

Firstday

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Ninetyseventhday

Chief Uto of the Tinji tried to be inconspicuous as he settled down to watch his citizens prepare for Firstday. Most of the citizens were gathering food, of course, but those ones were elsewhere today. Nor were these subjects doing any of the other tasks common to the tribes—weaving fishing nets, whittling spears, raiding the stores of other tribes. In the chief's opinion, this was a somewhat more important project, one which represented a significant gamble.

A tenuous shadow fell across his hiding place. A nearby voice broke into his thoughts, "Good morning, Chief."

Uto resignedly abandoned his attempt at being unobtrusive, moving to sit on top of the rock he had been hiding behind. "Hello, Neef. Can't a chief be allowed to see his citizens work when they think they are unwatched?"

Neef nodded his agreement, "Certainly, sir. But Roc had already noticed you and informed the others, so I thought I would come and get you."

Uto looked up at the subleader. "There was another reason, wasn't there?"

"Yes, sir. I have received word that our fears concerning Oni have been confirmed. Yiro saw two Zanti in possession of Oni's body, in the process of gutting it of course. We have identified the two Zanti in question, and Yiro heard them talk about their ambush of Oni."

"Very well. I suppose that we must implement Operation Aegis. Notify the Systi, and put the word out. Those two Zanti will be dismembered within a day."

Neef acknowledged the command and immediately headed out toward where he thought he could find a Systi representative. Behind him, Uto sat pensively for a few moments. Oni's bones were being whittled into spears and daggers right now, he knew. He was not particularly disturbed by the thought—if he had received any such useful materials, he would certainly have put them to good use, too. No, he was concerned for the security of his citizens. Operation Aegis was intended to put fear into the hearts of any who would threaten them. He was frankly excited to have this chance to try it out. He was disappointed to lose Oni, as that would force a restructuring of one of their eugenics projects. Yet, this killing had come at a very good time: he was confident that the plan would work and the Zanti would face swift retribution, helping to give him and the Tinji a needed boost of status and credibility right before the big Firstday announcements. The strengthening of the alliance with the Systi would be a major benefit. Just so long as Zanti Chief Qeri didn't declare war over this, everything should be alright. Knowing Qeri, war was a real danger, and a war with the Zanti could mean the end of the Tinji. There were almost twice as many Zanti as there were Tinji. Pushing the thought out of his mind, Uto swam away to go look for

some breakfast.

Uto's species is called the Paca, and it includes the Tinji, Systi, Zanti, Lasti, Refti, and countless other tribes. You will never see the Paca. They live on a planet which goes around a different star in a different galaxy, a billion light-years from Earth. The Paca, of course, know nothing of you, but if they could see you and how you live, they would think it very strange, certainly much stranger than you would find them.

Why would they find you so strange? Well, you have heard of dolphins, sea otters, and fish, right? Of course. So you have some idea of the world of the Paca. They, on the other hand, have never seen or even conceived of a terrestrial ecosystem. They live on a world with a much thicker crust than Earth's. Consequently, there has been no significant tectonic activity or volcanism for half a billion years, in which time all continents have eroded into the sea. The planet is one big ocean world, although it is very shallow compared to Earthly oceans.

The shallowness of the ocean is the essential element that allowed the evolution of the Paca. On Earth, the open ocean is a desert, not of water but of nutrients. Organic material tends to sink to the bottom, far from the sunlight, and so in the water the rate of photosynthesis and the abundance of living organisms are comparable to a land desert. In shallow coral reefs, though, the picture is completely different. There, where nutrients are closer to the surface, the rate of photosynthesis and the abundance of living things more closely resemble a tropical rain forest than anything else. There is a much larger diversity of species and a far greater biomass.

The Paca, the only intelligent species on the planet, resemble sea otters more than just superficially. Their world is an enormous expanse of coral reefs, shallow seas, kelp beds, and other productive areas. Some areas, though, had become over-foraged at the time of Chief Uto. The Paca had begun to deplete the supply of mollusks and food plants through their food-gathering activity. Unfortunately, this process was self-perpetuating. Depletion of fauna and flora reduced the photosynthetic productivity, and so less food was produced. Hence, competition was fierce, violence common, and starvation a threat. It was in this environment that Uto made his gamble to secure his tribe's safety and food supply.

