

Stewards of the Drawdown

by P.E. Rowe

With the end near, the normalcy of this silent world was striking. I flew into the highlands of the north, into a valley the western band of the Appa hantu frequented toward the final weeks of the thaw, just as they had done for thousands of years. I had met the herd here fifty years prior as an assistant to the Protector. I remembered being impressed by the matriarch, her tremendous, imposing physical presence seemed matched by her wisdom and memory, her understanding of the seasons and the landscape, the smell of the plants and the trees. She'd spoken with the wisdom of ages. All those years ago, when she'd gazed over the horizon and told us of doom, it wasn't reactionary or emotional. She couldn't have known what she was sensing, and, at the time, we stewards of the planet

did not know either, but she'd sensed it before we'd even thought to look, half a world away she'd felt it, through the heavy soles of her massive feet.

I hadn't seen that herd since. Observation was presently the responsibility of Matarisa α`Medi, Steward of the hantu of Appa, our oldest study group and friends and allies of over seventy thousand years. Matarisa α`Medi had been Steward of Appa for fifteen years now and had been growing more emotional as the final days approached. I felt it was my duty to be with her as we departed. It was the end of one of the longest strings of friendship in the catalogue of our race, and beyond that, the hantu of Appa were remarkably wise and compassionate creatures. Saying goodbye would not be easy.

I couldn't spot the hantu on the first pass over the valley, which I thought strange, given their tremendous size

and dark fur, a contrast to the snow-covered ground, but as we landed, the pilot assured me they were still in the valley and that the early snow, clinging to their heavy coats had helped the hantu to blend into the landscape. When I was met by Matarisa α `Medi at the landing area, she told me that the matriarch had asked for me by name.

“I have not been here for fifty years. Did you tell her about me?” I asked.

“No, Shalman, she remembers you.”

Odd, I thought, for the matriarch from my first visit half a century prior was long since dead, and I vaguely remembered hearing, quite a few years back of her successor’s passing.

“It will be a little walk out to the herd,” Matarisa α `Medi said. “I see you are dressed for the cold.”

We talked along the way of her final days with her researchers, of the contact they’d had with the hantu, and

the creatures' understanding of the approaching change to the planet.

"They know something is happening," Matarisa told me. "I can tell they sense something, both of their own accord and because we are leaving. They have been somber."

"They may yet survive," I said.

"I have said as much many times," Matarisa α `Medi said, "but I am certain the matriarch doesn't believe me."

After a long, cold walk in a brisk, early-winter wind, we finally spotted the herd well out onto the plains at the foothills of the great mountain chain that made up the backbone of the northern sub-continent. It was such an encounter in the annals with this very herd, millennia ago now, that had forever changed our race and theirs irrevocably.

The hantu had only been marginally proto-verbal then, though very intelligent for an herbivorous grazing

animal of such mammoth size. After altering our own genetic makeup to fit into the ecosphere of `Haia α `Ka, as the hantu called the planet, it was the first Chief Steward Senzen α `Zatlan who'd suggested and overseen the genetic alteration of select species of mega-fauna, an attempt at communication with the natives of the planet that had been far more successful than anyone could have imagined, a literal and figurative co-evolution of both our race and the races we'd enhanced. The hantu were the only creatures of the three races we'd altered wise enough to understand the significance of our intervention, and they were the only group that fully understood we were leaving.

Descendants of these Appa hantu now numbered in the tens of thousands across the northern sub-continent, just as with the various homs sub-species of the mega-

continent and the okris and dalfix in the oceans, each possessing their own languages and cultures and stories catalogued by a long line of steward-scribes who'd worked for generations alongside the steward-scientists like Matarisa α `Medi and me. There was such a sense of melancholy about the closing of this era among us all. I just wasn't expecting it with such intensity from the matriarch.

The low guttural hums emanating from her throat as we approached resonated in the ground beneath us.

"It is a warm greeting," Matarisa α `Medi explained to me, "an invitation to approach closer."

As we did, the matriarch lifted up the long, tube-like appendage that ran all the way from her snout nearly down to the snow-covered earth. She seemed to make a gesture with it that had meaning.

