

## CHAPTER FOUR

The memories hit her in a green rush. The delegation was speeding along in an open-topped monorail car, whooshing through the gaps between trees. Chiku had to keep reaching up to hold her hat on, but she was enjoying the feeling of motion, the simple pleasure of having a breeze on her face.

‘So,’ their host said, steepling his fingers, ‘do our arrangements meet with your exacting standards, Representatives?’

Chiku was wise enough to remain politely noncommittal. ‘We’ll need to review our findings in depth, Representative Endozo, then make a formal report to our legislative assembly.’

‘Although,’ Noah said, ‘what we’ve seen can’t be faulted. Isn’t that right, Gonithi?’

After Chiku and Noah, Gonithi Namboze was the third member of the *Zanzibar* Delegation. An expert in Crucible ecosystem dynamics, Namboze had accompanied them to verify that the chamber in *Malabar* was suitable for the elephants.

‘I do not anticipate any difficulties,’ Namboze said, although her tone betrayed her nervousness.

Noah had spoken out of turn, putting the young representative on the spot.

‘Difficulties?’ Endozo asked, as if the mere mention of such things was a cause for concern.

Chiku smiled tightly. ‘As I said, we’re here to conduct a thorough review. We can’t afford to skimp on any details, not when so much is at stake.’

‘Well, of course not,’ Endozo said, with an equally tight smile.

They were on their way back to the shuttle dock. They should have been on their way already but Chiku had requested a second look at the prospective chamber before they returned to their holoship. It was here, in this marvellous wooded space, that the offshoot herd elephants might be accommodated.

There were no elephants here in *Malabar*, not yet, but there was a suitable biome and a stable ecology that already supported large herbivores. The introduction of elephants would need to be managed carefully – *Zanzibar's* animals had not left their own chamber in the hundred and fifty years since departure – but Chiku saw no insurmountable problems. They had done it once before, exporting a small offshoot of the herd to *Majuli*. It had been one of the early successes of Chiku's political career.

At the shuttle dock, their boxy little craft had been serviced and readied for departure while the formalities were in progress. Although the day had gone well, Chiku was still exhausted. It had been the culmination of months of careful preparation and diligent committee work, bringing the Assembly around to her point of view.

Lately Chiku wondered if the tiredness ran deeper. It had been many decades since her last skipover. Chiku and Noah's last two applications had been declined – too valuable to the community effort, supposedly. It was flattering up to a point. And Mposi and Ndege, when the matter had been put to them, were not at all approving of the idea of being wrenched away from their friends and routine. But Chiku had heard that her next request might be looked upon more favourably. Sixty years, if they won full approval – enough to bring them out barely thirty years from their destination.

Thirty years was nothing – they could all bear that easily. And if the children disliked it, they would come round to their parents' view in time.

'I will report back to our chair,' Endozo said. 'We shall await your report on our facilities with great interest.'

They formulated motes and exchanged them as tokens of good intent. Endozo had brought two additional motes provided by senior members of his own legislation. As was customary, the motes were not to be disclosed until later.

Soon the three politicians from *Zanzibar* were on their way home, strapped into their seats as the shuttle boosted out of *Malabar's* dock. Clear of the holoship and its buzzing armada of support craft, they accelerated quickly. Presently, the engines quietened and the cabin was weightless. There was no room in such a small ship for provision of artificial gravity.

Noah was the first to let out an enormous sigh of pent-up tension. 'Sarcastic bastard. He didn't have to rub our noses in it quite that much, did he?'

'He was just doing his job,' Chiku said, agreeing with her husband

but careful not to give the wrong impression to the junior Namboze. 'We need their cooperation a lot more than they need ours and they've got excellent facilities. But they do have to meet our requirements – or I should say the elephants'. They'll be living there, not us. So for their sakes, we'd better get this right.'

'Your family name,' Namboze said hesitantly. 'That's no coincidence, is it? Your involvement with these animals?'

Chiku had been down this road enough times to know where it led.

'No, it's not a coincidence. Working with elephants is something of a family tradition.'

'Going back a long way?'

'Way back – to Africa and the work my uncle was doing there.'

'Geoffrey Akinya?'

So the eager Namboze had been doing her homework.

'Correct.' Chiku hoped the firm but polite terseness of her answer would send the right signal. She was far too worn out for a history lesson, however well-intentioned the enquiry might be.

Unfortunately, Namboze was not quite so easily discouraged.

'Did you ever meet him?'

'Once or twice.'

'In Africa?'

'In the East African Federation. That's where we lived, where we all came from. Near the old border between Tanzania and Kenya.'

'My family were from a lot further south,' Namboze said.

'Gonithi's a Zulu name, isn't it?' Chiku was hoping to change the subject. 'It's very beautiful.'

