

THE QUARRY

Intro to House-Ape Studies

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The spring sun was warm and the breeze carried a staccato orchestra of bird-sounds. Ardi and Selam were strolling to their lesson. The trees lining the path—host to a flock of foraging bush-parrots—oozed a delicious, fresh-leaved scent. Ardi reached over with her trunk and tore off a strip of bark. She chewed it slowly, relishing the sharp flavour.

Ardi and Selam lumbered towards the Lithium Building, joining the stream of mrithi. The stream thickened into a river, and filled the air with the mixed grumble of a student body. Mrithi from across the world thronged about them chatting, holding trunks, chewing stim-beans and charging to class, their heavy gait muffled by the springy turf. Further down by the lake, a female offered herself to a bull, who reared up behind on broad pillar-like legs to accept her offer.

‘Where are we going? Isn’t it in Lithium?’ Selam asked.

Ardi waved her trunk to signal ‘no’, replying:

‘Oestrus is scrambling your brain. The lecture’s in Argon.’

‘You didn’t tell me that,’ Seram moaned. ‘I never would’ve signed up.’

‘You got the same timetable I did. Not my fault you didn’t read it.’

‘I don’t have time to read.’

‘You’re a student.’

‘Exactly! Oh my god, look at those tusks,’ Selam gasped. A huge bull, with two overgrown prongs of ivory jutting past his trunk, was sauntering towards them. Selam lengthened her gait and raised her head.

Ardi gave her trunk an irritated flick. This was shaping up to be Selam’s third bull in four days. Okay, so if Ardi was in oestrus she’d be the one flirting outrageously. But still.

Selam caught the bull’s eye as he passed, letting out a low call:

‘Selam.’

He responded with a rumble that even Ardi had to admit was pretty sexy:

‘Karabo.’

Ardi could smell the testosterone rolling off him. He was in musth, alright. She sighed. Selam would never be able to focus now.

‘Come on, Selam. We are *not* going to be late for our first lecture.’

Ardi dragged Selam away, the latter rolling her eyes. The two of them were panting and flapping their ears by the time they reached the Argon building. An adjustable arm, with a small screen on the end, extended from each lectern. Ardi lowered hers to her eye, then pulled a triangular slate from her tusk-bag and set it on the lectern. Bumps and ridges bulged from the computer’s matte surface. The four fingers at the end of her trunk danced over them, and the protrusions withdrew and moved about in response. The lumpy marks at the edge of the slate formed the characters of the Phakathi alphabet, while the middle became smooth space for her to fill.

The room was filling up. Several of the students were mothers, each with a child clinging to her tail, tusk or trunk. One of them looked like a newborn, a week old at most, her four little legs working double-time to keep up with her mother’s stride. Ardi waved. The infant flared her ears and gave a shrill trumpet.

‘Adorable,’ gushed Selam, earning a thankful trunk-curl from his mother.

‘I really hope I have a daughter first,’ Selam whispered to Ardi.

Ardi shifted her feet. ‘I don’t mind either way.’

‘I should have guessed, you egalitarian. You want your kids to be smart though.’

‘Bulls can be smart.’

Selam snorted through her trunk. Just as she did, the teacher—clearly a male—climbed onto the podium. He was just Ardi’s type as well—short tail, round buttocks. Ardi pointed him out.

‘He must be smart enough.’

Selam looked up from her slate, ‘Oh, great. This is going to stink.’

Ardi was perfectly ready for the next round of fiery debate—even if she knew Selam was just tugging her tail—but as she opened her mouth the teacher raised his trunk for silence. This materialised just a bit more slowly than it probably should have. Male scientists were becoming more common (despite the best efforts of certain old-hat female scholars Ardi could name) but even so, he was unusually young—the grey skin on his forehead was smooth, and his tusks were short.

‘He’s so sexy,’ Ardi whispered to Selam.

‘What?’ Selam said. ‘Gross. He’s tiny. I’ll take a big beefy Ubude any day.’

Ardi smiled. Two could tug at tails. Tiny was a bit of an exaggeration—he looked about Ardi’s mass.

‘Welcome to *Intro to House-Ape Studies*.’

He had an odd accent, a continental mix with hints of his islander roots.

‘Scholar Ples couldn’t be here today. I’m Toumaï, her under-scholar, and I’ll fill in for now. Um... I’m going to jump right in.’

He tapped at the slate on his lectern. The eye-screens switched on to an image of a half-buried fossil skeleton, its empty eyes staring at the camera.

‘House-apes are an extinct species of bipedal primate. They disappeared during the last mass extinction, about ten million years ago.’ Toumaï raised and lowered his front legs in turn as he spoke.

‘75% of all animal species on the planet went missing at around that time—including all other apes. So, why do we care? What makes the house-ape so special?’

The next slide was an ancient tool, probably for digging.

‘In short, because they were like us. The house-apes were the only technological civilisation we know of besides our own. They had buildings, tools, complex language.’

