

Chapter 1

Heavy rain was falling in the thick jungle. Torrents of rainwater flowed across the jungle floor toward one of the many rivers that drained to the sea far away. Baku had built a rough shelter to protect himself and Keedu from the weather. Keedu had not spoken a word since Baku rescued him from the ice wizards and the Candu Mali Siwa on Orto Nong. They had been on this uninhabited planet for two weeks now and the weather never changed. Baku had managed to accumulate a large pile of dry wood which he used to replenish their small fire. Each morning, he would head out of the encampment to find edibles for them to eat. Today, he filled a simple metal pan with water and added some tubers and greens he located nearby. Baku squatted next to his pan and dipped a spoon into the soup and tasted it. "Lord Keedu, you must eat something!" he cajoled.

"Just shut up and leave me alone, Baku," he snarled. "And stop calling me Lord, you idiot. I personally destroyed the mages. You should have left me there for the ice wizards to kill. Now I'm a damned crippled failure."

"Keedu, you must calm down and stop blaming yourself," Baku urged. "How could any of us have foreseen what happened? The Candu Mali Siwa was a legend from Bala Napor. I thought it was a fairytale too."

"But I should have known!" he shouted. "I was the leader and led our men into a trap. The Candu Mali Siwa and his granddaughter warned me again and again, but I wouldn't listen. My head was too full of lust for blood and power. Now look at me." Keedu stood up and waved the stump of his right arm in the air. "I can't fight anymore. I might as well be dead."

"Brother, if we can form a circle, we can cure your wounds," the other argued. "Surely, we can find eight other mages. I doubt they will all hide from you as the Candu Mali Siwa demanded."

"I know we could find some to help, but then I would be responsible for their deaths too. Enough is enough, old friend. Let this be the end for me," Keedu said as he sat heavily on the ground outside the tent. Water poured over his head and body. He dropped his head and sat quietly again.

Baku rose and went over to Keedu and grabbed his good arm and pulled him back under the tent. "I am sick and tired of your whining and

bemoaning the past! Either stop moping and eat this soup, or I'll leave you here to die alone. We both have long lives ahead if we just forget about Orto Nong. It's a big universe, Keedu, and I plan to explore it until I find a place where I can live like Umdala was living on Earth."

Keedu looked at his only friend and knew he was right. The battle against the Ballanan and the Sentinels was an abject failure. But the loss was not due to their weakness or cowardliness. They lost because the stones had conspired against them. No black mage could stand against a Cantu Bagwa or Candu Mali Siwa. It had been thousands of generations since anyone took those old legends seriously. Keedu had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was simply fate that he led the mages at that particular moment. "Just give me some soup, Baku," he sighed.

Bill Marshall walked down the hill toward the portal key. Only a single sentinel was guarding it at this early hour. He walked up to Joe Peterson and said, "Joe, how are you today?"

"I'm good, Bill. I see you're quite a bit early for your jump," the sentinel replied.

"What time is it on Goola now?" Bill asked.

"High noon, Bill," Joe replied. "It's pretty hot and steamy in the jungle today. Let me make the connection for you." Joe turned and began tapping on the control console. After a few moments, the cave on Goola appeared through the portal key. "I have a lock on the portal now, Bill. Whenever you're ready."

"Thanks Joe," Bill said, shaking the man's hand. "Please keep an eye on things around here for me, okay?" The sentinel nodded. Bill walked through the portal and into the cave on Goola. Gone were the days when he became nauseated by stepping from portal to portal. He knew he did not require portals at all anymore, but traveling like everyone else was comforting in some way. It made him feel like a regular person, although he knew that would never be the case again. The stones owned him now.

"Dad, I was expecting you later," his son Frank said, standing behind the control console in the cave on Goola. He stepped around the console and hugged Bill.

"Well, things are a bit complicated at home right now, son," Bill replied.

"I can imagine. You're here to help Nan after she has the babies, right? Mom is probably very conflicted right now," Frank agreed.

"To say the least," Bill laughed. "I'm beginning to think the Candu Mali Siwa stuff is too much for me. I'm not getting any younger."

"Of course, you're not getting any older either," Frank answered. "But it's not like any of us have any choice on that. The stones picked you. Nan saved all of our lives more than once. I think this will all blow over some day."

"It used to be I could count on becoming feeble-minded in my old age. Now, that could be an eternity away," Dave reasoned. "But enough about me Sentinel. Tell me about the improvements made here to date."

"It's slow. As you can see, we haven't even started to remove the rest of the Heartstone. No one has figured out how to put a full portal key here since the cave is in the middle of a mountain with a sheer cliff at the opening. It won't be easy to remove a thousand-foot mountain. That's why we're relying on the retort now," Frank replied. "The jungle city of Non has seen a lot of improvements. The Ballanan have joined with us to rebuild the city. We are adding modern plumbing and air conditioning to most of the buildings. When we're done here, we will focus on upgrading Chang-A. The biggest challenge is educating the people. Going from the Bronze Age to the Technology Age is a mighty leap. Nan has been helping a lot too. She uses her powers to speed everything up."