During their exchange, the holoship *Malabar* had diminished to a blue-green thumbprint, blurred at the extremities, slightly out of focus. Light spilt from the sprawl of communities and service structures wrapping the holoship's skin from pole to pole. The great asteroid vessel bristled with a fine peach-like fuzz of docking spines and service towers. Hundreds of smaller ships were in constant attendance.

Beyond *Malabar*, Chiku could make out the lights of half a dozen other holoships, most so faint they could have been mistaken for planets or stars. Other members of the local caravan were too remote to see at all. Floating labels identified them all, and the larger taxis and shuttles moving from one to the other.

Chiku had no need of these embellishments. This far into the crossing, with old rivalries and alliances long since settled, the formation

of the local caravan had not shifted in decades. Nothing much would change between here and Crucible.

Only *Pemba* was absent.

They were on the deceleration phase for *Zanzibar* when Namboze decided to reopen the conversation.

'They say your uncle refused prolongation.'

'Yes, he did.'

'That's quite an unusual decision, isn't it?'

'Geoffrey still lived a long life by any reasonable human measure,' Chiku answered. 'He felt that to extend his time would be excessive, a kind of greediness.'

'I'm not sure I understand.'

Chiku thought, *I don't give a damn whether you understand or not.*

Relenting, she said, 'I didn't either, at least not to begin with. Geoffrey was only born about thirty years before me, so he could have lived for hundreds of years, if he'd wanted to.'

'Why didn't he?'

Chiku could tell she was not going to get out of this until Namboze's curiosity had been satisfied. 'Geoffrey tried to explain it to me on one of our visits. If you've looked up his biography, you'll know he was a scientist, an expert in animal cognition. That's how he ended up working with the elephants. Later in life, though, he gave all that up and became an artist instead. It's the reverse of what happened to his sister, Sunday – my mother. Geoffrey took to painting elephants instead of studying them, and Sunday became so involved in the family business that she felt she needed to understand some of the physics that had made our name – the Chibesa Principle and all that. Turned out she had a weird aptitude for it, even started coming up with this new mathematics no one had seen before. Sculpting numbers like clay. Isn't it wonderful, that a life can contain so much?'

Namboze smiled in polite acknowledgement. 'I suppose it is.'

'Anyway, Geoffrey had a little studio at the household, tucked away at the back of one of the wings. He had two paintings in particular that he wanted to show me, both of elephants from a distance, with Kilimanjaro rising beyond them. One was just a canvas, all ragged and torn around the edges, the brush-marks messy. The other was one he'd done earlier; finished and framed. Uncle Geoffrey asked me which one I preferred. I said I liked the one in the frame best, although I didn't really know why. The other one, I suppose, looked ragged and uncontained.'

It didn't have a definite beginning and end. It was a thing which might never be complete.'

'Like a life.'

'That was Geoffrey's point. Birth and death frame a life, give it shape. Without that border it just becomes a kind of sprawling mess, a thing with no edge, no definition, no centre.'

'Did you agree with him?'

'To begin with, no.' Chiku said.

'And now?'

'I suppose you could say I have a bit more perspective.'

After a while, Namboze said, 'It must have been wonderful to see the elephants in their natural habitat. I can understand why you're so keen to push this through. It'll make a great deal of difference to our resource allocation if we can move some of our elephants to *Malabar*.'

'It's not just about elephants,' Chiku said. 'If it began and ended with them, I'd still be pleading our case for assistance. But my ancestors – people like Geoffrey – understood something important. We don't do this for the elephants because it benefits us, or because they'll be useful to us when we land on Crucible. It's because we owe them. We did terrible things to their kind, over many centuries. Drove them to the edge of extinction. Butchered and mutilated them for a profit. But we can be better than we were. By taking the elephants with us into space, even if it costs us, even if it forces us to make sacrifices elsewhere, we're showing that we can rise above what we once were.'

'If times turn really bad,' Namboze said, 'do you think we'll still put the elephants' well-being ahead of our own?'

'It won't come to that,' Chiku said, after a few moments' reflection on the unusually direct question. 'We'll find a way through, no matter how hard things become. That's what we've always done. Make do and mend. Muddle through. Ask for outside assistance, if we have to. We're part of a community. That's the point of travelling with a caravan.'

Chiku was done, drained of words, drained of responsibility. The day had finally taken its toll. She did not mind Namboze's curiosity, but all she wanted right now was to be back in her home, with Noah and Mposi and Ndege.

Namboze seemed on the point of answering – her mouth opened fractionally, then froze. Her face brightened. It became, for an instant, a striking negative of itself. The shuttle was flooded with hard, bleaching light that attained, at its edges, a purity beyond white.

The light snapped off. Chiku blinked at after-images.