He was actually kind of engaging once he got into it. Shisayo seemed to be his second language, but he was quite comfortable with it.

‘The house-apes evolved in Phakathi, alongside our own ancestors. Like us, they migrated outwards, displaced or interbred with their close relatives, and emerged as the dominant species.’

Now a world map; a circular projection of familiar landmasses with the South Pole at the centre. Green lines, overlaid like a continental skeleton, represented the mrithi exodus over the last hundred thousand years. Ardi had seen this map many times in her mrithi evolution class, but the red dots, declared by the legend to mark house-ape fossil sites, were a new feature. There were a lot of them.

‘House-ape bones are the single most common fossil on the planet. We’ve found them on every major landmass, including Ithiphu, which was completely icebound in their time. I was going to bring a skull with me to pass around, but I guess my bull-brain forgot.’

His voice, although not as deep as a larger bull, had an agreeable timbre to it.

‘The house-apes probably numbered higher than a billion, and the estimates go up to ten billion. They left a lasting impact on the planet—we’re still digging up their bronze and ceramics. Plastic micrograins, once assumed to be a natural mineral, are probably the degraded remains of their industrial products.’

His slide changed to something that looked like a four-legged copper spider. Alongside it was a crumbling vehicle, standing on a grey desert under a black sky.

‘Very recently—and you probably heard about this in transmission—one of our probes found their machines on the Moon! The Moon artefacts are the best-preserved in existence, and have already told us a lot more about the apes. We estimate they weighed about a hundredth what we do, making space exploration much more viable. The wheeled apparatus in that image seems to have accommodations for the animals themselves, which indicates that they travelled to the Moon in person—a step further than we’ve managed.’

Another slide-change, this time to a dig. Dozens of house-ape skeletons lay in neat rows. A scholar was posed next to one, pointing at one of the skulls with her trunk-fingers.

‘Many of the best house-ape sites are arranged like this, suggesting they buried their dead—perhaps ritually.’

Ardi suppressed a shudder. She’d been to her old Matriarch’s wake, her great-grandmother. They had taken her body to her favourite spot in the mountains, covered it with leaves, and left it to decompose naturally. Ardi wasn’t sure how they did it in the city, but burial sounded awful.

‘Not only did this preserve an exceptional number of them as fossils, it also hints at empathy and transmitted culture.’

‘Who caaaaaareees,’ Selam whispered.

‘Can you not?’ Ardi hissed back.

An infrasonic rumble, among the constant background of quiet vibrations from outside, carried Selam’s name through the floor. The voice sounded suspiciously like the bull Selam had made a pass at. She shifted on her feet and gazed towards the exit. Ardi clenched her trunk sternly.

‘Don’t you dare. I’m not lending you my notes again.’

Selam pouted.

‘Fine.’

‘...despite the similarities, they must also have been very different to us. Their dentition suggests they were omnivorous. They were probably apex predators—there are fossils of our precursor species, the largest land animal on the planet at the time, with marks from their weapons. Their garbage sites are associated with vast, vast numbers of animal bones—along with several species that show signs of rapid evolution by artificial selection. This means that not only did house-apes eat meat, but they bred animals specifically for that purpose, the same way we breed ungulates for hair and wool.’

As he talked, Ardi noticed that his bottom lip curled upwards in a way that was very cute.

‘As for why they disappeared, the sixth mass extinction remains a mystery in many ways. Some argue that climate was to blame—others suggest random cosmic misfortune, as

befell the great-reptiles. But we still don't know. I have my own thoughts on it all, but they're outside the syllabus, and I don't think Scholar Ples wants me to plant my rogue scientific notions in you.'

Ardi chuckled.

'Finally!' Selam gasped, a little too loudly, making straight for the exit. When she noticed Ardi wasn't next to her, she turned back.

'You coming?'

Ardi nodded her trunk towards Toumaï.

'I'm going to talk to him.'

Selam touched her chin in a gesture of perplexed distaste.

'Seriously? He's a scientist! You might as well date a female.'

Ardi gave a dismissive wave.

'Go find your bull, Selam.'

Ardi's friend threw her trunk in the air and left.

'That was fascinating!' Ardi said, approaching Toumaï while he packed up. The wrinkly skin around his eyes crumpled.

'Thank you! It was my first lecture.'

'I've never seen a house-ape fossil up close, I was really looking forward to that,' she lied. Her Matriarch owned a house-ape femur, Ardi's favourite toy as a calf. She had broken it chasing her brother Daka around. The two of them, panicked, had buried the shards, not realising this might have been exactly what the bone's original owner would have wanted.

'I'm sure Scholar Ples will bring one in,' she caught his eye, and he paused.

'Or I could show it to you now! I don't have any plans in the very immediate future.'

'Really? I'd love that.'

There was a new couple by the lakeside as Ardi and Toumaï ambled back along the path. Ardi curled her trunk, amused—the pleased moans were Selam’s.

‘That was quick.’

‘Sorry?’ asked Toumaï.