“She wishes to see our faces,” Matarisa α`Medi said. “Take off the covering and bear the cold so she can see us.”

We did as the matriarch asked and unmasked our faces.

She emitted low growling noises that seemed rather undifferentiated and, to my ears, meaningless, but the speaker box, a few moments after the matriarch had grumbled, began to speak the translation into the cold winter air for me and Matarisa α`Medi.

“Shalman α`Denon, Chief Steward of the Protectorate Sul, peoples of the south, we welcome you this final time. Not our herd, nor any of the herds of the vast winter meadows can remember the times now before you were our friends and companions.”

“The honor has been ours,” I responded. “Your kind has been ever faithful and has neither forgotten to repay a debt nor allowed us to shirk our

own. We are far better for having known you.”

“As are we Shalman α`Denon,” the matriarch began speaking again. “I can see in your eyes you do not recognize me as I recognize you, for you were young and captivated by my grandmother matriarch, and I was but a child, learning at the foot of my mother how to observe the peoples of Sul. Perhaps even Matarisa α`Medi, Steward of Appa, did not know that we were observing you as closely as you observe our kind.”

“My great predecessor long suspected as much, matriarch,” I said.

“Matarisa α`Medi and I have spoken long on the reasons for our parting,” the matriarch said, “and faithful as she has been, both to us and to her duties, these discussions have only ever been in shadowy terms. We understand, though, that a terrible cataclysm is nearly upon us, the same one my

grandmother foresaw. We understand why you have been reluctant to share the truths you have unearthed about the coming days, for this is not your world, and we have no choice but to remain. I will tell you what I think to be true, Shalman, and as Protector, steward of all stewards, only tell me if I am wrong.”

“I promise you only that I will not betray our long trust, matriarch.”

“The oldest tales of our kind speak of an unending heat that rages beneath the skin of the world, a fire that erupts and rains its ash to the valleys below, blackening the sky, changing day to night. Grandmother spoke of tales even older, that said there were fires like these that made the world and would return to remake the world anew at the end of our time. I sense that day is soon at hand, and I sense by your reaction, she was not wrong.”

“I tell you, matriarch, you are not much wrong. Your grandmother spoke

only of a coming doom far at the end of the world. She spoke truth. There will be no fire here, only there. But, as you say, the sky will be dark and the air colder than it has ever been, and the winters may not end for years to come.”

“You need say no more Shalman α `Denon. I can sense your reluctance to say more. But we both know far more than we can ever convey. Both our worlds will be made anew.”

“I wish all of you well in the new world to come,” I told her.

“I sense you will all be well,” she said, “save for the one among you who will not go.”

“I’m not sure what you mean, matriarch.”

“One of your stewards, Champton α `Kaffe will never abandon Haia α `Ka.”

It took me a moment to realize that Champton, who was now Chief Steward of the Kempala homs of the

great grasslands of the Midworld, had even been here. But after searching my memory, I realized that the matriarch was correct, for Champton α `Kaffe had trained under my predecessor here in the icy plains of the north, and evidently he'd made an impression on the future matriarch of the Appa hantu.

I bowed with one arm forward, as was our custom in parting.

“I will convey your regards to Champton α `Kaffe when next I see him, matriarch.”

And she was silent for a moment before bowing her head to express gratitude.

“Come forward, Protector, before you depart,” the matriarch said, and as I stepped forth, she draped her long appendage over my shoulder and back, and she began to grumble, the speaker box translating still. “We continue to honor our friendship of the

generations by speaking the names, matriarch and steward, for as long as we shall remember.

Then the great matriarch, beginning with my name and Matarisa α `Medi's, recited the names of her predecessors and Matarisa's, and she continued for some time before I realized it was her intention to continue until she had recited every last name of matriarch and chief steward, reaching back through all the generations. She closed her eyes, continuing down a list that sounded as much like a trance as a list of names. I began to calculate how many stewards of the Appa there had been, wondering whether it was possible for her to remember them all, nearly a thousand names, I guessed. I knew that to do other than to listen would be a tremendous insult to the honor she was paying to our kind, to her great ancestors, and to our long friendship. So, I stood there, at the foot

of this tremendous animal, and I listened as she recited the names from her voluminous memory.