"Pretty exciting times here," Bill replied. "You take care of yourself, son. I hope you can come home to visit your mom soon." The two men hugged.

"I will Dad. As you know, I'm still trying to get Cindy and Cybil to come here more often. It's not easy with school and protecting the Earth," Frank smiled. "We have a full crew of sentinels now, so I should be able to spend more weekends there. And please give my love to Nan, Dad."

Bill put his hand on Frank's shoulder and said, "I will son. I love you and will see you soon." Bill turned and walked down the narrow tunnel toward the temple and the city. Entering the temple, he saw Chief Priest Joco Nilt meditating in the first row. His eyes were closed and his head was bowed. Bill sat next to him and waited for the priest to finish his prayer.

"Bill, what a pleasant surprise to see you here," Joco said at last.

“It’s good to see you again too, Joco,” he replied. “How are you and your city?”

“It is so amazing to see the progress, Bill. I have air conditioning, running water, and plumbing in my home now. I could never have imagined such things. Finally Non is a pleasant place to live,” Joco beamed. “We owe that to you, Candu Mali Siwa.”

“For my small part, you are quite welcome,” Bill replied. “But I think the Ballanan and Sentinels get most of the credit. I am very happy for your people.”

“You are here for the fruition of the Eretz Domma, I presume?” Joco asked.

“Yes, that’s correct, although it sounds rather sterile when you put it that way,” Bill suggested.

“I’m sorry if I have offended you, Bill, but this is more than a normal childbirth. Nan-bo-Nan is our most precious resident. Now you and she will have a family. The combination of the Candu Mali Siwa and an ice wizard is a unique occurrence in the history of the universe. We will have parties for weeks after her delivery, I can assure you of that!” Joco replied.

“I understand, but to me, we are just a man and a woman,” Bill said. He dropped his head and sat quietly.

“Bill, what is troubling you? This is a monumental day. You have returned to Goola and many wonderful things are about to happen,” Joco replied.

“Joco, you know I am a married man on my own planet. I have a wife, a son, and a granddaughter. Now I’m having more babies with another woman. It’s not right. I feel like I’ve betrayed both of them,” Bill sighed.

“You need to relax and stop blaming yourself for this, Bill Marshall,” Joco began. “What you say is true; however, you have just been following the course of God’s Will. Tell me what would have happened had Lance not been led to your planet by Nan?”

“We all would have been slaughtered by the vorrath, zongo, and ulluba,” Bill replied.

“That is correct. And if the ulluba had not led you here, what would have happened to me and my people?”

“The Ballanan did overrun the city and would have chased you all down and killed you,” Bill said.

“Perhaps,” Joco said raising one finger. “Nan-bo-Nan may have stopped them here, but they would have sent more and more troops, killing more of my people.”

“And if I let Nan die here after the mages attacked her, I would have been killing the one person who saved me, my family, Earth, Goola, Far Sun, and Orto Nong,” Bill answered.

“And don’t forget she helped you to become the Candu Mali Siwa,” Joco laughed. “I understand the situation is very confusing right now, but all things happen for a reason. Perhaps you can visit Grand Master Golo Ung in Chang-A while you are here. He understands the flow of time and reality better than anyone on Goola. I am certain he could offer excellent counsel to you.”

“Thank you, Joco,” Bill smiled and put his hand on the other’s shoulder. “It is really wonderful to see you again. Give my regards to your priests, especially Malua. His company added a pinch of fun to our last adventure.”

“If you visit Chang-A, you can tell him yourself, Bill. He is there for a year studying under the Grand Master. That old tradition of keeping Non priests here has been canceled after your arrival. I will go myself next year and am very excited about the opportunity,” Joco said. He looked up and smiled, saying, “Another gift from the Candu Mali Siwa that we can never repay. Farewell, my friend.”

Bill stood and closed his eyes for a moment. When they opened again, he said, “Thank you Joco. I hate to chat and run, but I am being summon . . .” Before he could finish speaking, he disappeared.

“Nan-bo-Nan can be very demanding,” Joco laughed.

It was the middle of the night on the jungle planet and the pouring rain had abated somewhat. Both mages were lying on a pile of dried leaves. Baku was snoring loudly and Keedu was lost in thought. The small bowl of soup had helped him think more clearly. He thought about his encounters with Cybil and Bill Marshall again, trying to find clues that might help him get his revenge. There was something they both had said, but the intervening time and the savagery of his wounds had driven

most of those memories to the back of his head. He rolled over and fell to sleep again.

