

Ashlea Prime

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Two Lifetimes Ago

The scientific community on Ashlea Prime was in an uproar. Reports of a rocket being launched from the third planet in the Comeki Star System had made it all over the planet. The lead scientists were in a committee meeting regarding the Shuka rocket.

Sofi slammed her fist down on a large conference table. “We cannot take this threat lying down! The third planet, Shuka, has launched a rocket. We *must* respond.” To say she was ad would be an understatement.

Kush, another scientist, looked at Sofi. “If you actually read the readings, you would have noticed the rocket crashed in a mountain range thousands of kilometers from their capitol city. It will take the occupant one to two years to even make it back to their city on foot.” He said. “They are no harm to us. Now if it was the Dubor, those who inhabit the fifth planet, then there would be cause for concern.”

Sofi scoffed. She hated when Kush had a good point, and he had a very good point. If the rocket had crashed on its own home world and it wasn’t headed towards Ashlea Prime, then there really was no danger. “So it was a failed launch.”

Kush nodded his head “It would appear so. Probably some new scientist who didn’t know what they were doing. Launched too soon before they were ready, and failed to do whatever it was they set out to do.” He smiled, he was right as far as he was concerned. “I want to investigate.”

Sofi was confused. “Didn’t you just say they weren’t a threat?”

Kush waved his hands in the air like a lunatic. “Don’t you want to see what tech they have? They could launch *another* rocket, one armed this time *against us!*” He said. “Isn’t that reason enough? What’s the limit for our safety as a people? What if these Shuka are just like the Dubor? We all know how well *that* conflict went!”

Sofi nodded her head. "You're making sense Kush! For once you're making sense!" Standing up, she looked around at the other members of the scientific community present in the room. "I vote that we go investigate this at once."

Kush shook his head. "Not now." He said. "Now is not the right time. This ... scientist ... person ... alien is on his way back to his village. They have a long walk ahead of them. I am not about to help this alien get home. They must do it alone." He paused. "But, in three years time, we will travel to Shuka and seek out this alien. We will confront them about their intentions and get answers."

Sofi's mouth dropped open. "You expect us to wait three years? For an alien to make their way home?"

Kush nodded. "Yes. Not only do I expect us to wait. We *will* wait. There is no question about it. I have the final say on the matter, and that is my final word. No discussion. End of sentence. Period." Kush folded his arms. What he said was law.

Sofi knew Kush was basically god for their community. If he told them to jump out of a window, ninety-eight percent of the community would do it. It was a crazy thing to think about. "Fine." She admitted her defeat. "But I won't be sitting around waiting for you to find me. Three years Kush. You have three years to get your act in order and we can track down this ... alien." She exited the room.

Three Years Later

Sofi was in the middle of feeding her children. It was eight in the morning. "Have a good day at school today." She said to the three of them. "I will be a little late coming home tonight as usual, there's a meeting I have to attend."

Her youngest daughter looked at her and frowned. "Mommy, why do you always have to go to meetings?" She asked as she shoveled food into her mouth.

Sofi stopped what she was doing and walked over to her daughter. "I'm sorry honey, but it's just part of my job." She explained. "Someday you'll understand, I hope." She paused as she listened to her own excuse. It was lame, as lame as lame could get and she had said it to her five year old. What a terrible thing to do.

Knock Knock

There was a knock at the door. Sofi looked up and towards the front door. Who could be calling at this time of the morning? It was an odd thing to have a visitor this early on a weekday, or a weekend for that matter. She walked over to the door and opened it.

Kush stood at the door. He was smiling. "Good morning Sofi." He said.

Sofi looked at Kush and frowned. What the hell was he doing at her door? “Kush? What are you doing here?” Sofi said. “We don’t have a meeting do we? I thought those were changed last week to once a month.”

Kush laughed. “You’ve forgotten.” He said as a matter of fact. “You ready or not?”

Sofi looked confused. “Ready … for … what?”

Kush shook his head. “You still don’t get it. We’re going to Shuka. It’s been three years.” He said. “It’s time to get answers about that rocket. Obviously it’s taken the alien this long to get home, they haven’t launched another rocket … *yet*.” The way he said *yet* made Sofi feel uncomfortable. “Got someone you can call to watch your kids?”