‘Oh, nothing. Are house-apes your field?’ Ardi asked.

He tipped his trunk in the affirmative. ‘And you? Are you studying palaeontology?’

She indicated ‘no.’

‘It’s an interest subject. I’m studying genetics.’

‘Excellent. My father wishes he studied genetics, but things were different then.’

He’d said something odd, and it took her a few moments to put her trunk on it. ‘Wishes? Do you still know him?’

‘Yeah,’ he said, a little sheepish. ‘He raised me, together with my mother.’

‘Oh!’

He winced. She tried to back up, mortified.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean offence. I’m from the country, things are more conventional there. At least, that’s my excuse.’

He curled his trunk. ‘Don’t worry. What was your home like?’

‘Full nuclear family—matriarch, mother, aunts, older sisters, cousins. There were so many kids. I loved them all, but it was super crowded. I couldn’t wait to get out on my own.’

Ardi smacked herself on the forehead. She’d forgotten to transmit home last week. Mother wouldn’t be too fussed, she understood how busy it got, but Matriarch was always anxious to hear from her. Matriarch prided herself on keeping close tabs on the whole family, even arranging regular transmit-talks with those on other continents. Well, the females, anyway. Ardi was the only one who kept in touch with Daka, and her male cousins may as well have gone to live on the Moon.

They arrived at Toumaï’s workspace in the Carbon Building, a small cubicle among many—barely room for the two of them. Ardi took the opportunity to press casually against his side; his round belly was slimmer than her past mates. She liked it.

‘This is where they keep the male scholars!’ he joked, but most of those in the surrounding cubicles really were bulls. He rummaged through a box, his trunk emerging with a petrified house-ape skull. The mandible was fixed to the cranium with a wire hinge, forming a complete head. She took it from his trunk-tip. It felt more like stone than bone.

‘She might have been a palaeontologist, like you. Digging up great-reptiles,’ she said.

‘I’ve had the same thought. But actually, this is a male.’

He slipped the tip of his trunk, which had a mischievous crook to it, through the skull’s base. He made the jaw wave up and down with his fingers.

‘What’s your opinion on the deposition rate of limestone?’ the skull addressed her in a mock professorial tone.

Ardi gave a brief trumpet of laughter.

‘No rock talk, Mister House-Ape. I want to know more about you.’

‘Ask away.’

‘What happened to you? What caused the mass extinction?’

‘We did.’

Ardi’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

‘Do you really think so?’ she asked Toumaï, forgetting to address the fossil-puppet.

Toumaï passed the skull back, trunk uncurled.

‘Yes. I think the house-apes did more than die out.’

Ardi looked at him closely. His tusks were as pale as the Moon.

‘Tell me about it.’

‘Really? I’m sure it’s not terribly interesting.’

She tipped her trunk, now with the stone skull at the end. ‘It’s interesting to you.’

His trunk coiled with gratitude.

‘House-ape civilisation existed for an instant. In the fossil record, it’s not there, then it is, then it isn’t. About ten thousand years, out of the four billion this planet has been here. It might have been less, but we honestly can’t resolve a smaller timescale in the fossil record. One second they were a few packs in Phakathi. The next, there were billions of them. And

then zero. At the same time, three-quarters of all living species went extinct. It would be an extraordinary coincidence if those events were unrelated.’

He paused, and Ardi gestured interest by splaying her trunk-fingers.

‘Like I said in the lecture, house-apes must have had a profound impact on the environment. The sheer extent of their garbage sites demonstrates how wasteful they could be. And as predators, they clearly weren’t averse to killing other animals. Plus, it seems like the arrival of a technological species will disrupt any ecosystem—we certainly have, wherever we’ve travelled, if perhaps not as deeply as house-apes. Just their existence, their behaviour, I think, was enough to endanger the biosphere. And in such large numbers, it never stood a chance.’

‘If they caused the extinctions, how did they die out themselves?’

He lifted his trunk. ‘Plague? Famine? Sterilisation? You would think at least some of them would have survived. But that’s an even deeper mystery.’

‘They could go to the Moon, but they couldn’t avoid destroying themselves or the planet?’

Toumaï gave another trunk-shrug. It was a habit she found annoying in general, but for some obscure reason, it was endearing in him. ‘Who are we to judge? We’re probably doing the exact same thing. Maybe to a lesser degree. Maybe not. We could be headed for the same fate, whatever that is.’

This was a troubling thought.

‘Don’t forget,’ he added, ‘if they didn’t disappear, we never would have evolved the way we did.’

Ardi made two rings with her fingers, gesturing thoughtfulness.

‘What if they didn’t die out? What if they left?’

He looked at her curiously.

She shrugged her trunk. ‘They travelled in space. Maybe they decided to stop the damage they were doing.’

‘Hmm. Could be.’

The thoughtful look on his face was enough to win her over. She put the skull down and twined her trunk with his. He started, then relaxed and gave a gentle squeeze back.

‘You can tell me more over lunch,’ Ardi said.