Nearly an hour into her recitation, the cold taking its toll, shivering beneath her, I reached out for support and found her great ivory tusk, which she raised up under my arm, holding me up and drawing me closer to her for warmth as she continued to speak long dead names back into existence.

It took nearly two hours in the cold before she finally concluded.

When at last she stopped speaking, I was as cold as I had ever been in my life. But I did my best to speak earnestly despite the frigid air.

“It was the greatest honor of my life to be among the names you spoke here today, matriarch. We shall never forget you.”

“Nor we you,” the matriarch said.

And, now finished, she turned, as though they simply had no more interest in our kind, and she began to

walk away. Then, shivering as we were, Matarisa α`Medi and I walked back to the extraction point outside the final camp, holding each other for warmth and strength, tested as we both had been by the ordeal.

We boarded the aircraft on one of the final flights out of the northlands. The few flights that would follow would extract equipment and any last remnants of infrastructure, leaving no trace of our kind on the land. Matarisa α`Medi, last of the Stewards of Appa, and I, the final Protector of Haia α`Ka—we were the final diplomats to speak with the hantu. Now as we glided low over the valley, we caught a final glimpse of them through the windows as they ambled into the wilderness, the sad hum of the aircraft's engines underscoring our sense of deep melancholy for the end of a brilliant epoch.

An hour or so into the quiet flight, Matarisa α`Medi revealed that she'd had similar suspicions to the matriarch.

“Protector, Champton α`Kaffe and I are old friends. He preceded me here and taught me many things about the hantu when I was learning stewardship among the herds of the northland. I had no idea he'd made such an impression on the matriarch, but she sees far more than we know. She may be correct about Champton, for he has not answered my correspondences in a great time. When we last did speak—I thought nothing of it at the time—he conveyed his vehement opposition to the Protectorate's order to depart. He believes we are far more of this world than of any alien world, even if our ancestors came from elsewhere. I did not think it was anything more than Champton α`Kaffe seeking commiseration, because, truth be told, I feel

much the same. Eruption or no, we should not abandon these species we have altered. They have become our responsibility, as is this world. We should never abandon them to fate, especially now, with a crisis at hand.”

“I feel much the same as you both,” I told her. “And I do love these animals, but the ancestors have made it clear to the Viceroy that they will remove us if we do not obey of our own accord. So, we will depart as commanded, all of us, Champton α `Kaffe as well.”

Not long after returning from the north, I discovered that Champton had not been heard from in weeks, which had not been unusual for him, for his subjects were among the control groups on the Midworld, tribes of primitive homs, proto-verbal hunters, where stealth and seclusion were key components of successful observation. But with the matriarch’s comments and the suspicions of Matarisa α `Medi,

I was not going to wait much longer for Champton to reappear. I began to reach out to the chief stewards of the Midworld, all of whom had expertise in dealing with the many homs species we'd studied across the mega-continent.

Regeria α `Kera, a senior steward of the homs of the mega-continent, knew Champton well, as they'd shared study sites and collaborated often. It was her opinion that we needed to go looking for him immediately. She didn't put anything past Champton, whom she said had been growing more extreme in his views since the drawdown had begun years prior.

I decided to put together a team to locate Champton α `Kaffe and recall him to Daral Sul until departure, which was now but weeks away.

I decided to bring both Matarisa α `Medi and Regeria α `Kera, for they both knew Champton as well as any of

the stewards. I also called back Immon α `Sand, the foremost expert on the homs of the Midworld. He had been dispatched to the island chain where the impending eruption would soon throw open the crust of the planet. On those islands, we had study groups and control groups of homs Hobs—diminutive cousins of the Talman homs of the mega-continent. There were also small populations of rao hoti, a smaller furless cousin of the mammoth hantu of the cold northlands. Immon α `Sand was reluctant to come, for he claimed he was close to unraveling the mystery of how each of these simple species somehow all knew of the impending eruption. The homs Hobs of the islands, isolated as they were from the common homs of the islands, were now regularly speaking the volcano's name—Tobisheeah—and behaving as though it were a given “she soon wake big bad,” as they said.