Sofi still looked confused. “I … I can’t.” She said. “Now is *not* a good time.” Sofi turned around to look at her kids. There was so much she had to do, she couldn’t just go to Shuka, not today. “Maybe in a week.”

Kush shook his head. “No can do. We have to go today, I have the rocket scheduled for *today*. Look, you told me to find you. I did. Were you not expecting me to come though on this or what?”

Sofi remembered the conversation three years prior. She never thought this day would come. She wasn’t expecting this day to come to be honest. Sofi was still interested in finding the alien who had flown, and crashed, the rocket. Kush’s timing was just down right *terrible*.

Kush frowned. “You have got to accept this invite. It’s not going to come again. I’m leaving with or without you.” He said. “Don’t make me go at this alone. I need someone to ride shotgun.” He paused as realization hit him. “Don’t make me take Notal. You *know* how he can be on a road trip. I’ll beg if I have to...”

Sofi chuckled at the thought. Oh she could make Kush’s life hell if she wanted to. She finally gave in. “Alright, let me contact my nanny. Tell her she’ll be taking care of the kids for a couple of … is days okay?”

Kush smiled. He had her. “Good, good. Yes we shouldn’t be gone more than a couple of days. A week at most. Meet me at the launchpad in thirty minutes. We’ll go from there.” He turned around and left.

Sofi closed the door and turned to face her kids who were all staring at her. “Change of plans kids.” She said as she looked up the contact information for her nanny.

Thirty Minutes Later

Sofi arrived at the launchpad where Kush was waiting for her. He was smiling.

“You made it.” Kush said. “Good, let’s prepare for take off.” He led her to an elevator that would take them to the top of the rocket, to the module. “Ladies first.” He said looking into Sofi’s gray eyes. It was a windy day, the wind was blowing Sofi’s blue hair left and right. It was also blowing Kush’s green hair too.

“Lovely day for a rocket ride.” Sofi said.

As they boarded the vehicle that would take them into space, Sofi worried about her kids. Would the nanny take care of them okay for a few days? She breathed slowly. Going into space was also a little bit terrifying for her. Sofi had been to space numerous of times, but never to another planet. That part was new.

Moments later they took off and left their world behind. As they entered space and became weightless, Sofi got dizzy. It had been a number of years since she had been in space, this was long before her kids were born. Closing her eyes she focused on not getting sick. Her nausea was over in five minutes.

Kush checked his instruments. “Shouldn’t take us long to get to Shuka.” He said. “Fire main thruster.”

Sofi nodded as she pressed a button that would fire the rocket’s main thruster at the aft. The button was next to the FTL engage button, but since they were in the same solar system as their target planet they didn’t need to engage the FTL drive. That would have been overkill.

As the main thruster fired, Sofi and Kush were pressed into their seats. Without artificial gravity or any kind of force generator, they were subject to the rocket’s force. Sofi braced herself as best she could, Kush did the same. Ten minutes later they were in orbit of Shuka.

Sofi looked at the planet below. “That’s Shuka.” She said. “Some of the old timers claim Shuka was the first planet to be populated in our solar system. The other planets were then populated later from remains of the two suns being created. But well that’s a myth. A rumor.”

Kush nodded. “Yeah I think we’ve all heard the rumors Sofi. That’s nothing new.” He looked at his readings. “I’ve located the capitol city. Looks like it’s the only city on the planet. How can that be? You’d think they would want to cover more of the planet’s surface with more settlements ... but obviously that isn’t the case here.”

Sofi smiled at Kush’s lack of understanding isolationism. “It’s a thing, trust me.” She said. “Locking onto a landing site near the city now.” Sofi announced. “I’m not detecting any kind of weapons platforms near or around the city. I think we’re good to land.”

Kush nodded. “Good, take us down.”

Sofi carried out the orders. “We should land in a few minutes.”

As their rocket ship circled around the city and came to a landing site, both Sofi and Kush breathed a sigh of relief. The rocket hadn't been flown in a handful of years. Neither of them knew if it *could* still land without crashing. Luckily it landed without problem. A little rocky maybe, but it landed.

Unbuckling her seat belt, Sofi stood and walked towards the airlock door. Kush followed right behind her. As the door opened, they were met by a Shukan female. She looked at them with a scathing look. She didn't trust them, who were *they* to land in *her* city? Sofi smiled at the woman, gently.

