

## Tales of the Diaspora: #1 Professional Human

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The thorny tongue with a horrible gentleness pushed the piece of chocolate into Phebe's mouth. It forced the little sweet lump a little too deep for comfort before withdrawing. Se-Aleen and, The-One-Who-Would-Look-Upon-Fear-Without-Faltering did their best to imitate clapping and, H, Phebe's boss, pulled its tongue back, scraping Phebe's teeth on the way out. They beamed at her expectantly, caught up in the fun. Above their heads was a banner written in both AtL and what Phebe thought was meant to be English, "CongratulatioNs on oNe! year as top ProfessioNal humaN". Phebe wanted to cry. Instead, she ate the chocolate.

"So?, have you asked it?" The party was winding down. The energy that had, for a brief, lovely, uncomfortable, moment, turned it into more than a couple of coworkers eating, slowly draining away into the flesh of the floor. Se-Aleen was hanging over Phebe's shoulder, his outer lips barely moving as he spoke. His voice sounded strange in the pidgin English of the city. The high and low notes, pinched off to squeeze his words into the human range, made him sound, uncharacteristically, tense. As though the wonderful full symphony that was his voice had been forced to perform in a bathroom stall.

"No, I, It's just not the right moment." Phebe spoke in a mix of AtL and Ang-resch, trying her best to mimic the huge pitch changes and gentle strokes across the face that characterized Se-Aleen's native tongue. Partially because it was company policy, but mostly because she knew it annoyed him. She had important work to do tonight and just wanted to be left alone.

She had planned so carefully for this evening, rehearsed again and again what she would say to H, but now that she faced the prospect of actually saying it. Of betting everything on it. She felt paralyzed. And she could still taste the flavour, or the texture, or the idea, of H's tongue. But Se-Aleen was not so easily disentangled. He grimaced only slightly when her oily fingers passed across the pale downy fur between his eyes. Then gamely twined his eighth hand in her hair, in sympathetic solidarity. He shifted his grip on the ceiling a little to whisper even more quietly, this time in pure AtL.

"Come on, I've never seen it in a better mood. Look at its tongue, it's practically orange! I'm telling you, H will listen to anything today." He was probably right. Phoebe's boss was clearly

having a wonderful time. It was talking animatedly to Z from air traffic control, who had stopped by to try out human food, and stayed to suck up to H a bit. His sexual front limbs, strong, hooked, were tucked and swaddled primly up against his body, the claws gleaming. Se-Aleen chuckled, a bizarre theremin screech that slid up and down the scale at dizzying speed, “If I didn’t know better I’d say it was flirting with him.”

“I don’t know Se-Al, I’m not really feeling up to it today.” Perhaps she could modify her plan, maybe do it more gently, with fewer lies? She wanted so badly to be gone but she knew how much the ghost of the unasked question would haunt her. The question and the hard red-purple lump. They haunted her already.

Se-Aleen tightened his grip in her hair, an odd moment of social comfort and physical pain.

“It’s ok, little cousin perhaps tomorrow, then you can-”

“Do not advocate for base cowardice Se-Aleen of Ajen-Peck, do not counsel equivocation, cowering, procrastination, and quivering.”

The-One-Who-Would-Look-Upon-Fear-Without-Faltering had come up behind them. Oozing silently, elegant, graceful. The pale blue gelatin of her body lightened with the righteous indignation in which she felt so at home. Se-Aleen pulled up toward the ceiling, his color-eyes contracting in irritation and self defensive sarcasm.

“Yes Fear Looker, let’s turn asking for a raise into a war of, ah, li-liberation. That seems, just , just perfectly appropriate” The-One-Who-Would-Look-Upon-Fear-Without-Faltering lightened further, the terrible stinging cells rising to her moist, rippling surface at the shortening of her name.

“Your comunilist quibbling is distasteful in the extreme. You would have intelligent beings bow and scrape to one another as the sea to the cliff. Phoebe Horatio Fern! If you are resolved that your time is worth more than they have calculated; take what you are owed! Argue your worth. If H does not see the validity of your case then you must leave, at once!” Her voice was quick, precise and hard edged; steel in a discourse of clay. She was talking too loudly for Phoebe's comfort; her perfect translator rendering her English words in an accent that Phoebe's grandmother would have known as French. But a glance in H's direction showed it still enthusiastically gesticulating with its tongue.

“I’d love to, The-One-Who-Would-Look-Upon-Fear-Without-Faltering, but I can’t leave I have-”

“Of course she can’t, Unfaltrer” Se-Aleen rushed to interject, his second and fourth arms were raised, the fingers splayed protecting his eyes, his soft cream fur bristling, unconscious preparations for a fight. “What would her family do? You’ve met Phillip. Are you suggesting he could take more shifts down in the arteries? At his age?” Se-Aleen gesticulated his seventh arm emphatically, indignant on Phoebe's behalf. But his eighth unconsciously, callously, released her hair.

“I am suggesting, as you well know, you oversexed, mewling, tree parasite, that the very concept of serving the obsolete, purely because of genetic similarity, is the thinking of a slave, a subject to tyrants and...” Phoebe tuned them out. She would get no help from her colleagues. A conversation about what she needed had become one of their old arguments, a script they knew well, and performed better. A pointless background. She should not have expected more from them.

The lump had come into her life three days ago. It fell with a horrible little squelch from her father's mouth as he coughed and coughed, bent over their little table. They stared at it. The tiny, horrible, familiar thing. The rhythms of her life ground to a stop.

