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A New Day In A New Year

Jason Constantine Ford

Epokor walked through the jungle in a state of anger. It was only a few days ago that Papiron, the Chief Shaman of the Jurangi tribe ostracised him for consistently failing to bring worthy offerings to the gods over a period of several years. As he thought back to the punishment handed down to him, Epokor could not accept the consequences of his infidelity to the gods. In the presence of his family, Papiron brought a curse down upon him. From that moment onwards, Papiron's wife and children were too afraid to meet up with him or even speak to him. They feared that the gods would punish them if they treated him the way they did before he was ostracised. His only consolation was staying at the sanctuary of the goddess Mirana and praying to her to assist him in his grief. According to the beliefs of the Jurangi, Mirana was the goddess of the forsaken. She was believed to be the sole member of the gods who would accept someone who was ostracised from the tribe. Epokor reached her sanctuary and knelt down before her. Memories of being close to his wife and his children were coming back to him. His inner anger was slowly subsiding. He started crying as he prayed.

Despite the immense humidity that was coming over the land, a large crowd gathered on Murad Harbour in the north of the island of Tatiaroa off the mainland of Tahiti. The crowd were waiting below a large stage for the arrival of Chief Rikarama of the Jurangi. Today was the first day of a new year and it was the custom of the Jurangi for the Chief and his main shamans to perform a ritual called the ritual of purification. This ritual involved the Chief and his shamans performing a dance to mark the beginning of a new year. After a few minutes, Chief Rikarama arrived with his shamans and entourage. They were greeted with loud applause as they arrived on the stage. Chief Rikarama turned his attention to the crowd.

'Greetings to everyone. May you have a prosperous new year. Before the ritual begins, we need to pray to the gods to give us divine assistance.'

Chief Rikarama turned towards the west as did his entourage; people in the the crowd did the same. The Chief knelt down and prayed in silence. Everyone else followed suit. As he was praying, the chief felt uncomfortable. He did not know why he felt this way. The only thing he knew was that his instincts were inclined to the view that danger was ahead. He sensed that the gods were angry but had no clue as to what he could say to placate their wrath. In his state of prayer, he struggled to find words which could establish some kind of rapport between the gods and himself. The final minute of his prayer simply consisted of him being unable to speak to the gods in a way which could convince him that he was worthy enough to be in communication with them. He arose and summoned his shamans to him. He ordered them to gather twigs on the middle of the stage and then light a fire. They followed his orders. After the flame was lit, the Chief and his shamans began a dance around the fire. After less than a minute of dancing, the sun was replaced by the clouds. A peel of thunder was heard and a flash of lightning struck the other end of the island. The Chief and his shamans immediately stopped dancing.

‘The gods have given us a sign. They are not happy with us. You need to return to your homes and offer prayers to the gods to placate their wrath.’ Chief Rikarama said.

Upon hearing this, the crowd dispersed. Each of them was filled with fear over the possible dangers which could happen. It was a customary belief among the Jurangi that thunder and lightning on the first day of a new year were a sign from the gods that they were unhappy with the people and would be inclined to punish them. There was only one person among the Jurangi who did not hold this belief. This was a young girl named Tabitha who neither believed that the gods rewarded nor punished people. She simply believed that they were indifferent to the affairs of human beings.

From the safety of the hill, Epokor observed the behaviour of the crocodiles. Although he was filled with disdain for crocodiles, Epokor firmly believed that killing one of them would be the sole chance he would have of the curse against him being lifted. It was only yesterday that he met Papiron at the shrine of Mirana. Papiron told him that he spoke to a god called Rahkalla who informed him that there would only be one act of sacrifice that would be enough to placate the wrath of the gods against him. According to Papiron, Rahkalla declared to him that unless he were to prevail in a life or death struggle against a crocodile and take away its heart, he would always be ostracised from the tribe. Epokor counted the number of crocodiles who were visible in the swamp. There were nine of them. A plan came to his mind. On an allotted day, he would wait for a smaller crocodile to reach dry land while the others were in the water. From there, he would lure it away from the others and fight it single handed. All he needed to do was wait for the day when Papiron would give him a knife which warriors use to slay animals.

After arriving back home, Tabitha’s parents were not in good spirits. They entered into the lounge room without saying a word. Her father knelt down before a statue of Rahkalla and prayed briefly. He lifted himself up from prayer and looked at Tabitha.

‘I have bad news for you.’

‘What is it?’ Tabitha asked.