Namboze had screwed her eyes into knots. She had been facing

forward, with Noah and Chiku in the reverse-facing seats.

'Something's happened,' Namboze said.

Chiku could barely bring herself to turn around, to see what the young politician had witnessed directly.

*Zanzibar* was still there. It had not been ripped out of existence, the way *Pemba* had. Of course, they were too close for a *Pemba* event to be survivable. This had been nothing comparable, nothing of the same magnitude.

Nonetheless, something terrible had happened.

'Hold approach,' Noah called. 'Assume fixed station at this distance, until I say otherwise.'

The taxi obeyed Noah, as it would have obeyed Chiku or Namboze. Seat restraints and foot stirrups tightened.

'Holding station,' the taxi informed Noah.

'Are you all right, Gonithi?' Chiku asked Namboze. 'You caught whatever that blast was full on.'

'I'm all right.' She had managed to open her eyes again. 'I think the filters dropped just before it reached full brightness. What do you think it was?'

Noah had unhooked himself from the taxi's stirrups to float closer to the observation window. 'Something pretty bad.'

There was a wound, still livid, in *Zanzibar's* skin. It was a third of the way between the trailing pole and the holoship's fat equator. The wound was weeping gases, spiralling out in a slow-winding corkscrew. Chiku lacked a clear view of the damaged area, but she guessed that it spanned several hundred metres, perhaps as much as half a kilometre. A hole in the hull wide enough to fly a shuttle through, with elbow room.

Gases were still venting. Air, water vapour, other critical volatiles ... it pained Chiku to think of how little they could afford to spare. The winding corkscrew emulated a galactic whorl, the Milky Way in miniature.

Suddenly, the gush of gases ebbed to a trickle.

'Containment control,' Noah said. 'They've sealed that chamber, whichever one just ruptured. It's bleeding dry.'

'What was in it?' Namboze asked.

'I'm not sure,' Chiku said. It was difficult to relate this external view to her mental map of the holoship's interior.

'Take us in,' Noah told the taxi. 'Minimum approach speed.'

By the time they neared the docking hub, the trickle of escaping gases had been all but staunched. Emergency crews were already at work, spilling out of hull locks and docking bays in service craft and individual

vacuum suits. By now they would surely be entering the compromised chamber from within *Zanzibar* as well. Chiku watched the figures as they traversed the outer skin, tiny and beetle-bright in their luminous vacuum gear. With *Zanzibar* still rotating – Chair Utomi had yet to order a spindown, and might not judge matters serious enough to warrant such a drastic measure – the emergency crews were effectively hanging upside down, only a slip away from being snatched into space.

The coming and going of service vehicles delayed docking for thirty minutes. The shuttle waited its turn, then fell into the open maw of the polar aperture.

*Zanzibar*, like *Malabar*, had the proportions of a fat ellipsoid. All the holoships looked similar from the outside, and all were within a few kilometres of being the same size. Fifty kilometre walnuts, skewered on the long axis of their engines.

Chiku had seen them being born, in the year before she went to Quorum Binding. She had gone out to the birthing orbits from Triton, on a sumptuous high-burn liner the size of a small city-state. The holoships were strung out like beads on an invisible wire, all at varying stages of completion. Gravity tractors hauled in asteroids, mountains of rock and ice selected for size, composition and stability, raw matter for the shaping. They chiselled and cored the asteroids, voiding mighty chambers large enough to swallow the liner a thousand times over. They fused and glued loosely-bound rubble piles, infiltrated rock and ice with webs of spiderfibre reinforcement, until they had the integrity to withstand spin and the ferocious, barely-contained impulse of a truly monstrous Chibesa engine. They bottled and pressurised the interior chambers, then gifted them with warmth and water and ten thousand forms of plant and animal life. Then they built towns, cities and parks, schools, hospitals and seats of government, and allowed people to begin moving in, eager droves of them, in their hundreds and thousands. What had been a shell became a place.

Last of all, the Chibesa engines were lit. With the slowness of clouds the readied arks began to pull away from the birthing orbits. They went out in caravans, for mutual support. Each caravan was part of a larger flow of holoships, assigned to a particular solar system. Hundreds, for the most popular target systems. Typically a dozen or so holoships would be organised into a local caravan, with one or more light-years between each caravan.

It took years, decades, for the holoships to reach their cruising speeds. But once that had been attained – presently a whisker under thirteen per cent of the speed of light – there was no immediate requirement

to re-employ their engines. Some of the holoships, like *Zanzibar*, had partially dismantled their engines so that the forward and aft polar apertures could be used for the docking of large ships. The dismantled components were moved into secondary chambers, like the pieces of an ominous puzzle.

