

Waves of Warning - Chapter Twenty Seven

Part one: Sea-change

The smell of the sea was different. The low shroud of mist on the southern horizon was unlike anything he'd ever seen, and if he could have asked Taveka about it, he would have been told same thing. But as the chief navigator of the Marulean sea people, he was now on his own. From the moment Taveka saw the long white wings of the wandering albatross, no words could now pass between them.

The voyage to Ka'unua was imminent, and that alone might have been cause for his sleepless night. However, he was wide awake and fully alert due to the unusual power flowing through the entire Nebula Archipelago. His ears were tuned to the frequencies of the waves breaking on reefs up to a mile away. By candlelight he was making entries in a small notebook in the navigator's code of symbols as taught to him by Taveka for use on extraordinary occasions to quantify a record of wave and weather phenomena.

He remembered questioning his mentor about the system since so much of the knowledge of the navigators was passed down through oral traditions or sheer experience. Taveka's answer had surprised the apprentice.

"Someday you'll be able to keep it all up here, but for now, write down what you need to remember, especially when the ocean shows you what you have never seen before."

In the silence between sets, he reviewed the last three days of his log. In addition to the wave height and interval notations, he had sketched the cross-hatched wave patterns of large swells refracting through myriad shoals near the home island of the Maruleans.

He remembered studying several logs made over Taveka's lifetime, including one from August of 1968 that he recognized as a record of the swell from the same storm that had produced the biggest waves ever at Malibu. His current notations were similar, including the way the progression of entries clearly portrayed an inexorable increase in wave size. But Taveka's log had finally indicated a peak, and then a decline, in the storm energy. The log in front of him had yet to indicate any reduction in the power emanating from what undoubtedly was a storm of far greater proportions.

He checked the position of his reference stars. He started a new entry when the silence was broken by a sound like a cannon shot as the first wave of a new set broke on a shoal almost a mile away. As the set of waves came closer, he tuned his ear to discern the individual explosions on the reefs leading to his island.

Then he heard an entirely different sound, coming not from the ocean, but from the sky.

He knew exactly what it was but let the moment of recognition pass without a second thought. He would not be distracted from the polyphonic rhythms of the swells and the movement of his reference star. When the set of waves ended, he completed his entry in the silence of a lull. Then and only then did he look in the direction of the receding sound. He saw a ghostly silhouette moving across the dome of stars. Colored running lights were blinking on the wingtips. He thought of the lifevest Taveka had found, but before he could ponder the situation any further, another set announced its arrival and he returned to his work.

He was laying on the ceremonial platform where he had slept every night since seeing the albatross. In his dream-trance the beat of his heart matched the rhythms of waves breaking all around him. Then the waves stopped, and he had the distinct sensation of his heart slowing down until a last heartbeat echoed like the distant roar of a wave far out on a barrier reef somewhere in the South Pacific.

He was happy in the stillness. Then the silence was broken by a new and different sound, familiar yet out of place. He allowed it to bring him back to wakefulness. The low drone from high in the sky made him think of David and the changes ahead for the sea people of Marulea. The very nature of the thought was all he now needed to realize he was no longer a part of their future. He smiled, and he knew it was time.

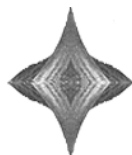
He opened his eyes and hopped down from the platform to the sand. He began to walk with dispatch and resolution along the shore towards the village in the distance. Within minutes he was in front of the house of his daughter and his grandchildren. His successor was sitting on the porch, barely visible in the candlelight. He walked towards him until he was only a few feet away. David looked up, then stood up. Seconds passed in the darkness. Each man turned away knowing the tasks now to be performed.

David returned to the porch with Luan and a torch used for night fishing, They positioned it open to the sea but protected from the wind.

A minute later Taveka was aboard his voyaging craft and lashing his surfboard securely alongside the shelter dome. He felt the movement of the craft and the strength of the wind and began readying his sails for the voyage. He looked and saw the torchlight flicker before becoming bright and steady again. But the light itself had not wavered. A mast with shortened sails had passed across his line of sight. The light flickered again, then was blocked out entirely as the wind filled the sails of David's voyaging craft.

Taveka smiled. This was going to be fun. He put his tiller hard over and his sails caught the wind. He'd made a bet, and now the race was on. If he won, his successor would have to do the laundry of his grandchildren for a year. If he lost, well, Taveka knew he was not going to lose, not to a surfer from California, and certainly not to a voyaging craft carrying an extra passenger, even if she was his daughter.

The two craft shot out of the reef pass and soon the single torchlight was below the horizon, Taveka slightly ahead. All around them surf was breaking white over unseen coral shoals while glowing phosphorescence coalesced across the sea like galaxies across the night sky. The navigators felt the currents begin to strengthen and adjusted their course against the stars that would guide them all through the night across the Nebula Archipelago. There were still many hours to go before dawn, and five days to go before Ka'unua appeared on the horizon.



Part Two: K3

“Takeoff checklists?”

“Done, all systems within spec.”

“Do we have latest from Seranen on the K3?”

“Roger that. No change. Within twelve hours and counting.”

“MET NET system integrity confirm?”

“Confirmed. All AWS icons green. Replacement units aboard and ready for deploy. One at 8177, three on the way to the Pole.”

“Thanks, Damon. Ops weather report?”

“Perfect. Summer conditions. Highly unusual.”

“Roger that. Comm the tower we’re go for takeoff.”

Pilot Pieter Kistenberg touched the throttles ahead. The twin Otter, a ten passenger twin-engine plane, taxied slowly out to a sheet of blue ice near the main Antarctic polar supply center at McMurdo Sound. A minute later the small, rugged aircraft was aloft and accelerating up to maximum airspeed. Co-pilot Rico Candelaria kept a close eye on all the indicator dials. The two man crew knew they had to stretch their performance envelope to complete their mission ahead of the next katabatic event: to patch up OSOM’s AWS network and get an early warning before the next katabatic exploded to life.

