

Anniversary

Oxeefar threw himself out of his bed and stretched, letting out a bellowing yawn. This was equally out of true form and for show. His wife, Eshidu, never listened to the morning tone and chose to only open her eyes when Oxeefar let out his roar.

“Morning sunshine.” Oxeefar teased through a cough.

Oxeefar joked with her as he had done every day of their five year marriage and courtship. Eshidu hated the way she looked when she first woke yet Oxeefar repeatedly told her it was one of the things he loved most about her.

“I’m awake. You sound like an old man. Are you coughing?” Eshidu playfully teased him back.

They were both truly happy and realized how lucky they were to have truly found their soul mates. Every day they woke three hours before their shifts and used the time to discuss their life and often compare its current state to the alternative if they had never left Earth. Today was like no other except that it was their anniversary and they both were excited to see what creative excursion the other had planned.

The settlement on the planet Osage, and everyone inhabiting it, existed to support the main research facility. Oxeefar and Eshidu were both engineers assigned to the hydroelectric facility H7. They were in the first wave of people to arrive within twenty years and were part of the most recent expansion. Establishment of additional power was obviously a major priority. The only facility to precede the hydroelectric plants were the corresponding automation facilities. They produced the machines that would in turn construct the remaining facilities and residential quarters. Each was designed for the most recent expansion.

H7 was beyond state of the art and so much further past their expectations, neither Eshidu nor Oxeefar could wipe the smiles from their faces upon their introduction. They met during their initial tour and had not separated

since. That first bout of giddiness and infatuation carried them far into their second year and past their nuptials.

“I was thinking about pulling an extra shift tonight. Any reason that wouldn’t be a good idea?” Eshidu asked.

The inflection in her voice made it obvious she was about to pry for clues and Oxeefar loved her even more for it. Eshidu loved being surprised yet it also drove her wild that something was being planned and she didn’t know what it was.

“No. You should do that. But only if you want to. Maybe I’ll pick up one as well. What do you think?” Oxeefar played along.

Eshidu pouted at the failure of her weak attempt. “On second thought...”

Eshidu paused, she was no good at playing games and today’s anticipation was just too much. She cracked.

“Ok, Ox, I said I could wait this year, but I can’t. Tell me what we are doing tonight.” Eshidu exploded with questions.

“You win. I know, I know. You were right. I’m terrible, now tell me. Please.”

Oxeefar didn’t budge. “Nope.”

“Come on Ox. Please. The suspense is killing me and besides... I need to know if what I have planned will be good enough.”

“Again, nope.” Oxeefar was enjoying it.

“Ok. Let’s just cancel the whole thing. I hate you. I want a divorce.”

Eshidu tried not to smile.

Oxeefar tried not to smile as he responded. “Ok, divorce granted. So, since we are splitting up I might as well tell you what I had planned, right?”

Eshidu knew Oxeefer was mocking her and would not let slip even one detail. She gave up and hugged him as they finished putting on their suits. Oxeefer had won. He had her hooked and she knew it. The couple spent the rest of their time getting ready in silence, exchanging glances and light touches as they passed.

As they approached the door to leave their residence, Oxeefer motioned for Eshidu to go through the door first. Eshidu still smiled that Oxeefer subscribed to such minute chivalrous actions, even after five years. She stepped through the portal first and Oxeefer followed close behind. Only when the door slid out from the wall and closed the portal did the message appear on her visor. She motioned for it to open and a timer appeared. The timer displayed a reading of twelve hours and was counting down.

Eshidu stopped in her tracks and turned to launch herself at Oxeefer. The move was so sudden, it would have knocked a smaller man from his feet. Eshidu's smile told Oxeefer that he had done well.

"Ox, you have really outdone yourself this year. A countdown clock?" Eshidu felt a surge of pride that her husband would go to so much effort for her. Eshidu was never one to be bested so she let one last comment out before turning back around.

"With all this build up, I sure hope this date measures up." Eshidu used her most mocking inflection and didn't turn back to look at Oxeefer. She darted down the path and Oxeefer didn't miss a step in following her, he chased after her like they were love struck teenagers.