"And so, we will give a reward of five standard Tinji barrels of clams to the individual or individuals who deliver to us the dead bodies of these two Zanti," Neef declared to the surprise of the assembled representatives of five tribes. "The reward will be paid over the next one and a quarter hectodays, at the rate of one barrel every twenty-five days. If any other Tinji citizens are killed by individuals of any tribe, we plan to offer clams for those killers, too. That is all." Neef watched the small crowd scatter as everyone left to begin searching for the perpetrators. Even if the chances of actually getting the payout consistently for one and a quarter hectodays seemed small to many of the bounty hunters, the temptation was too great. Neef knew that they would have their culprits soon—five barrels of clams

would be a coveted commodity. Yet that is why Neef felt somewhat worried. He knew how the Chief planned to collect that many clams, but the idea was untested to say the least. Actually, that was true of all of the Chief's projects. Never, in the memory of anyone living, had a chief tasked a full thirty-five percent of the laborers to leave food gathering and work on such speculative projects, except for short periods of war. If it had been a custom among the Tinji, Neef would have crossed his fingers in the hope that no more killings would follow soon. He swam over to a kelp bed to root for a snack.

The Tinji had always invested in R&D, of course. Any tribe had several active eugenics programs running concurrently, and they were always on the lookout for new designs of spears and various other tools. But how much actual labor did a eugenics program really take? Very little. The new projects were far riskier, but hopefully with a higher payoff.

Over the thousands of hectodays of remembered history, eugenics had given decisive advantage to certain tribes, allowing them to slaughter those who stood in their way. In the process, the average member of their species was now somewhat bigger, much more dexterous, and far more intelligent than previously. But eugenics worked very slowly. While not abandoning the tried and true ideas, Uto wanted to do something far more radical than select the best from the genetic material available to him. Social organization could change much faster than genes.

The planet of the Paca had no name, since none of the inhabitants understood that they lived on a planet. They only knew about the places to which they could travel and those which they heard about, and such limited exploration could not reveal that they lived on the surface of a somewhat squashed sphere. Besides, they had more important things to worry about, such as eating.

There is no moon around the world, and the planet's rotation has not been slowed significantly by the tidal action of the sun and the other planets. Thus, the day is a short eleven Earth hours. The planet's axial tilt is nearly zero, and the orbit is almost as circular as the Earth's. The net result is a complete lack of seasons, and the only external clues to the passage of time are the rising and setting of the sun, and the motion of the stars and planets. With the frequent cloud cover, the stars are not useful as the basis of a calendar. Consequently, the Paca simply counted the days. Instead of years, they spoke of hectodays, or hundreds of days. By the Tinji calendar, Operation Aegis was launched in the morning of ninetyseventhday, in hectoday 4483. By evening, two dead Zanti were being examined by Uto, and three triumphant Yisti were salivating over a barrel of clams.

For the second time that day, Neef gave an announcement as part of Operation Aegis. "We have given the clams as we promised. These Yisti will be well fed for the next one and a quarter hectodays. We now announce that they are under our protection, even though they remain with their own tribe. We hereby give warning that anyone who kills these Yisti, except in self-defense, will meet the same fate as these dead Zanti. Furthermore, we are

extending the same protection to all of the Systi. As you know, they are our allies, and we have developed a special partnership with them. They will help us to gather the clams for bounty, and we will pay bounty for anyone who kills a Systi citizen without good reason. Let it be known that we will defend the security of our citizens and friends.”

This alliance, if successful, would be rather novel. Occasionally tribes banded together to make war on a common enemy, and it was not unheard of to give gifts to those of other tribes. But alliances rarely held for many hectodays, and practically any tribe would go back on a promise if it seemed in their best interest. This was particularly true in these lean times—in a day when even chiefs could be hungry, the security of other tribes was hardly a major concern of most Paca. In fact, many liked the population control that the killings provided. Chief Uto’s hope, however, was that with security and power would come the freedom to try some unusual techniques for food production.

Ninetyeighthday

Uto opened his outer eyelids, leaving the inner set closed to protect against the cloud-filtered but bright sunlight. Glancing around, he spotted the area where some of his citizens were beginning the day’s labors. They were preparing for his planned inspection of the research projects, but Uto had been following their work closely enough that he already knew a good portion of what they had to show him. He stretched and swam over to the laborers.

This was clearly the height of technology among the Paca. The inventions were so novel that there were no words in the Tinji dialect that really fit what they had built. You, on the other hand, would not find them so unusual—they were boats. There were two, one an experimental version that was barely two bodylengths long, and another, more sophisticated device a full eight bodylengths long. They had waterproof hulls of carefully stitched rawhide, stretched over a framework made of bone, seaweed rope, and other materials. The larger one had a crude mast and sail, the mast being very short because of the difficulty in finding appropriate materials, and the sail made from woven seaweed.

The other major project was less visible on the water surface, but equally important. Tethered by seaweed to the ocean bottom, several pontoon-like devices supported a network of ropes and nets that served to hold clams, oysters, and various other food animals. The pontoons were made of simple animal skins, open toward the ocean floor, weighted around the edges, and manually filled with air from the bottom to make them float.