In his dream, Keedu was standing with his army of one hundred thousand black mages on the streets of New York City. He was supremely confident his men would slaughter the little child in front of him, claiming to be the Cantu Bagwa. Those were ancient legends no mage really believed. They were like the nursery rhymes told to small children to make them behave and listen to their parents. "Who is going to help you, little girl?" he had said.

"Don't you read, Keedu?" she laughed. "The Heartstone and Hopestone are already helping me."

"Not more of those ice wizard romantic meanderings about a Hopestone. There is no such thing," Keedu replied. "Perhaps my men should exile you along with Bola. My spiders like fresh young meat." The dream faded and he rolled over. Now Baku's snores were too close and Keedu woke up. Noticing the rain had stopped he rose and walked out of the camp to look around. In the couple of weeks they had been here, Keedu had sat in the same spot, unwilling to leave the camp. It was still the dead of night, but mages had excellent night vision so he was able to bypass lines of ants as well as branches and other litter covering the jungle floor.

He climbed up a small hill where a group of boulders broke the endless canopy of jungle. He sat on the highest boulder and surveyed his surroundings in the pale light of three small moons. There were mountains in the far distance and he thought he could see snowcaps there. Perhaps he and Baku would travel in that direction to get out of this damp mess. He thought again about his encounter with the Candu Mali Siwa. That event had cost him most of his right arm, bitten off savagely by an ulluba under Bill Marshall's command.

He was beginning to recall those events, and the details flooded into his mind like the torrents of rainwater outside their camp. He stood there on Orto Nong with his army. The Elder Council building had been leveled by his men and they were relishing their victory when the single human came to face them. The man warned Keedu he was the Candu Mali Siwa, but he did not believe it.

"Oh, you're a comedian, I get it," he chuckled. "That is a legend, fool. And the legend says that a mage must be the Candu Mali Siwa, and you are no mage."

“It’s good that you can read, Zimu,” the man replied. “But not everything in the ancient texts should be taken so literally. But I am the Master of the Stones. You should run away while you can.”

The hilltop was now bathed in bright light. Keedu looked around and noticed a blob of light coalescing next to him. He had never seen ball lightning or anything else that would resemble this image. After a few moments, the ball of light resolved into a short human of great age. His face was covered with deep wrinkles and his thin hair was wispy and white. His skin was so thin Keedu thought he could see the veins and tendons through it. “What the hell are you?” Keedu asked. “Is this your planet?”

“No Keedu, this is not my world, but I was curious why you and Baku are here?” the man said.

“How do you know our names, old man?” Keedu asked.

“My name is Os Balakak,” he said, “and I know many things about you and your brother over there. After all, I am from Bala Napor as well as you.”

“That’s preposterous!” Keedu scoffed. “You are no mage and you certainly aren’t an ice wizard. Tell the truth before I strike you dead where you sit!”

Os laughed out loud. “You cannot harm me, mage, because I am not really here.”

Keedu was irate. He pressed his index finger against the old man’s temple. “Never tempt fate when you are with a black mage.” A blast of plasma shot from the finger and through the man’s head and flew out into the jungle, where it faded away.

Os was still laughing. “Ouch, you got me!” he chortled. “I hope that made you feel better, Keedu Mongala Zimu. But I wouldn’t waste your energy here. There are many wild beasts that would love to crunch your remaining bones,” he said looking at the stump of Keedu’s arm. “By the way, would you like me to heal your arm?”

Keedu sat with his mouth open. He had just shot a lethal burst of plasma into this old man to no effect. Now Os was using his full name. Keedu was certain he was dreaming now. None of this was possible. “That’s it. Now I know I was dreaming. You’re not real, old man. I’m going to wake up now and forget all about you.”

Os patted the mage on the back. "Well, if I am a dream, then it wouldn't hurt if I repaired your arm, would it? Normally, I would charge quite a few years for this, but I don't want to take advantage of a sleeping mage. This one is on the house!" Os rose and walked around to the other side of Keedu, who tried to twist his body to avoid the man's touch. "Now don't be such a baby, Keedu! It will hurt, but I'm sure you'll agree the result is worth it. Stop squirming and sit still!" Keedu moved frantically to avoid Os for several moments. Finally, Os grabbed Keedu's head with both hands and shouted "Enough!"

Keedu was frozen in fear. Os smiled at him softly, then grabbed Keedu's stump. Searing pain shot through Keedu's body, but he couldn't move. He felt his body being consumed by a fire inside of him. All of his muscles strained to move and flee, but he could not budge. He was able to move his eyes to see his right arm as he fought against fainting under the extreme pain and heat. He had to be dreaming, he thought, but the pain seemed totally real. He thought he could see bones and sinew growing out of the stump. New muscle covered the bones and skin began to grow to cover the muscle. He was beginning to see the beginnings of a new hand when the pain overwhelmed him and he passed out.