Three hours into the day, Eshidu was already outside Oxeefer's office when he stepped to the door. They consistently synchronized their breaks so that they could walk and chat. Proud that after five years they still enjoyed conversation and debate, it was an unshakeable part of their routine.

Oxeefer spoke first. "So, what is it today?"

Eshidu always came up with the topic for the day. It usually involved some random hypothetical or problem in history that they could pontificate over but never solve. Eshidu smiled and Oxeefar knew today's topic would be a trap.

Eshidu said, "I've got an easy one for today." This was an obvious lie and Oxeefar knew it.

Eshidu continued, "In honor of our anniversary, I thought it would be interesting to see what our life would be like if we had never come to Osage..."

Oxeefar was in slight relief as they had danced around this topic before with minor variations. He felt he was on fair ground with this one until he realized she wasn't done.

"...if we had never come to Osage but we had met on Earth. How would we have met and where would we be now?" Eshidu stopped short but Oxeefar knew what would be next. They had never openly discussed it but it had always been on both of their minds. It was the unspoken topic for every couple on Osage.

Eshidu finished. "Boy or girl?"

Oxeefar winced inside. There would be no way of avoiding the talk, and no way to avoid deep nostalgia for what might have been. Every person on Osage had been through a rigorous screening process for genetic anomalies, hidden psychological deficiencies, and went through extended counseling. The decision was made early on and each participant was required to agree to permanent sterilization. Both men and women went through the process as the environment would be much too unpredictable and harsh to make the necessary adjustments for infants. No couples were sent on the mission to Osage but as is a part of life, kinships formed. Many of these new relationships progressed and developed into full fledged marriages. There were no hopes for these relationships to produce offspring so the question often got raised after a time. "What if?" Oxeefar had even given the topic substantial consideration many times in his own head but when they didn't have the discussion in the first few months, he

avoided it. Eshidu had done the same and eventually too much time had passed to bring it up. Now, it had been thrown out and couldn't be avoided.

As was custom, Oxeefer answered immediately, verbalizing his thoughts as they came to him. This was a ground rule that Eshidu laid down, claiming it made their conversations more spontaneous and truthful.

"This presents a challenge. Not that we wouldn't have met but that we were living pretty far apart when signed up. I'm going to say..." Oxeefer hesitated for just a moment before spinning his tale. "...we met at a conference."

"You were the keynote speaker, discussing your company's most recent development which would make you wildly wealthy. I, of course, was instantly smitten by your intelligence and enthusiasm. After your speech, I waded through the crowd and pushed a few people more forcefully than I should have to be able to speak with you before you left. Just as I got close enough to make my introduction, you turned and walked away, never meeting my eyes. Pass."

Oxeefer stopped, giving the signal that it was Eshidu's turn to ad-lib. This was a rule that Oxeefer had devised. At any time during one of their conversations, they could call for a pass and the other would have to pick up where the story was left off.

Eshidu hadn't been surprised since Oxeefer quite often played the pass card. "Unbeknownst to you at the time, during my speech I spotted you across the lecture hall. You looked so handsome. When I finished, I saw you making your way through the crowd and I started to get nervous. You know how shy I am when it comes to meeting new people, especially handsome strangers. I couldn't decide what to say to you so I panicked. At the last second, just as you were finally standing right in front of me, I turned and left...but not before I captured your image in my visor. Your registered conference profile appeared and I knew that I would have to work up the courage to meet you before the end of the day."

"Being the last day of the conference, I knew everyone, including my handsome new stranger, would be attending the closing ceremonies. After all, the executive board always has to pat themselves on the back for what a

fabulous conference they just put on. As expected I found you shortly after arriving and..." Eshidu stopped just as she had Oxeefar wrapped up in her version of the story. Eshidu said "Pass" with a big grin on her face.