The flight up to Antarctica’s highest ice plateau was startling in its ease. It almost seemed as though the entire continent was resting after the K2 event. Visibility was unlimited in the low winter light, and at ten thousand feet the crew of the *Osomair* had a rare view of the Transantarctic Mountains from horizon to horizon. It was summer weather in August, but the Ice Pirates never let their guard down.

When they arrived at Dome Argus, the reason for their vigilance was confirmed. What looked like a bomb crater ten miles in diameter was centered around a blasted and jagged ice surface. Leading from the crater, straight towards the South Pole, was a gouge in the ice two miles wide.

They shot a roll of aerial photos with a camera that stamped each frame with date, time and GPS information before a final flyby to drop the new AWS unit to the ice. The parachute deploy went smoothly, and the unit was sending back data without a hitch. They were in constant contact with Damon Waiya at OSOM’s ANTMETNET ops, and at first Waiya thought there had to be a problem with the AWS.

“You sure, Rico? I’m getting variable winds at twenty knots, temp ten below zero, barometric at nine fifty six. You could have a beach party out there!” he said to over the HF voice channel.

“Yeah, but there’s no beach! It looks like someone took a massive pickax and tore the place up before gouging a riverbed straight to the Pole!”

“Anything from Ray?”

“Yes. K3 is imminent. Atmospheric loading is at K2 levels plus sixty percent and rising. Upper level winds are accelerating towards Dome Argus. Same scenario, and no telling where she’ll go after she hits.”

* * *

The sun was moving along the horizon without touching it. The lighting hadn't changed since they'd chuted the first AWS down to Dome Argus four hours ago, and now they were halfway home after their recon over the Pole.

"*Osomair*, this is METNET ops. *Osomair*, do you read me?"

"Go ahead, Damon. What's cooking?"

"AWS 8177 just blew up. Repeat, 8177 down just like K1, only faster."

"Copy that. Do we have a vector yet?"

Waiya looked at the glowing network of icons spread around the Antarctic continent. Even as he spoke, another AWS icon began to glow yellow and its data gauges began to flux.

"*Osomair* confirm potential vector through network node point 77.93. Repeat AWS at 77.93 reporting accelerating conditions."

Waiya grabbed a dryeraser marker and a navigator's map of Antarctica. He laid a clear sheet of acetate on it that was already marked with the graceful curve of K2's path, almost as perfect as a nautilus shell, from 81.77 to the South Pole and then out into the Weddell Sea towards South Africa. He then shifted the acetate around, lining up the curve from 81.77 to 77.93. The curve overlaid the Russian research station at Vostok, for many years the site of the coldest temperatures ever recorded. He continued to trace the projected path inside of Dome C, the site of the Concordia research station supported by the French and the Italians. From there it continued unimpeded until it intersected with the coast at the Ross Sea – and the McMurdo station.

"*Osomai*, Damon here. Project K3 path through my location."

"Roger that. We'd better get home, and fast."

"Was just about to tell you the same thing."

Waiya began tapping out a Morse Code message to Ray Seranen.

K3>F5. ARGUS > VOSTOK > MAC.

Half an hour later the trail of AWS icons from Dome Argus to McMurdo Sound told Damon Waiya all he needed to know. Except for the two closest to the OSOM facility, they were all black. And of those two, one had just gone from yellow to red. It would soon be dead, leaving the last icon, just on the other side of the Prince Albert Mountains, still glowing green.

"*Osomair*, this is ops. I'm down to the last AWS at 76.158."

"We'll be on the deck in fifteen minutes, Damon."

The approach into Willy Field at McMurdo station was a familiar routine for the Ice Pirates. The landmark mountains were like old friends, and the lights at the base in the growing darkness were friendly as ever. They were home.

As they circled for a landing, Waiya's voice came over the airwaves.

"*Osomair*, this is ops. AWS 71.158 just went black. Last indicated wind speed was one fifty before total failure. She'll be coming over the mountains in about fifteen minutes."

"Roger that, Damon. Out."

Across the McMurdo Sound from MacTown, the Prince Albert Mountains stood sharp against the deep blue Antarctic sky. The air was so clear that stars were easily visible just above the line of peaks. Damon Waiya looked out at a range of white peaks about twenty miles away. It

was a crystal vision of Antarctic beauty at night, and the Ice Pirates allowed themselves a rare moment of emotion.

“I’ll never know how a place so beautiful can be such a killer.”

“Well, Rico, its just Nature’s revenge on us,” said Pieter Kistenberg, “We want to know so much, we want to prove ourselves to ourselves over and over again, and we’re lucky if we even stop to think what we are doing. And when we don’t stop to think, we either kill the planet or ourselves.”

“I feel like I’m waiting for an army from Mordor, and here it comes,” said Damon Waiya.

Stars began to disappear as a wall of gray rose up and filled the space between Lister Mountain to the east and McNeish Peak to the west. The flood of wind and ice particles grew, lapping up the sides of the valley towards the peaks. Now other low spots in the range began to fill in, and within a minute the entire Prince Albert Range was under assault. It would not be able to hold back the invasion about to pillage the largest man-made facility on the frozen continent.

The entire Prince Albert Range was reduced to a mere speed bump by a force now just beginning to find the weak points in over a hundred buildings, smothering the huge facility as if it didn’t exist. Just before the men retreated to a reinforced storm shelter, they saw one building, standing on a rise overlooking the oncoming devastation. It was the square, wooden home to the Scott expedition and had stood intact since the beginning of the twentieth century. The Ice Pirates wondered if it would still be there after the K3.