She begged the tired Dr. to at least check. She even opened the window of the free clinic to point significantly, desperately, at the hard red-purple growths that were the houses of the human slum. The hollowed out tumors laying in the shadow of the great living city. Her home. The Doctor said that a human could not possibly have a city's disease. She didn't believe him. She wasn't sure he believed himself.

She walked across the room to H.

Phoebe tapped on H's left foot, gentle, polite, but insistent. H turned to her almost at once, its eye wobbling in surprise.

“Oh Phoebe, Phoebe how's my favorite human?” H's voice burbled and grumbled through AtL as though stomach gasses had developed a full scale of tones, or a distant pot of thick soup had learned to bubble with intention. H's useless sexual arms were tied in front of its chest in an elaborate bow. It was wearing its favorite bone bonnet, the one it always brought out for work

parties and told everyone it had inherited from its grandmother, at a rakish angle. It was also a little drunk.

“I'm well H, I love the party but I was wondering-

“Have you met Z? Z this is Phoebe, she's-”

“H!” H looked almost as surprised as Phoebe felt - she had never interrupted H before, never.

“What is it Phoebe? Is something wrong with your gallbladder?”

“No, I just had something I wanted to talk to you about, in private. About work.” She couldn't do it. Here, looking H in the face, her plan seemed ridiculous. But doctors, real doctors, weren't cheap, not for her.

“Oh don't be silly, work is over, everyone is friends now, just tell me what it is.”

“It's really more of a private-”

“Come now Phoebe, don't be like that, just tell me.” H turned to Z and, in perfectly audible conspiratorial tones, said “She really has some of the funniest moments. Z, did I ever tell you about the time she tried to change the human costume! She said the suspenders weren't for women, imagine that! I of course reminded her that with my degree in historical human-”

“I need a raise!” H went immediately silent. And Phoebe knew in a horrible moment of clarity, that she had made a mistake. She had had a plan, a perfect, humiliating, plan. And she had been so nervous she just blurted out what she wanted. H looked mortified.

“Now, wait a moment. I was very careful when I selected the amount to pay you. You were weighed and your nutritional needs calculated, all your medical needs are met by your local clinic, I even double checked the rent on your shelter myself. Your pay should be exactly right. It really is very rude to question me on this, I am an objective you know,” it shook its limp knotted arms meaningfully. “And everyone knows that I'm an expert on humans.”

How could she have been so stupid, to approach H in front of someone it was trying to impress. She opened her mouth to try again, to say something, anything, to try her plan, to make her arguments as The-One-Who-Would-Look-Upon-Fear-Without-Faltering would put it. But H was

faster. Its tongue flicked out to rest on her lips. Forcing her words down her throat as effectively as it had pushed the chocolate.

“No! that's enough, we won't talk anymore about this.” It was over. All her careful work, the endless overtime. All because in a nervous panicked moment, she had forgotten her plan. She wanted to run, to take refuge behind her father as though she were still a little girl, but he was old now, and frail, and coughing lumps. No one would help her, and in the moment of truth she had failed her father, failed herself.

She gave up.

“Renter of my time! It is unwise not to listen to her arguments. She has the spark of intellect and must be allowed to speak!” The-One-Who-Would-Look-Upon-Fear-Without-Faltering placed a dark blue translucent tentacle on Phoebe's exposed elbow. Her surface felt like a warm eyeball. In that moment, it was the most welcome feeling in the universe.

“Yeah, come on H.” Se-Aleen was speaking in full symphonic Ang-resch, “You know how impressive it is when a manager listens to its subordinates.” H looked more surprised than anything; its employees never got along. It let its tongue dangle in confusion. That was all the opening Phoebe needed. The little spark of support had at last lit the fuse on her plan. She wasn't alone and she would not be helpless. She began just as she had practiced in AtL, but pitching her tones in a slightly exaggerated human accent.

“H, as you know, there is an important human holiday coming up. For this one I must give many expensive gifts. You must know it well, as you are the expert.” H recovered from its confusion slowly, but it did recover. It hurriedly twisted its knees in agreement, glancing quickly over at Z.

“Yes, yes of course I do, just remind me of the name? It's been a long day.”

“Of course, of course, it's called Hanukkah. As you know doubt could tell Z here, it's very important that I provide excellent, expensive, gifts. If not, my family will be disgraced, I won't be able to find a mate and-” she leaned forward and made the tongue whisper gesture with her left arm. “I heard that people who failed to give generously, used to be burned for eight whole days back on earth.” H shuddered. “I know it's just a ritual but you know how important those are for humans, you wrote that article on it.” Phoebe had gotten the idea that became her plan while reading the awful thing. “Please H, you are the most experienced cultural ambassador here,

surely you, better than anyone, understand how important this is. Of course you are right and my salary is perfect for my daily needs. But as you said 'humans are so superstitious that their ritual needs should be considered as important as their physical!.'” She had memorized the quote exactly. “So I must ask you again to consider a raise.”

Phoebe knew she had won. Even before she had finished speaking H's tongue was making the telltale lazy circles above the ground. There was haggling to be done, and specifics to work out, there were doctors to find and bribes to pay, but that was for tomorrow, tonight but she had won!

That evening, after the haggling and the dancing, and the awkward goodbyes were over, Phoebe, The-One-Who-Would-Look-Upon-Fear-Without-Faltering, and Se-Aleen cleaned up the party together. Her friends bickered, the music of their argument just a comforting background as she cleaned up the last of the snacks. On a plate hidden in the corner and covered with a napkin she found it. The last piece of real delicious chocolate. She was so exhausted, and so relieved that she wanted to cry. Instead, she ate the chocolate.