"Who are you?" The woman asked.

Kush took lead. "My name is Kush and this is my associate Sofi. We come from the fourth planet, Ashlea Prime. We noticed your rocket launch, three years ago, and its subsequent crash. We've come to speak to the pilot of that rocket, if possible."

The woman folded her arms. "My name is Kerta." She said. "Welcome to Shuka. I know of the pilot you speak of. He's ... a scientist of sorts. But I'm not sure I want you talking to him. Might give him some ideas."

Sofi raised her hand. "Hi yes, um we can provide your people medicine. Might help you get through the coming winter. I don't know about your planet, but we have harsh winters on ours and it tends to take lives. We're more than happy to share what cures we have, that is if you're interested in them ..." She allowed her voice to trail off. It was like leading a rabbit by a carrot on a stick. Too easy.

Kerta thought about the offer for a moment and then nodded her head. "Alright, medicine." She said. Kerta paused. She *knew* Nokev would want to talk to *any* scientist that came to visit Shuka from a different planet. Part of her wanted to grant him whatever it was he wanted, but she knew that wouldn't be possible. She had an image to uphold. A planet to protect. A city to run. If she gave into everything Nokev wanted, *he* would be running the Religious Council. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt for you to talk to Nokev." She said. "But be discrete please. We are not fond of leaving our planet let alone visiting other planets. It's been our way for over two millennia. I'm not about to change it." She said. "But Nokev is a dear friend, I owe it to him."

Sofi smiled big. "That would be great." She looked to Kush. "Wouldn't that be great Kush?"

Kush shrugged. "Yeah that would be fine."

"Splendid." Kerta said. "I'll ask you to stay with your rocket for the time being. We don't have a place for ... um ... dignitaries such as yourself. We don't get visitors much. I will return within two hours with Nokev and make the necessary introductions. Sound good?"

Kush nodded his head. "Yes. Yes."

Kerta smiled. "Good. Two hours then." She turned and left the landing site.

Kush turned to Sofi. "First impressions."

Sofi thought about it for a moment. "They *seem* friendly. Possibly just scared of outsiders, like she said they don't get out much. Don't have many visitors over either." She thought about it for a moment. "I suppose we will have to wait to meet with this ... scientist ... this Nokev to see what his thoughts are."

"I agree." Kush said. "They don't seem like the kind to want us dead. I count that as a win right now. Let's hope that momentum keeps us going for a bit longer." He grinned. "So we wait."

Two Hours Later

Nokev arrived at the landing site. He looked over the alien vessel and whistled. Walking around the ship, he took her all in. There were two main engines on each side of the ship, and a thruster engine in the middle. The cockpit seemed small only accepting two occupants. He approached the airlock and knocked loudly hoping the aliens would hear him and answer.

Kush answered the airlock door. He looked at Nokev and smiled. "Nokev I presume." He said. Nokev nodded. "Good to meet you, my name is Kush and this is my associate Sofi. We have some medicine that your people might be interested in."

Nokev nodded. "Right, yes. Medicine." He said, blabbering a little bit. "I um, I'd like to know more about your rocket here as well. I recently returned from a rocket adventure. I'd love to compare notes with you and your associate."

Sofi smiled. "I'm sure you would." She invited Nokev inside. Nokev accepted and entered the airlock. Inside the ship, they found a table to sit at. Nokev pulled out a recording device and placed it on the table.

"Here are my readings from my last trip into space." Nokev said. "My black box as it were. I'm not sure if your ship has a similar device that logs whatever you encounter. I find it to come in handy. It was very handy during testing before I ventured out into space."

Sofi looked at the device. "Yes, we have a similar technology that we use in our FTL capable ships."

"FTL?" Nokev asked. "You mean faster than light travel? You have the ability to travel beyond the confines of the Comeki Star System?" He gasped amazed at the opportunity that presented itself to him. FTL was something Nokev had only dreamed of. But it was reality.

"That's right." Sofi said. "We've had some ships make small jumps out of the star system. Nothing too big, but they do manage to come back to us unharmed. We've had a bit of success in such flights." She smiled at Nokev. He was cute ... for an alien. Looking to Kush she continued. "Maybe we could share with him some of our tech?"