Chiku's little vessel was now sliding into the space that would once have been occupied by the end of the Chibesa engine. Larger ships, shuttles and taxis were attached around the curving walls, linked by connecting tubes and service umbilicals. The taxi matched rotation, docked. Clamps secured and the airlock connector grappled into place.

Chiku set about loosening her restraints. 'An hour ago, our only concern was how our presentation had gone down.'

'The elephants are safe, aren't they?' Namboze asked. 'Whatever was in that chamber, that's nowhere near the elephants.'

'They should be all right,' Chiku said. 'The damage is nowhere near the main community cores, either, or the school chamber.'

They disembarked from the taxi. Chiku had been anticipating chaos in the processing area on the other side of the lock, but everything was surprisingly ordered, albeit busier than usual, and with an unmistakable air of heightened tension. Walls were alive with status reports – images and text updates, refreshing and scrolling constantly. Pulsing bars of red, outlining doors and windows, signified a shift to emergency conditions.

Chiku struggled to remember the last time this had happened. The *Pemba* loss, perhaps. Maybe the occasional emergency drill. But even those were extremely uncommon.

Chair Utomi, busy with crisis management, had tasked another Assembly member to meet the diplomatic party at the dock. Chiku was only slightly surprised to see her old colleague Sou-Chun Lo.

'Have you any idea what happened?' Namboze asked.

'Whatever it was, it doesn't seem to have gone beyond Kappa Chamber. We're hoping and praying that was the end of it.'

'Kappa Chamber,' Chiku echoed in a low voice. A weird chime of déjà vu, there and gone in a moment.

'Chiku, Noah – your children and immediate family have been accounted for and are safe,' said Sou-Chun Lo. 'Gonithi – there's no immediate reason to worry for your friends and colleagues. I doubt any of them were in Kappa, unless they had a direct connection to any of the research programmes.'

Chiku, Noah and Namboze nodded their thanks.

'You have all been working hard,' Sou-Chun Lo said, steeping her fingers in a prayer-like gesture. 'You should go home now.'

'Provided there are suits to spare,' Noah said, 'Chiku and I intend to assist with the search in Kappa.'

Chiku flicked a glance at her husband. They had discussed no such thing.

'There is no need, really,' Sou-Chun Lo said kindly. 'You have all done more than enough for the committee in recent days. Your particular commitment has been noted, Chiku.'

She wondered if that was a reference to their hopes of obtaining skipover.

'I'd still like to help,' Noah said.

Chiku shook her head. 'You can help by going and finding the children – they must be scared out of their wits. I can take care of myself here. It's important that someone from the Assembly gets their hands dirty in the rescue effort, so it may as well be me.'

'I want to help, too,' Namboze said. 'I have suit and field medical experience.'

'We're not expecting to find many alive,' Sou-Chun cautioned. 'You should be ready for that. It's going to be messy.'

'We know,' said Chiku. 'We saw the explosion.' But tired as she was, she made an effort to strike a positive note. 'Still, there's a chance a few may have survived the blast and managed to get to suits, or pressurised structures, or even into the service tunnels under the chamber. Besides, the whole place has to be searched regardless of the likelihood of finding anyone alive. We need to know what happened in there, and whether it continues to pose a risk to us.'

'There are no immediate structural concerns,' Sou-Chun said. 'The blast and pressure loss deflected our course by a very small amount, but our trimming motors can easily correct for that. Most of the citizens wouldn't have felt anything – the first they knew of the accident was when Utomi appeared in their homes.'

'What about the research programmes? Most of those were housed in Kappa, right? Thousands of scientists, engineers, all their support staff ... hundreds of them must have been there at the time.'

'Including Travertine,' Noah said quietly.

That was the connection she had almost made for herself. Travertine and Kappa.

How could she not have seen it?

'The hours we kept ... how could Travertine *not* have been there?'

'Travertine?' Namboze asked, incredulous. 'The *same* Travertine?'

'There's only one Travertine,' Noah said, with a long-suffering expression.

'I thought Travertine wasn't allowed to conduct experiments any more,' Namboze said.

'Not quite,' Chiku answered. 'Travertine didn't break the old rules deliberately, they were just drawn up badly. After *Pemba* there was a mad rush to create new legislation, and it wasn't done properly.'

'I think Travertine knew full well what he was doing,' Sou-Chun said.

'You could just as easily say he acted in the interests of the local caravan,' replied Chiku. 'No one ever thought Travertine had been motivated by personal gain, just a desire to solve the slowdown problem. Look, can we save this for later? For all we know, he's among the dead or dying.'

'I'll see if I can reach the children,' Noah said. Then he put a hand on Chiku's elbow. 'Be careful, please.'

'I will,' she said, and made a mental note to the effect that from this day forward she would never once complain about having an uneventful life.