Uto carefully climbed aboard the larger boat, taking care not to over-exert himself. It was somewhat more difficult to breathe air than water, and he wanted to save his breath for speaking. “Tell me the results of your recent test,” he queried, filled with worry that unexpected problems would crush his hopes.

Subleader Reet, who was responsible for this research project, replied, “It went marvelously. Obviously, there are some things yet to work out, but this project will succeed. As planned, we visited the Pushti, carrying a full load of food for gifts and trade. By keeping the bulk of the vessel floating on the surface, we reduced the drag from the water. We found

that with the sail to catch the wind, we could travel faster than swimming speed, even against the water currents. It took much less effort than swimming, especially considering how much we carried."

"So you traveled a distance of about two hundred hectobodylengths?"

"It was probably more than that, since we wandered a bit. It was very difficult to know our position and which direction we should go."

"I would imagine. And how did the Pushti receive you?"

"Quite well. We traded two barrels of crabs for one boatload of seaweed, one hide, and the promise of two barrels of clams, as we agreed. I think they will live up to their promise, provided we insist that they do so and that we leave open the possibility of further trades. These trades will be mutually beneficial, and will make it easier for each tribe to get the food they need."

Uto knew that this would be especially true if the other project was successful, since they would then have a surplus of certain kinds of food. "Excellent. I was worried that they would just take the crabs and the boat and kill everyone. We must let the other tribes know that we have a successful trading relationship."

Reet hesitated. "Let's wait for Firstday, Chief. The incident with the Zanti is enough for now. Besides, the other project could use a few more days."

The inspection of the second project went less well. Some of the pontoons supporting the oyster and clam farms had been upset in rough weather, and the researchers were still learning the techniques of growing the animals. This project was in an earlier stage than the boats were, and the results showed it.

Subleader Beeq, manager of this project, began, "These pontoons are not stable enough. They don't hold enough weight, and we can't get enough skins, especially since the boats need them."

"Well, I can hardly justify moving more hides this way, after seeing the results of the two projects."

Beeq cut in quickly, "Yes, I know, and I am not asking for more. We have another idea that may work better."

Uto gave a look that, to a Paca, was inquisitive. "Go ahead."

"Come look at this." He led the way to an odd contrivance eighty bodylengths away. "We have been experimenting with blocks of coral. We used these rocks to break off large pieces of the coral. We smoothed the surfaces and stacked the blocks on top of each other. As you see, we have built a tower that reaches all the way out of the water into the air, and it is surprisingly sturdy. In fact, the more weight we put on top of the tower, the stronger it seems. This tower is strong enough to hold the ropes and nets, and probably can withstand storms."

"Very intriguing. This represents quite an investment, of course."

"Yes, it is. It took many days to build because of its size and the precision it required. But it is mostly an investment of labor and coral, and we have plenty of those. The tower

should last much longer than the skins do, and will work better. If we can succeed in growing large amounts of food, it will be well worth the investment."

Uto, proud at the ingenuity and skill of his citizens, told Beeq, "Yes, that is correct. I want you to continue experimenting with these towers. Make them sturdy, and above all figure out how to grow food. I'm counting on you."

Beeq, with obvious relief, answered, "Yes, Chief. We will get to work immediately."

Ninetyninthday

Uto and his advisers had carefully planned the speeches and celebrations of the upcoming Firstday. They would describe the research projects and explain why the new ideas should help the tribe. Now, however, a problem threatened to make all of the preparations moot.

Putu, visibly agitated, interrupted Uto's deliberations with his subleaders. He made his report: "Our spies have very disturbing news. It seems that Chief Qeri of the Zanti sees our bounty policy as a challenge. He plans war, to begin at dawn on Firstday, less than two days from now. He has called a meeting of representatives from several tribes to seek their assistance."

Uto, knowing the symbolic significance of starting a war on Firstday, immediately forgot about the topic he had been deliberating. "This report is reliable? How did you possibly get this information?"

"The Zanti have never been careful enough to adequately search for spies near their conversations. They are too sure of their strength and numbers to take mere information seriously. We have had four Tinji and two Systi working on espionage the past few days, as per your orders. It has paid off; this information is very reliable."

"Who are the other tribes, and when will Qeri meet with the them?"

Putu listed the tribes. "The representatives of the tribes are to meet tomorrow morning."

"Is the planned war common knowledge among the Zanti?"

"Not yet."

Uto considered this. "I think we will need to pay the Zanti a visit before then. Perhaps tonight will be a good time."

The subleaders and spies began conversing conspiratorially, while other Tinji citizens patrolled the area in search of Zanti spies. They found none.

