before Afwer started out. She breathed a sigh of relief when she at last jumped off the log onto solid ground.

“Come on!” She called out to him, though she knew he couldn’t hear her over the roar of the water.

Afwer climbed up onto the log and began to steadily make his way across the water. Ana mumbled a short prayer to Ayog, the God of the earth as she watched him reach the middle.

It all happened in seconds, before Ana could shout a warning. Afwer set all his weight on the middle of the log, and he was about to take another step forward when the entire tree broke in two. Its middle shattered into a million rotten pieces, and Afwer came tumbling down with it into the icy rapids below. The rope around Ana’s waist jerked and pulled her forward. She grabbed the rope, pulling with all her strength. It cut into her waist and into her hands. It burned and tore away the skin on her palms, but she refused to let go. It was her fault they were in this mess and she was terrified she might lose Afwer because of it. Her eyes filled with tears and they clung onto her lashes, freezing in place.

“Come on... come on...” She kept pulling, despite her hands burning and her waist aching. Afwer surfaced, at last, coughing and gasping for breath.

“Afwer! Thank the gods!” Ana reached out and grabbed his hand, pulling him to shore.

He shivered, even his Nihonian blood wasn’t used to being wet in such cold temperatures. The droplets of water on his pale skin were already beginning to freeze over.

“Here,” Ana draped her own cloak around him, “hope is just down the hill, this way. There we can find you some dry clothes.”

“Are you alright?” Afwer said.

“I... I’ll be okay. Once we get back to Hope... once we... finish this. I’ll be okay.”

“Ana.” Afwer took her hand, “Lets finish it then.”

Ana could hear the growling of the generators that had been built from different parts of the mothership. Unfortunately, there was someone on guard at the bridge, though Ana should have suspected it. She took a deep breath and stepped towards him, Afwer following close behind.

“Gabriel?” The old man looked up from the white rapids below the makeshift metal bridge with wide eyes, his breath was being caught in the cold air by turning into mist.

“Ana? You’re alive!” Before Ana could even reply Gabriel threw his shaking arms around her, and squeezed her tightly. “I was so worried after you disappeared!”

“I’m alright, Gabriel, I promise.” Ana said, hugging him back.

Gabriel looked up to see Afwer and Ana felt his embrace tense. The Kurhytian was confused, he only knew a little bit of the language Ana used. “It’s alright.” Ana pulled away from Gabriel with a grin. “Gabriel, this is Afwer. Afwer,” She switched back to the Kurhytian’s own language. “This is Gabriel. He’s like a father to me, really.”

Afwer made a short bow, and Ana turned back to the older man. “I went to the Kurhytian council, Gabriel, like I said I’d do! They agreed with me, they think an alliance...”

“Ana.” Gabriel said. “You know how Ivan is going to feel about this. He is your leader just as much as he is mine.”

“I know, but...”

“He is already furious that you’ve been missing. How do you think he’s going to react when he sees this Afwer?”

“We’ve brought medicine, Gabriel! They gave us a cure! As a way of offering a peaceful alliance.”

“A... cure?” Gabriel said. “Impossible! Ivan’s scientists did more research than they ever have and...”

“The Kurhytians have been here for much longer than we have, Gabriel...” She trailed off before continuing. “I don’t have to argue with you or prove anything to you, do I? I know you trust me. Let’s find Ivan. We need to get this medicine to the people as soon as possible.” She gestured to Afwer for him to follow her. He nodded, holding his bag of medicine tightly.

“Are we going to administer it to the people?”

“We have to talk to Ivan first.”

“You know as well as I do that people are dying, many can’t wait a moment longer.” Afwer said.

“I know, but if I don’t talk to Ivan about this an alliance will never be possible. If he even attributes all of them getting better to us finding the cure. He’ll believe we did this behind his back and that it was some sort of untrustworthy act. The man has a temper, and he doesn’t really trust anyone but himself.”

Afwer shook his head. "I understand. You lead the way. No matter what happens, I'm sure we can find a way to get the medicine to your people."

"Follow me." Ana took his arm, but Gabriel called out before they went into the town.

"Ana, if anyone sees you with the Kurhytian there could be trouble."

"We'll be careful, Gabriel, thank you."

"What did he say? I didn't catch it all."

"He says that people will go tell Ivan if they see you, and if Ivan finds out about us before we can get a word in... I don't want to think about it. Let's go around the back of town, I know the way. No one really goes there, especially not when the snow's this bad."

The afternoon had turned into a small blizzard, the snow hitting Ana's cheeks and stinging her skin. She was ready to go inside and wrap herself in warm wool blankets by a fire. Her eyelashes were still frozen from tears that never fell. "Ivan's house is just this way."

"Who's there?"

"Ana, look out." Afwer pulled her away from what she now saw as the light of a torch.

Daniel, one of Hope's best hunters, spun around to see who he had heard. Even through the thick falling snow and wisps of fog he caught a glimpse of them. She had made a mistake, completely forgetting about the afternoon guards who took turns marching around the town, including behind the houses. It was apparently Daniel's turn tonight, and he would certainly turn both Afwer and Ana in to Ivan.

"I said, who's there! I know you're out there." Daniel swung the torch forward, and the light fell across Ana's face, burning her eyes.