Kush simply nodded. "I think we can make a deal with him. Depends on what he has to offer though. I mean we can't just *give away* our tech. Unless you think we can?"

Nokev smiled at the two of them. "I'm sure I can come up with *something* to trade. We have plentiful gardens across Shuka City. They include our prized melons. Something of a delicacy around these parts."

The city. Kush thought. It brought up an interesting question. "Your city." He said resting a hand on the table. "Why is there only *one* city on the entire planet surface? Why haven't your people spread out across the planet to other uninhabited continents?"

Nokev chuckled to himself. "Ah you noticed that. Yeah it's a strange one. One of our oldest laws of the Religious Council in fact. No one is to leave the city boundaries. The city is there for our protection. To leave the confines of the city would be to disregard that protection the city offers. A disgrace to our gods." He concluded.

"Yet you left the city *and* the planet by flying in your rocket." Sofi said. "What would your gods say about that?" She didn't believe in a god or gods. Her scientific mind wouldn't allow for it. Sofi had tried to make a god and science work together for a while, but never got the hang of it. So she had given up on the thought. To her knowledge god didn't exist.

Nokev folded his arms. "Well I'm not sure what my gods would say about that to be honest. But I do know what *I* would say about it, and if there is a god or gods? They punished me by making me crash land in a far away mountain range. It um took me a while to travel back to the city on foot."

Kush nodded. "Yes, we detected your crash site three years ago. We waited till the time was right to come and meet you." He said with a smile. Kush wasn't sure how Nokev would take the news that they had waited to meet with him personally like it was their mission or something. They would soon find out.

"You waited for *me*?" Nokev's mouth dropped open. "I'm not that important of a person. I defy the rules, bend them when I can really. Kerta, the woman you met before, tends to lean on my side when necessary so I don't get in trouble with the Religious Council." He paused. "I've had my share of close calls. Kerta always reminds me to tread lightly when it comes to the rules of the Religious Council. They are there for a reason." He recited the words from memory as he had heard them on several occasions. "At the end of the day, I figure it's my life and I can do as I please. No one is going to tell me what I can or cannot do. So I live."

"I see." Kush said. "Going against your beliefs takes a lot of courage. I am not sure I would have the courage to do what you did. You should be celebrated as a hero for what you've done. You've shown your people that space travel is possible."

Nokev shook his head. "But I crashed."

Kush shrugged. "A minor setback. We will help you analyze your data recorder. Maybe we can come up with the reason why you crashed and help prevent it from happening again the next time you take flight."

Nokev grinned. "I'd like that."

Sofi picked up a datapad and handed it to Nokev. "Here, these are the medicines we are willing to give you in exchange for your fruits and vegetables. We promised Kerta we wouldn't only talk about rockets." She smiled at the thought. They were scientists after all. Rockets weren't the only thing they were gifted in.

Taking the datapad, Nokev looked over the medicines and their uses. He marveled at how advanced they were in their medicines. One jumped out at him. "This one. The medicine that takes care of the ... Debian flu virus." Nokev said. "The symptoms are quite similar to our Ougantic flu. It's very contagious and deadly to our people. We lose roughly twenty people a year to it."

Sofi nodded. "We came across a cure over fifty years ago. Our scientific discoveries are your scientific discoveries." She said. "Tell me, is there is Mrs. Nokev?"

Kush coughed. "Sofi!" He exclaimed. "That is not appropriate."

Nokev laughed. "Yes, yes there is. Her name is Norev."

Sofi blushed. "She's a lucky woman to have you." Turning her attention back to the FTL drive she pulled another datapad from a pile. "Here are the specs of our FTL drive. I'm not certain if they will match the design you have in mind for your next rocket, but I hope they help."

Nokev looked over the datapad in amazement. "Can I keep this?" He asked.

Sofi nodded. "Of course."

A week later Nokev had learned everything he could from Kush and Sofi. As they parted ways, Nokev couldn't help but thank them for all of their knowledge they had given him. It would take him the better part of a year to come up with an FTL engine based on their designs. But it was worth it, and they got some crops out of the deal as well. It was a win win for both sides. Nokev was happy, Sofi and Kush were happy, Kerta was even happy. It was a good thing.

The End