‘The gods have brought down a curse. Their wrath is upon us. We have to stay home and spend the day in prayer.’

‘Why do we have to spend the day in prayer?’

‘Their anger must be placated.’

‘Why would they be angry?’

‘I don’t know. It is very hard to try to predict their will but I have an idea about the cause of their anger.’

‘What’s this idea of yours?’

‘I think the gods are angry because of the sins of one man.’

‘Who’s this man?’

‘His name is Epokor.’

‘What did he do wrong?’

‘He was negligent in his service to the gods. The gods punished him for his impiety by ostracising him from the tribe. Now all of us must pay for his sins by staying indoors.’

‘You’re telling me that I have to stay home all day. That isn’t good.’

‘Do you want to be punished by the gods?’

‘No.’

‘If you don’t want to be punished by the gods, you have to stay home. Give me your word. You’ll be staying home, won’t you?’

‘Yes, I’ll be staying home.’

Tabitha left the lounge room and went into her bed room. She was so disappointed that her father would deny her the opportunity to go out into the open spaces and play with Misty, her pet cat. Despite the levels of fear that were prevalent among the Jurangi concerning the gods, Tabitha was not influenced by other people’s attitudes and behaviour. She could touch an object that was cursed just as easily as she could touch any ordinary object. After an hour, she searched through the house and could not find Misty. She wanted to leave the house but fear of being punished by her parents prevented her from doing so. She looked through the door of her parents room. They were kneeling down and were immersed in prayer. They seemed to be oblivious to the world around them. As she carefully observed their behaviour, she realised something. They were immersed in a certain state of mind and did not appear to be able to break out of that state. Tabitha could easily leave the house and roam around the island without her parents being aware of it. She was about to leave the house when Misty suddenly appeared.

‘Where have you been? I’ve been looking for you everywhere.’ Tabitha said.

Misty lifted her right paw up and down and then pointed to the front door of the house. She used her paw to indicate to Tabitha that she spent the past hour roaming around the island.

‘Did you see anyone?’

Misty nodded her head. She lifted herself in an upright position with her two back paws on the ground and her two front paws in the air. This body language was an indication that Misty had seen a human being. Misty gave another form of sign language to Tabitha. She put her paws in front of her eyes and released them. This behaviour meant that she saw a human being who was sad.

‘You’re telling me that you saw someone who was in a bad condition?’

Misty nodded her head. Tabitha worked out who it was. It was that guy called Epokor. She wanted to leave the house immediately but remembered how Misty's sign language was limited in regard to flora and fauna. She needed some kind of tool that could make Misty's sign language clearer to her understanding and enable her to learn more about the circumstances of Epokor's condition. An idea came to mind. Her parents had a papyrus scroll containing images of all the animals and trees on the island. This scroll would be an affective bridge between her words and Misty's sign language. There was only one problem. The scroll was in her parent's room. Tabitha turned her attention to Misty.

'I need you to do me a favour. There's a scroll in my parent's bedroom. I need you to get that scroll.'

Misty pointed her paw in the direction of the bedroom to ask where the scroll was located.

'I'll get a ball and roll it into the room. The ball will land close to the scroll.'

Tabitha was able to find a ball in the lounge room. Making her way back to the door of her parent's bedroom, she rolled the ball and it stopped beside a scroll that was on the bottom shelf of a cupboard at the back of her parent's bedroom. Misty immediately walked into the room without being noticed, took a hold of the scroll with her paws and rolled it out of the bedroom. Tabitha picked up the scroll and the both of them left the house. Less than ten minutes after walking, Tabitha and Misty saw another human being in the distance. They hid themselves behind a bush as Tabitha tried to figure out who it was. The man was wearing a feathered hat and the vast majority of his body including his face was painted with religious symbols. He was obviously a shaman but it was very difficult to determine who he was on account of the hat he was wearing and the nature of the paint that covered his face. The man entered a home and was completely gone from view. Tabitha turned her attention to Misty.

'I'm going to that house. I'll see if that man can provide me with information on Epokor, the guy who has been ostracised. If he has information and refuses to give it to me, you'll be my spy. You'll follow him wherever he goes and let me know what you've discovered.'

Upon reaching the house, Tabitha knocked on the door. A man opened the door. I was Papiron. A look of shock came over his face.

'Are you crazy? Don't you know that the gods are angry?'

'Yes, they're angry with everyone except me.'