I had to weigh the likelihood and value of Immon discovering the biological mechanism at the root of this natural intuition against the Protectorate's need to locate Champton. I decided that Immon, ever the optimist, would likely never have fully unraveled the roots of that deep mystery. Given that we only had weeks remaining, I ordered him to meet us at the Midworld hub, or at least what remained of it.

When we all arrived, we interviewed the remaining stewards and assistants, all of whom told us honestly that they were unaware of both Champton α `Kaffe's whereabouts or any plans he may have had to defy the orders of the Protectorate. His last known whereabouts were in the midlands, observing a tribe of Kempala homs, but he had not been heard from for several weeks. He was now the only steward on the

entire planet absent for the final drawdown.

We began at the tribe's last known location. The Kempala homs were not known to move territory often. They were great runners, spear hunting a varied selection of swarm cattle and horned grazers—highboks, tenboks, kuduboks, and kimboks, as well as scavenging and trapping small game. Their territory was rich in protein and provided ample sustenance year-round. To find most of the tribes of the midlands gone when we arrived was shocking. Kempala homs by the hundreds, perhaps a thousand or more, had all seemingly and spontaneously migrated. We found no sign of mass death, disease, or famine, and we found very few useful stone tools in the abandoned villages, suggesting they'd taken their valuables with them. The Kempala were on the move.

Fortunately, because of the draw-down, I had ample resources that were

returning from other sites, spy-birds of many species—by the thousand—that could quickly be put to the sky. And we took to the air as well, trying to spot footprints or other signs of a trail.

Immon α`Sand was no expert tracker by any means, but he'd learned from the Kempala here and the Talman in the north how they tracked game and read terrain. Initially, it seemed as though the Kempala's departure was long enough in the past that traces of them were difficult to detect on the landscape. They had soft feet, and unlike us, fashioned no shoes, tough and thick-soled as their calloused plantar skin tended to be. They could also move across the landscape at rates that were astounding. At a sprint, these homs were poorly constructed animals, ready-made meals for a hunter felinus of any genus. Nor should they have been able to run down any of the lightning-quick

grazing boks that were the staples of their diet. But they'd evolved a naked, near-perfect, heat-diffusing skin; a bowl-shaped pelvis; and an ingenious locking mechanism in the bones of their midfoot, allowing them to stride at moderate speeds across rugged terrain, and in teams, they could run down prey over hours, driving larger, faster animals to exhaustion and submission. The anti-climax of a Kempala homs hunt was a stunning event to witness, for when the end came, it was obvious to both hunter and prey, with the closest hunter merely walking up to the desperately panting, defeated animal and quickly putting the exhausted bok out of its horned misery with the quick twitch of a sharpened stone.

The infants and nursing mothers of the Kempala tribes wouldn't be able to move so fast across the landscape, but with a possible two weeks' lead, the

Kempala homs could have been leagues away.

Our first air reconnaissance yielded nothing. Even with the spy-birds fanning out over the area we found no sign of the missing Kempala within a day's flight of the zero-spot search origin.

Regeria α `Kera suggested we seek out other known tribes of homs nearby. There were study groups to the north of the Kempala territory that were known to trade spearheads and other tools with the Kempala of the grasslands. That was where we found our first lead.

When we arrived at the village of the Pranuman tribe, we were mobbed by the gathering villagers, who had never expected to see our kind again. Fortunately, Immon α `Sand had the foresight to bring fruit, and that was all these proto-verbal villagers of all ages seemed interested in. "*Pōm, gotu. Pōm,*

pōm, pōm,” they would say with hands extended out to us. Beyond that, though, they were skeptical of us. They did not recognize us in the way they might have recognized Champton α `Kaffe, who had spent decades walking among the territories of these tribes.

Finally, Immon α `Sand began to negotiate when our fruit supply was running low. “No more,” he conveyed, partly by speaker box and partly through gestures, “Until we speak. Tell us where the Kempala go. Where is Champton? Where is Kempala tribe?”