Hundredthday

Zanti citizens awoke to the surprising news that their chief was no longer among them. A small contingent of Tinji and Systi soldiers *was* among them. The soldiers told the citizens and subleaders that Chief Qeri was away among the Tinji, meeting with Chief Uto and others, and that he would be away all day. The citizens were more than a little suspicious, however, that none of Qeri's guards or subleaders had been told of any such trip or had accompanied

their chief. Without clear instructions, with the recent Tinji bounty threat, and with the unnerving presence and constant verbal reassurances of the soldiers, none of the Zanti had the courage to make any attack. The day passed in tension. Little of the normal work was done by the citizens of any local tribe.

Firstday

As a day of tribal celebration and ceremony, Firstday was not ordinarily a time for citizens of one tribe to gather with those of other tribes, but exceptions were sometimes made to proclaim the formation of alliances or for wars. When a war started on a Firstday, it might become a war of extermination, and when an alliance was formed on Firstday, it was intended to be long-lasting and serious.

In this case, on this Firstday, the Tinji announced that the Zanti would join their celebration in the spirit of alliance. Many of the Zanti did not believe it, of course, and hid themselves or plotted sabotage. But since the Tinji promised the personal safety of any attendees, many came.

Uto stood on a rock in front of the assembled masses of Tinji, Zanti, Systi, and representatives of others. Chief Qeri stood next to him, but in his case a Tinji spear point was pressed against his back. Uto began, "My citizens, and our guests, today, Firstday of hectoday 4484, is a momentous Firstday. Today I and Chief Qeri declare the cessation of animosity between the Tinji and the Zanti. Two days ago, we learned of Qeri's plans to begin a war against us. Fortunately, we sent a delegation to dissuade him from this course of action, and succeeded. After strenuous negotiation, he has decided that it would be in the best interests of both tribes to cooperate."

All of the Paca at the meeting understood what kind of negotiations those must have been. Chief Qeri was obviously being forced to accept a public announcement of friendship to save his own life. He was a very proud, stubborn, and ambitious leader, as everyone knew, but he wasn't about to throw away his own life.

Qeri had summoned various tribal leaders to meet with him on hundredthday to plan war against the Tinji, but when they had arrived they found that the Tinji had bound him with rope and were running the meeting. In the presence of the tribal leaders he had sent for, Qeri had had to admit his willingness to meet the demands of the Tinji. From there it had been too late to back down, not that the Tinji didn't keep a spear pointed at him constantly.

At this momentous Firstday meeting, Uto was a commanding presence. To all present, it was evident that he had pulled off a political coup in all but name. By leaving Chief Qeri in charge of the Zanti, he was preventing the danger and destabilization that would come from a power struggle in that tribe. By publicly declaring that he would be fair to the Zanti and would spare their lives, he committed himself to that action and removed incentive for further hostility. And by announcing the results of his experiment in trading food, he established himself as a visionary and capable leader, one who would keep his tribe well fed and the bounty hunters on his payroll.

“We will trade with anyone, at negotiable terms. We can get you whatever kind of food you desire, because we can travel to where it is found. We will soon be growing more food than we can eat. It is in your best interest to allow us to do so unharmed, because first, we will have plenty to trade with you, and second, we will be able to pay any bounty we choose in order to kill those who will harm us.”

Chief Uto of the Tinji tried to be inconspicuous as he settled down to watch his citizens celebrate Firstday. Most of them were still eating the Firstday feast, of course, but he didn't feel like participating. The stress of outwitting the Zanti and of leading the festivities had worn him out and ruined his appetite. But there was something else, too. He felt distant from his citizens, somehow. In the course of a few days he had neutralized a powerful enemy and secured their food supply. By making his fame assured in the history of his tribe, he knew that he now seemed heroic or larger-than-life to his citizens, something he was sure that he didn't deserve. They looked at him with more awe than he wanted. What was worse, if he tried to explain that he was just a Paca like them, just trying to be a good leader and to serve them, they would consider his modesty to be simply one more attribute to laud. There was no way out of it.

He knew that their society would now be different. He had an inkling of the change that was already coming about through trade. He could sense that within a few hector days, the Tinji would have enough of a reputation for stability and honesty that other tribes would entrust their riches to them. They would keep track of what was owed to whom. They would need to invent words for “bank” and “currency” and “debt.” They would need to develop writing to keep track of the transactions and balances.

Uto did not even suspect the other changes that would come. With the beginnings of basic scientific research in the air rather than in the water, the Tinji would discover fire, and metal, and glass, and concrete. They would learn new tactics for warfare on land, where gravity and the vertical dimension became more significant than they were in the water.

It was the first day of a new age, and Uto didn't feel very heroic.