'You foolish girl.' Papiron shook his head in disbelief. 'If you want to be punished by the gods, that's your fault. I'll spend my day doing more important things.' He was about to close the door but Tabitha put her hand in the way.

'Just let me ask you a few questions.'

'What do you want to know?'

'I'd like to know why you ostracised Epokor?'

‘I won’t be revealing that you. You won’t know a single thing. Leave now!’

Upon hearing these words, Tabitha turned around and walked away.

After having waited outside the house of Papiron for more than fifteen minutes, Misty decided to jump onto one of the window sills and have a look inside. Papiron was mixing powders inside a cauldron for a broth. He took a spoon from the cauldron and poured some of the broth into a cup. Although Misty did not have a knowledge of the occult, she sensed that there was something about the drink that was bad. Misty made up her mind that she would try to get Papiron’s attention. She used one paw to hold herself on the edge of the window sill without being seen and used her other paw to bang against the outside of the house. She heard Papiron asking himself what was going wrong. This was an indication to her that he was leaving the house. Misty jumped down and made her way in through the front door. She jumped on top of the rim of the cauldron and sniffed the broth. Her sense of smell was telling her that what was inside the broth was not fit for human consumption. Footsteps could be heard. Misty hid herself behind another cauldron near the wall. Papiron entered the room. He took hold of a dagger, grabbed the cup and left. Misty followed him from a distance. After more than half an hour of walking, Papiron met up with Epokor. A dagger was in one hand and a cup was in the other.

‘I have two presents for you. Would you like to receive them?’

‘Yes, I have no other choice. Killing a crocodile is my only option.’

‘This drink will give you the strength to fight the crocodile. This dagger will be the weapon that gives you victory.’

‘Can I have them now?’

‘Not yet. Before you receive them, you need to pray to the gods and ask them to give you the strength to defeat a crocodile.’

‘I will do as you have said.’

‘I wish you luck. May the gods be with you.’

Papiron turned around and left. Epokor knelt down and prayed. He closed his eyes as anguish came over him. Misty tipped the cup over and its contents split onto the ground. Misty immediately left without being noticed by Epokor. After having finished his prayers, Epokor looked at the cup that was offered to him. He noticed how its contents were split onto a flower. He looked at the flower in disbelief. It was dead.

Misty communicated to Tabitha what she saw between Papiron and Epokor. She put her paws in front of her eyes before releasing them and moved her right paw in a circular direction. This behaviour meant that the man who was sad in the person of Epokor was given a command by Papiron. Tabitha asked Misty what the command was and she responded by passing her paw in front of her throat in quick motion. It was obvious that the command was to kill an animal but Tabitha had no idea as to which kind of animal it was. As Misty’s unique

form of sign language was not able to distinguish between animals, Tabitha opened up the scroll she found in her parent's bedroom. She showed Misty the different types of animals which were known by the Jurangi. Misty placed her paw on an image of a crocodile. Tabitha felt uncomfortable but not discouraged. Although the odds were heavily stacked against Epokor, Tabitha was convinced that there would be a way to help him out of his horrendous difficulty.

'We'll be borrowing tools from the best hunter in the Jurangi. Do you want to follow me?'

Misty nodded her head. The two of them moved towards the south of the island and after half an hour of walking, they reached a hay shed outside the home of Panor, the Hunter. Tabitha collected a fishing net, two ropes with hooks, a hammer, an arrow, an arrow case, a bow and the carcass of a dead bird which she placed in a bag. Tabitha found a piece of chalk and a sheet of papyrus and started to draw on it. She drew two trees above an image of a net connected to the trees with ropes. On the branch of one of the trees, she drew an image of a girl holding onto the ropes. Tabitha now had a plan in place but before she could know if there was any chance of it succeeding, she needed to test both her skills and those of Misty. She turned her attention to Misty.

'I'll be needing your help. Do you want to help me?'

Misty nodded her head.

'I have a plan but I'm not sure if it's going to work. I'll need to train you and train myself. Are you willing to be tested for your abilities?'