The wife of the chieftain of that tribe was the most expert speaker. She came forward and said, “*Pōm, pōm, pōm, gotu,*” gesturing that we pass out the remainder of the fruit first. “Next Kempala go, all go. Pranuman stay home.”

“You know where?”

“Yes. *Pōm, pōm,*” she insisted, hands extended.

Immon α`Sand gestured for the rest of the fruit to be given, and when she could see that the baskets were empty, she said, “Kempala go big water,” and she pointed to the horizon to the southeast. Immon knew that to be a common failing in the speaker box translation for these proto-verbal tribes; “big water” he insisted meant ocean.

“It makes sense,” Regeria α`Kera said once we were back in the aircraft. “The shorelines will be affected last. They could eat shellfish and sea greens, scavenge crustaceans. Champton would be planning for the swarm cattle to perish as soon as the grasses do. He may be bringing the Kempala to the sea.”

The following day with the spy-birds all recharged, we set off for the ocean with a wide search-line, hopeful that we could catch up to them in several days. Two days passed before we

picked up our first sign of any homs, the faintest of footprints, spotted by the spy-birds, headed in the direction of the sea. Immon estimated the track was at least three days old.

Four more days passed, with the third bringing heavy rains, wiping the earth clear of signs. Yet, on the fifth, spy-birds sent back footage of a large band of Kempala women, walking with the young. Soon after, we began getting footage from the leading edge of the migration of the Kempala hunters as they ran down massive horn-cattle on the dry plains to the southeast. The footage was magnificent. The hunters were fast, elegant, coordinated, smart. They moved like the wind and water, around obstacles, over distances, closing gaps, several groups chasing numerous animals, all working it seemed with one mind.

“Get us up in the air,” I said to our pilot. “We should witness this with our own eyes.”

The pilot got us up alongside a group of hunters as they pushed a small creche of kimbok. From our vantage point, we could see the hunters working in tandem, alternately splitting off to pressure the animals, while others fell back, taking turns pressing the animals forward, while the leaders in the back read the terrain and dictated the pace. Immon directed our pilot to stay far enough back to neither distract the hunters nor affect the animals. It was a sight that over decades as Chief Steward and then Protector, I had never witnessed.

“These Kempala are spectacular,” Immon α Sand said. “How they can run like that and think together. Who’d have thought a bipedal creature could be so graceful.”

“I wonder what it feels like to run like that,” Regeria α Kera said. “It must feel like flying.”

“They’re too beautiful. It is a crime against creation to let them all die,” Matarisa α`Medi said, shaking her head, speaking only what all four of us stewards were thinking.

I couldn’t refute the sentiment.

We watched the hunt from a distance for nearly an hour more. At one point, the leader, as he dropped back to coordinate his two front runners, turned his head toward the aircraft, waved his arm, and smiled, as if to say just watch now, dear stewards, you who need machines to fly over the land, see what we who roam the earth can do with our own two feet.

When they finally felled the first of the kimbok, the two elder hunters remained at the kill, celebrating with a stylish dance of sorts, and, sensing the weakness in the second of the two kimbok they were still chasing together, the two younger runners pulled alongside the other kimbok with a

tremendous sprint. Then suddenly, as if of a single mind, the two young men speared the animal down to the ground in a sudden burst of dust.

“What a sight!” Immon said.

The spy-birds collated the sightings from that afternoon’s reconnaissance and identified four campsites, and of the four, two were identified as probable locations for Champton α`Kaffe, so we landed at the first to seek him out.

We were welcomed by the tribe. They told us they would bring us straightaway to Champton α`Kaffe. They took us from the edge of their campsite down an orderly path that led to the center of the camp. We could see a simple shelter of animal skin and wood, set up to generate shade more than shelter.

I had spent little time among the Kempala. My time with the homs was spent further north among the Talman

of the northern mountain-faring tribes. Those Talman had been proto-verbal and only marginally altered by our predecessors, similar to the way these Kempala homs were supposed to have been. But immediately I noticed a clear difference among them, especially between the old and the young.