"Well... The little run-away comes back," Daniel said with a huff.

"Ivan will be glad to see you're alright."

"Ivan will be what? I doubt it."

"And who's your friend..." He trailed off when he saw Afwer stand up tall.

"My name is Afwer. Ana and I would like to speak to your leader."

"What the hell is he saying?" Daniel said, looking over at Ana.

"We need to get to Ivan, privately. You know what he'll do if he finds out about us before we have a chance to get a word in."

Daniel was hesitant, Ana watched him shift his weight from foot to foot as if he was weighing both of his choices.

"Alright fine. We'll go the back way, but I'm escorting you there."

Daniel said. "You go on ahead. I'll follow."

He was warily eyeing Afwer as Ana took the Kurhytian's arm and led him on towards Ivan's large home at the end of town.

The wind was roaring in Ana's ears now, pushing her towards the houses. As she neared Ivan's house she could smell smoke. There was a bonfire somewhere in the woods to her right. She didn't dare ask Daniel what they were burning. Had the fever taken more lives?

"Is this it?" Afwer asked.

Ana didn't answer, she took a deep breath, and rapped her knuckles on Ivan's metal door. There was a moment of silence that made her hold her breath and then Ivan's familiar rough voice.

"Come in."

Ana slowly opened the door to the warm glow of the small light above Ivan's table. The man himself was sitting by the wood stove, his hands stretched out before it. He looked older than when she had last seen him tired, with dark circles under his dim blue eyes.

"Ivan," she said, surprised at how aged he looked. It had only been a couple weeks. Was he sick?

"Ana," Ivan clenched his fists and stood slowly. "Where in the name of the gods have you been?"

"I told you where I was going," Ana said, crossing her arms and stepping towards him. Ivan seemed to notice Afwer for the first time, his dim eyes tracing back and forth between the native Nihonian and Ana.

"You disobeyed me," he said as his face went pale.

"I did what I thought was best. What I know was best," she said. "The Kurhytians know this sickness, Ivan! They have medicine! Besides that, if we can make an alliance it would..."

"You could have died, Ana, for the sake of the gods! You could have... and all to go beg at the feet of the natives!" He laughed, shaking his head.

"Ivan..." Ana said, "you're... bleeding."

"Forget it," Ivan wiped the blood away from his nose. "It's just the fever."

She hadn't been around to see this and Afwer hadn't told her. The fever made them bleed from the nose? How many people had died after all this? Her stomach churned and her knees grew weak.

"You know as well as I do, that we need help. Look, I have the medicine here. We can be cured. What about your daughter, Eva? What about..."

“She’s dead,” Ivan said, lowering back down into his chair by the fire. “What?”

“Eva. My...” He paused, clearing his throat, “My Eva is dead.”

“I... Ivan, I’m so sorry,” Ana said, tears filling her own eyes. “If...”

“If you had been here!” Ivan said, jumping up again before Ana could place a hand on his shoulder. “Ana if you had just been here!”

Tears were rolling down the man’s cheeks and into his dark beard. His eyes were red from crying. “Everyone. Everyone is dying! Sick! I’ve been alone... You were my closest advisor! You should have been here!”

“I’m so sorry, Ivan,” her chest felt tight. “If you had only listened to me sooner...”

Ivan’s clenched fists tightened and his knuckles grew white. “How dare you. How dare you speak to me that way!”

“If I really was your closest advisor, you would have at least paid attention to my advice. The Kurhytians and the humans! It’s historic! It’s the best thing that could happen to Hope! Can you imagine the trade? The new information? And besides that, you said it yourself, everyone’s dying. The Kurhytians have a cure. We need their help. This isn’t time for pride, or for anger. Look, Afwer and I are going to give this medicine to everyone. Don’t try and stop us.”

“You trust him?” Ivan nodded towards Afwer, who had stood respectfully off to the side during their conversation.

“With my life.”

“Go.” He gestured vaguely towards the door.

“We’ll give you some first.” Ana said.

“No,” Ivan shook his head quickly, “Do what you want. I won’t stop you, but leave me alone.”

“Will you be alright?”

The response she received was a shrug. Ivan’s nose was bleeding again, but he didn’t bother to wipe it away. He sat down by his fire once more, staring into the flickering flames, mesmerized. Perhaps dreaming of Eva.

Ana turned back towards Afwer.

“Come on, then,” she said with a deep sigh.

“Is he alright?” Afwer asked.

“I think he should be. When everyone else has had the medicine, we’ll go back to him. He needs time,” Ana said. “And so do we. We’re quickly running out.” She led him outside, back into the falling snow and fog. “The medicine, do you think we have enough?”

Afwer looked around the town, and then back over towards where they had smelled the smoke. Ana knew he was probably calculating, just the same as she was, how many of her people might still be alive.

“Yes, I think we’ll be okay.”

“Come on then. We’ll start with the children.”

She started leading him towards the first house, but he reached out and took her hand before she could.

“And you, Ana? You’ll be alright?”

She paused and smiled up at the Nihonian, watching the snowflakes settle in his dark brown feathers, like little stars.

“Yes, Afwer,” she said, squeezing his hand, “I think I will.”