Misty nodded her head again. The two of them reached the beach and jogged together along the sand. Tabitha challenged Misty to a race across the beach with the goal that the fastest of the two of them would reach the first coconut tree in sight. As Tabitha looked across the beach, the nearest coconut tree was half a kilometre away on the other side of the beach. Tabitha gave Misty a signal to indicate that the race was beginning by raising her hand in the air and then bringing it down. The race was not even a contest. Misty easily breezed past Tabitha and made it to the coconut tree in less than a minute. Tabitha was very impressed. She never previously saw an animal run so fast. Now it was time for Tabitha to test her skills. She asked Misty to go back to the home and promised to meet up with her afterwards. Tabitha travelled to the swamp. She used the hooks from her ropes to climb up a tree. After climbing up the lowest branch of the tree, Tabitha took out the carcass of a bird from her bag and threw it as close as she could to the lagoon. In a matter of seconds, a few crocodiles emerged out of the water. Three of them charged onto the shore with one of them managing to quickly scoop the carcass into its jaws and swallow it. After that crocodile consumed the dead bird, the other crocodiles returned to the water. Not long afterwards, it followed them. Tabitha recalled the speed of Misty in comparison to the crocodiles. Misty was much quicker than them. It would have only taken her three seconds to reach the carcass while it took the crocodiles at least ten seconds.

Tabitha reunited with Misty at the front of her parents' house. They proceeded on a journey around the island to find Epokor. They searched from the beach to the swamp and to the forests but could not find him anywhere until an idea came to Tabitha. She recalled how those of low standing among the ranks of the Jurangi turned to the goddess Mirana in their sorrow. Tabitha opened up a map made of papyrus and looked through it. The map indicated that the sanctuary of Mirana was located in the Valley of the Forsaken which was east of the swamp. Tabitha and Misty made their way to the Valley of the Forsaken after walking for more than three quarters of an hour. They saw a sanctuary that was purely made of thatched twigs and bamboo sticks. At the end of the sanctuary, there was a statue of Mirana and a man knelt down at her feet. It was obviously Epokor. He finished his prayers and turned around to see Tabitha and Misty looking at him. For a few seconds. He was unable to talk but stepped forward to meet up with Tabitha.

'You shouldn't be here.'

'Why?' Tabitha asked.

'I'm ostracised.'

'That doesn't bother me.'

'It should bother you. If other people discover that you have been talking to me, you'll be ostracised also.'

'I'm not concerned about what other people think.'

'Aren't you concerned about being ostracised?'

'No, other people don't worry me.'

'What about the gods?'

'I don't fear the gods.'

'Are you serious?'

'Yes, I'm serious. I don't fear the gods.'

'Why don't you fear them?'

'Because they don't interfere with human affairs.'

'What are you doing here?'

'I'm here to help you.'

'How can you help me? I've been ostracised.'

'I can help you kill a crocodile and bring you back to the tribe.'

'I don't believe you. You're only a child.'

He shook his head and walked away. Despite Epokor's disbelief, Tabitha was determined not give up any hope of finding a means of removing his ostracisation. Her own level of self belief and her faith in Misty was enough to persuade her that the tools in her bag would be sufficient for the task ahead of her. From there, Tabitha and Misty went to the swamp. Tabitha collected a handful of stones and placed them in her bag. She unfolded the fishing net and placed it on the grass between two trees and gave instructions to Misty.

'I need you to get the attention of one of the smaller crocodiles after it appears.'

Misty pointed her paw toward the water as an indication that she was asking Tabitha what to do.

'This is what I need you to do. You have to get the attention of a crocodile, wait for it to move and then run over to the net as fast as you can. Can you do that?'

Misty nodded her head.

'We'll have a practise and see how we go.'

Tabitha positioned Misty in an open space between the lagoon and the trees. Tabitha continually made gestures to Misty in the direction of the fishing net. She instructed Misty to run back and forth from her position to where the fishing net was. Misty managed to do several runs without getting entangled.

'You've done really well. If you stay where you are, I'll get myself into position. We're going to catch a crocodile.'

Tabitha took out two ropes with hooks from her bag. She tied the plain ends of the ropes to opposite ends of the mouth of the fishing net. From there, she used the hooks of the ropes to climb up to the second lowest branch of a tree situated directly above the fishing net and tied the ropes around that branch. She dropped down from that tree and climbed to the lowest branch of another tree that was nearby. She was in a situation where the first tree would give her enough leverage to pull the fishing net upwards from where she was standing on the second tree.

'Misty, remember what I told you. As soon as a smaller crocodile starts moving towards you, run to the fishing net and go past it.'