Matarisa α `Medi saw it too. "So like the hantu," she said. "Watch the ones at the edge of the crowd as they think they are unobserved. So verbal."

"Mark their eyes," Regeria α `Kera said of the little ones. "Watching everything, they are."

At this, Immon disappeared into the crowd. He was the expert, and perhaps with the same kind of unspoken coordination as the hunters, he sensed what I needed to know about these Kempala homs. He set about learning what he could without a word between us.

As we approached the little tent at the center of the camp, Champton stood to greet us. He was dressed as the Kempala, bare skinned and barefoot, possessing a kind of care-free air about him I'd never seen in a steward observer. He seemed among them, greeting us as outsiders.

"Come and sit with us, honored friends," he said, and then he turned to the gathering villagers among us. "Shalman α Denon, Protector of Sul, walks among us. Let us greet her with praise!" and a great shout went up among the tribe.

They guided us to the front of Champton's tent, laying hands on our shoulders and smiling, uttering a phrase over and over that the speaker box didn't know how to translate, "*Djeesa, Gotu. Djeesa, Gotu.*"

"They are welcoming you," Champton said, as we sat just outside the reach of his shelter.

He looked different from my memories of him, which were not so distant. He was different, though, and it was something more than seeing his bare skin exposed, naked to the blazing sun of the Midworld.

As the greetings of the crowd died down, I was about to speak.

“Later,” Champton said, anticipating that I meant to address this business of his, for clearly he’d been up to something none of us understood. “First, we must share a meal together, friends. Then we may discuss more serious matters.”

The tribe worked together to start fires and prepare the felled kimboks. The hunting party we’d witnessed was only one of many, and there was much meat to go around.

While the meat was cooking, Matarisa α Medi conveyed the greetings of the hantu matriarch to Champton α Kaffe. He had numerous

questions for Matarisa of the well-being of the herd, how they had fared over the many years since he had been with them in the cold northlands. He told stories of his experiences among them, and as I listened, I began to understand how deeply he had been affected by his time among the Appa hantu. He spoke of generations, foundations, the legacy of our forebears as well as theirs, the reality of what it meant to be a steward-protector, a guardian of the landscape and all its living inhabitants. He was passionate in a way I'd never seen a steward before. When he put his hand on my shoulder, smiled, and told me genuinely it was good to be with me after so long, I couldn't help but think of the matriarch's long appendage draped over that same shoulder, saying the names of our predecessors, speaking them all back into existence. Something different was alive in him.

Champton α `Kaffe was no longer just one of us stewards. When the light of the day fell and we were seated there, lit by the warm glow of the cooking fires, I could see flashes of the Kempala in his eyes.

Immon returned and sat beside me, whispering his findings in my ears. "There are children here with vocabularies as extensive as the wisest of elders of the Talman homs, far smarter than the dalfix, perhaps even the hantu. The older teenagers, though, are as dim as the elders."

Champton saw this exchange and sensed that it was now time for the conversation. I asked him the only question that I thought mattered at that point.

"What have you done here, Champton α `Kaffe?"

He smiled. "I am Champton α `Kaffe no longer. What have I done?" he

repeated. "I have acted according to my conscience. Plain as you can see!"

And that phrase "my conscience" was a combination of words none of us had ever heard or even considered, for the concept of conscience was, for us, until that moment, only one of the group. It was as though Champton's saying those words had spoken something new into existence, a concept we couldn't have even considered before—that we could each of us have a conscience of our own. It was an unsettling revelation.

"How long have you been altering their genes, Champton?" Immon α `Sand asked him.

"The oldest is now thirteen," Champton said. "They are many now, perhaps a thousand, children as bright as the hantu matriarchs with a spirit as buoyant as the homs Hobs or the dalfix. And, when the world erupts, they will need such spirit to have a

fighting chance. After the sun goes out, after the stewards all depart, they will need more than we left them with. It was wrong of us to change their course and send them out into this world, across the continents, and then to leave them? Wrong!”

Champton’s passion had erupted, and even as the elders of the Kempala seated among us grew quiet, we could sense they were growing agitated as well, watching Champton succumb to his emotions in such a visceral way.

