

"What is it?" Cesar asked from the back, teeth chattering despite the cabin's warmth and the sleeping bag wrapped around him.

"It's somebody out there," Gail said.

"Turban, furs... is that a rifle on their back?" Margo asked, squinting.

Gail grabbed the radio mic. "X-Ray Papa Two, how armed are you? Over."

"We're warm but not hot, over. I'll talk to them," Patty said.

"You sure that's a good idea?" Cesar asked.

"Shut it," Cindithia replied, struggling forward. "This is proof positive that the plateau is inhabited! They might know something about the city, about whether it's Kadath!"

"Do not trust men of Leng, they with the knife-smile," Margo said, fidgeting as the vehicle came to a stop.

"OK," Patty's radio voice said. "I'm going out to talk. I'll be armed, and Jane's watching."

"I'm tooling up," Cindithia said, "Margo, move please. Gail, pull sideways so I'm not exposed getting out, would you?"

"Get miked," Gail said, putting the vehicle in park, checking a pistol, chambering a round.

"Of course." The team was equipped with short range radios, and Cindithia switched hers on, hanging it beside her throat, before struggling into her gloves. "Check one, check two, over?"

"You're five by five," Patty replied. "I'm getting out. Gail, stay in the car and wait, over?"

"Roger that Patty, over."

Margo leaned forward on the edge of her seat after Cindithia dropped stiffly out of the passenger door. Gail glanced around but could see little in the dim. It was a cloudy... night? Antarctic day? Sunless nightmare realm?... so there was little starlight to guide them, only the harsh beams from the Pistens' searchlights. Having seen what infested this sky, Gail was grateful for the covering weather.

Patty moved forward and, over the radio, Gail heard her hail the traveler in English and, when that got no response, Chinese.

The reply was some language Gail didn't recognize, shrill and meeping. She saw Patty shake her head no. Next Jane opened the undamaged driver's side door of X-Ray Papa One and leaned out.

"Ull... haka ourakanla?" she said. "Lama lama?"

"Oopah! Anamu mu!" the figure in the turban replied.

"Ohhh God," Margo said, in tones of quiet dread. She was looking at the stranger through high-powered binoculars.

"What?" Gail demanded.

"What language is that?" Cesar asked.

"It's tsaluoli," Margo replied, handing the optics to Gail. "Jane's father is from Tsalal, the language is dying out but... they legendarily had access to Leng and these areas."

"Who? The Tsalal natives?"

"There was a whole situation where they contacted whites and it destroyed their culture, which is ironic, because they had a huge taboo against the color white and white colored objects."

Gail paid only partial attention, squinting at the lenses, through the windshield and across the dark emptiness. But when the turban swam into view and she looked below it, she hissed in distaste.

The... man? woman? It was hard to tell, the face was heavily wrinkled and only a little of it showed between the low headgear and scarf beneath its chin. But the mouth, when it opened to smile and speak, showed horrible teeth. At first Gail thought they were just whittled down by decay, or perhaps filed, but they looked too clean, their ivory-yellow color was too consistent and even. These weren't flat teeth like humans had, equally fit to saw plants or chew meat. They were sideways, locking together like a zipper, long and sharp. Jane was talking to someone with fangs.

"Patty? What're they saying? Over." Gail turned the binoculars away and outward, up to the ridges looming above them.

"It's rough Gail, Jane's tsaluoli is rusty and they have a weird dialect... she says her name is Tick, I think? Over."

"Tick," Margo muttered, hugging herself.

"She seems friendly," Patty continued. "That thing on her back... it's not a gun. Well, it was, it... it's like a hollowed out AK-47 with saxophone keys. The stock's like a bell now. Uh, over."

"If they have one fucked-up gun, they could have access to unfucked ones," Cesar said from the back.

Over the radio, they heard Jane's voice speaking strange syllables and, faintly, the answers from the strange woman.

"She wants to know why we're here. Should I let Jane tell her we're looking for Kadath? Over."

"What do you think, Patty?"

"I say we go for it."

"OK."

Patty spoke to Jane, who went on to haltingly speak with Tick. The woman's laughter sounded unfeignedly enthusiastic.

"She says she knows the way! It's past the valley, but she warns us about the... yes, the 'tekeli li,' the..."

"The white curse of the sunless lands," Jane said, over her own mic, followed by more tsaluoli phrases.

"Guys, we have company, over," Cindithia's voice cut through Tick's faint reply.

"Come back?" Gail said.

"Thermal scope, Gail. There's hot bodies up on the ridge, both ridges, over!"

"You copy that Patty?"

"How many?" Patty asked, while Margo started crawling into the back and covering her head.

"I don't know... a dozen? Twenty? Over."

"Patty, make Jane tell them to stand down!" Gail cried, moving across the cab towards the far door. The gun was in her hand, but she wanted a rifle. When she exited, the wind was like a slap, she could hear Jane yelling and Tick laughing. Gail spared a look over her shoulder and the turbaned woman was nodding,

hands up, still smiling, her posture conveying “OK, you got me, I was going to trick you but you’re too smart” and it all seemed too pat to her...

“Got me a rifle?” she barked at Cindithia, who indeed had the munitions crate open.

“Kalashnikov, or something slower with more reach?” Cindi replied. She had one of the assault rifles at her feet and was scoping the hills along a sniper gun’s barrel.

“Are we out of their range?” Gail put the safety on her handgun, ejected the shell from the chamber and put the weapon in one of her coat’s deep pockets.

“Accurate range? Sure. The distance where they can shoot indiscriminately and shred us? Afraid not.”

“Where’s the rocket launcher?” Gail asked, then heard Tick yell something in yet another language—this time, one that sounded like barks and gurgles.

“What the fuck?” Cindi muttered. With a curse of her own, Gail snatched up a scoped rifle, sat herself small against the trailer and looked.

The figures up in the hills were distant and dim, little more than movements of light gray and black in surrounding gloom, but they seemed man sized and slow in their movements, as if walking on sore feet.

“She says they’re coming down in peace, their guns are up,” Patty said over the radio.

“Stay alert!” Gail said, then heard low, lonesome music cutting through the hiss of wind and rumble of idling Pistens.

She looked...

...and realized she’d blinked, blinked as she moved her head, but it was a long blink, the gray shapes were nearer and the sound...

...the sound was buzzing in her head, her cells, her chest, her bones, a disruption, not even sleep though it felt like sleep, like narcotics, like anesthesia...

...another blink and a knife-mouthed man with a scraggly beard leered as he pulled the rifle from her unresisting figures. “Ooh, we’ll see what under those puffy coat,” he said, his English clacky, the emphasis all wrong...

...the music went on, mixed with laughter, and then a scream, Gail tried to wake up, to struggle free but she had to blink and...

...blood-smeared faces, chewing, looking down at her...

Then she was out cold.