Misty nodded her head. After a few minutes of waiting, the head of an infant crocodile emerged from the water. It did not seem to notice the presence of Misty. Misty started jumping up and down to get its attention but the crocodile ignored her. As Tabitha's plan did not seem to be working, an idea came to mind on how to gain the crocodile's attention. She took out a stone from her bag and hurled it at the crocodile. It missed. She threw another stone which landed on its head. The crocodile turned towards Misty and charged at her. Before the crocodile could even get out of the water, Misty had already run past the fishing net. As the crocodile was charging forward, it was about to reach the fishing net and then suddenly, the mouth of the net opened up as it was running. Tabitha pulled so hard on the

ropes that she moved the ropes several arm lengths from the hooks that she initially held. An idea came to Tabitha. She realised that she did not need to keep pulling on the ropes for the fishing net to stay above the crocodile's head. As she firmly held the ropes in her hands, she jumped down behind the back of the branch and landed on the ground. Her landing resulting in a scenario where the downward pulling of the ropes lifted the crocodile further up in the air. Tabitha used the hammer from her bag to cement the hooks of the ropes into the ground and looked at the results of her work. The crocodile was desperately trying to escape but could do nothing. Tabitha and Misty proceeded to the sanctuary of Mirana where they met up with Epokor once again. Tabitha smiled at Epokor upon seeing him.

'I've caught a crocodile for you.'

Epokor responded by shaking his head in disbelief. 'Go back home. It isn't safe for a child like you to be walking alone.'

'I'm telling you the truth.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Just go to the swamp and have a look. There's a crocodile in a fishing net.'

'I still don't believe you.'

At that moment, Tabitha started to cry. Epokor regretted behaving the way he did. 'I'm sorry that I hurt you. Please, stop crying.'

'I'll stop crying if you go down to the swamp with me.'

'O.K., I'll come with you.'

Upon reaching the spot where Tabitha and Misty completed their successful operation, Epokor was lost for words. All he could do was stare at an infant crocodile trying to escape from a fishing net as it tried to wiggle from left to right without any success.

'How did you manage to do this?'

'I'm a warrior.'

Epokor simply stared at Tabitha in disbelief. 'You couldn't do this alone. You're only a child. The gods must have helped you.'

'The gods didn't help me. I did it myself.' For a few seconds, there was complete silence until the purpose of the hunt came to Tabitha's mind. 'Aren't you going to kill it?'

'Yes, that's what I have to do.'

Tabitha gave Epokor a bow and an arrow. Epokor bended the arrow back and it landed between the eyes of the crocodile. It died instantly. Epokor bowed his head towards Tabitha respectfully.

‘Thank you so much. I don’t know how I could ever repay you. Is there anything I could do for you?’

‘No, I’m doing this for free.’

‘Why did you do it?’

‘I did it because I believe in doing what is right.’

Later that day, Epokor brought the carcass of the crocodile along with its’ heart to Chief Rikarama. The Chief responded by lifting his ostracism and arranged for a procession in honour of Epokor to be arranged for the next day. On the day of the procession, Epokor was carried on a carriage where he was surrounded by dancers and musicians. Everyone in the tribe was present with the exception of one person. That person was Papiron. Tabitha learnt through the scouting of Misty that Papiron spent the procession at the main sanctuary of Rakhalla. After the event was over, Tabitha and Misty travelled to Rakhalla’s sanctuary where Papiron knelt down in anguish. They hid behind some bushes. Tears were falling down Papiron’s cheeks as he spoke to Rakhalla.

‘Why did you let this happen? You ostracised him from the tribe and now you’ve allowed the demons to transform him into a hero. How can you do this?’

Papiron’s head slumped down briefly before he could raise it up again. The anguish was so intense that he struggled to make eye contact with the statue of Rakhalla.

‘Why did you abandon me? You promised me that he would die of poison but it never happened. You even let the demons give him the power to kill a crocodile with his bare hands. Why did you do this to me?’

Not a single answer could be heard from the questions that were asked by Papiron. Papiron shook his head in frustration, lifted himself from the ground and walked away. After he was gone, Tabitha and Misty confronted the statue of Rakhalla. Tabitha held a dead flower in her hand.

‘I’ve got a present for you. Do you want it?’ Tabitha asked.

There was no response from the statue of Rakhalla. Rakhalla’s refusal to answer Tabitha only filled her with scorn for him. She simply placed the dead flower in one of Rakhalla’s hands. It was the same flower which died after the contents of the poison cup of Papiron fell on it. Tabitha stared at the image of Rakhalla with the dead flower. There was still no response. Tabitha eventually realised that she was wasting her time with Rakhalla. She stuck her tongue out at him and walked away with Misty.