“How long ago did you begin altering yourself?” I asked him.

I wasn’t certain of it, but his behavior seemed to indicate that he had done something to alter his genes as well.

“And what have you done to yourself?” Immon asked.

Champton took a deep breath, seemingly to calm his nerves. “Our ancestors, whoever they were before they came here, they made us from some aggregate of us and the creatures

of these lands, presumably as little as they needed to make our biology compatible with the environment of this world. When I studied the genes, ours and theirs, without a complete source for our ancestors, I discovered that there was very little overlap with any of the other species beyond homs Talman and some from the ancestors of these Kempala tribes. I wanted to be more like them. We came here to study them, and in tens of millennia, we observed, and we walked beside them, but we never truly walked with them. I wanted to feel as they felt. And I knew that I would need to. I had decided my course years ago when we were told of the drawdown. I was with the matriarch then. We discussed it together. I couldn't understand it as I do now, but I could feel that it was wrong for us to depart this world."

"But this is not our world," Matarisa α`Medi said. "It is theirs."

“And where is our world, sister?” Champton said. “The moment we changed them, we changed them forever. It is the same with us. Have none of you thought about what we must be to this mysterious race of ancestors who put us here? What do you suppose they think we are to them now? Would they have us breathe different air to them? Will they put us in a bubble of our own? Preserve our bodies to dissect and study?”

“It is not for us to decide,” Regeria α `Kera said. “That was the oath we took as stewards.”

“I have decided,” Champton said. “This is my home, and these are my people. We will go to the sea, and when the sun goes dark and the ash falls from the sky, I will be here with them helping all the children to survive. The sun will come out again, I know it. And the Kempala will be here still!”

I thought to say that I couldn't allow him to stay, and just as I was about to open my mouth, the being that had formerly been Champton^a `Kaffe looked at me in just such a way, and suddenly I became viscerally aware of the warmth and magnificence of the hundreds of bodies of these awesome hunters surrounding us all. I looked at the bones of the kimbok scattered amongst us, warming by the fires.

"Friends," Champton said. "After all this time, what can we be if not ourselves? If we are not homs, then what are we?"

"We," I said, gesturing only to the stewards by my side, "as we have always known, we are of the stars."

"I am homs!" Champton shouted loudly enough to be heard by the whole crowd, "homs of `Haia!"

A great cheer went up among the Kempala, a mixture of cries, some whoops and then a chant of words that

built and grew in the crowd around us, “*Gotu `Haia! Gotu `Haia! Gotu `Haia!*” And this meaning of *Gotu* wasn’t entirely clear to us, but there was a power in it we couldn’t comprehend.

Champton sat at the fire truly among them, content in a way I had never seen one of us, for he was no longer one of us. Champton α `Kaffe was no more.

“What can I say to the Protectorate?” I asked as the cheering finally settled.

“You can tell them Champton α `Kaffe is dead. It doesn’t matter how.”

I nodded, and I reached to take his hand in mine. His skin was hard, wrinkled, and felt like warm, supple leather.

“I wish you well in the stars, Shalman,” he said. “You should go.”

As we got up to leave and began the walk back to the aircraft, the Kempala surrounded us as we walked, laying their hands on our bodies and chanting, over and over, almost singing

as one, in perfect rhythm, my name, *Shalman, Shalman*, varying the cadence as though the sound had a different meaning with each utterance. They were too beautiful to be left to perish. As confused as I had become, the one certainty I felt was happiness that he had remained among them.

We boarded the aircraft and took off into the night sky. The final viewpoint we observed of the Kempala homs of the Midworld was a scattered constellation of dim orange campfires beneath us, glowing against the backdrop of the shadowy earth, slowly diminishing to blackness as our aircraft rose into the sky. Our pilot set a heading for home, a home that in less than two weeks' time, when the earth opened, we biologists and protectors and stewards of this changing world all understood would exist no longer, and we knew that this great experiment of our ancestors would end in a fiery conflagration of ash and darkness and

frozen ruin, and our great experiment of life, of growth, of longing and hope, would only now have just begun, set irrevocably in motion beneath this strikingly familiar alien sky.

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