Oxeefar felt robbed but knew she was only using his own rule against him. "Ok. I was at the closing ceremony and I saw you again. This time I knew for sure that I was going to make my introduction. I walked directly up to you and...asked you to dance. You giggled and said, I don't know how. In my most debonaire voice I told you that I would teach you and I led you by the hand. After the first dance you were so impressed with my dance moves that..." Oxeefar couldn't continue his story over the sound of Eshidu's raucous laughter. She tried to stifle it at first but gave way as it came bursting forth. Oxeefar stopped walking when Eshidu doubled over because she was laughing so hard.

Between breaths, Eshidu got out, "You showed me...how to dance. That's great. I could see you now. Oxeefar, I love you. Ok, you win."

Oxeefar would have been offended had he not been such a large man. What he lacked in gracefulness, he more than made up for in raw strength. In truth, Oxeefar had never danced before and now on Osage, would likely never dance. After a few more seconds of her laughter, he joined in to laugh at himself.

Eshidu conceded defeat on the first part of the discussion but never gave in so easily in its entirety. "Alright, so where would we be one year later?"

Again, Oxeefar jumped right in. "We would have been swept up in a whirlwind romance and been married only shortly after. We then mutually decided to move outside of the city, for family purposes of course. I would arrive home late because my commute would be longer and you would be waiting at home dutifully like a good wife." Oxeefar's smirk would have betrayed his sarcastic tone even if Eshidu hadn't know him.

Oxeefar continued. "I am excited when I come through the door because I have great news to share. It seems I have just been given another promotion because of my groundbreaking work. You are so happy for me

that you start gushing with tears.” Oxeefar was again poking at Eshidu as she was affectionate but not an overly emotional person. “Pass”

Eshidu took over but seemed to hesitate. The hesitation became easily perceptible and Oxeefar promptly called her on it. “Ha, I stumped you. Does that mean I win?” Oxeefar asked.

Eshidu hesitated even a moment longer. “No, sorry. So, you came through the door exclaiming your great news and I was so happy for you that I cried. What you didn’t know is that I had exciting news of my own. The true reason I was crying was that my hormones had taken over. I ask you to have a seat and I make an even bigger announcement. I’m pregnant.” Eshidu paused again. “Pass”

Oxeefar wanted to say that he had seen this coming but he didn’t think it would have been this obvious. She had put him on the spot and now was waiting for his reaction. This was an extremely sneaky way to go about the conversation and he was proud of her for it, despite being nervous about his next few words. This conversation could go well and lead to a great anniversary or it could take a horrible turn and ruin their evening, possibly more. Hesitation would amplify whichever way he leaned, so he decided to just go for it. “I...”

Eshidu cut him off. “Wait. We are at my office and our walk is over.” Eshidu’s devilish smile appeared and Oxeefar knew he had been had. She had timed it precisely so that she could drop this bomb on him as they neared her office. Oxeefar would have to agonize over the anticipation of finishing their conversation through the return trip to his office and the time until their next break.

“Well played.” Oxeefar conceded.

Eshidu stepped to her office door and as it slid closed behind her. Oxeefar turned and headed back to his office, the anticipation of their next conversation already building.

Eshidu could barely wait for their second break of the day. Oxeefar had surprised her with a countdown timer in her visor that would not disappear. Currently there was just over six hours left on the timer. She zoned out for a moment letting her work take a backseat to the timer in her visor and her thoughts of what might be planned for the evening. As soon as the signal tone indicated it was time for her break, she turned and waited for Oxeefar to be at her door.

A full minute passed before she walked to the door and motioned for it to open. She fully expected for Oxeefar to be standing in the hallway prepared to verbally ambush her as he often did. He didn't jump out from behind the wall, so she ventured out into the hallway, still not there. She started the walk to his office considering what would be so urgent that he would miss their break time. She assumed she would meet him somewhere on the walk between their offices but she didn't. She arrived at his office and motioned for her arm unit to grant her access.

Stepping inside, she was greeted by two of Oxeefar's office partners. "Eshidu?" They seemed surprised to see her. "Where is Ox? We thought he was with you?"

Eshidu was caught off guard by their questions. "He's not with me."

The answer was even more startling. "He's not? He left for the physician just after last break. We just assumed he was with you and maybe you two love birds had taken off early. He was so excited about your big date." The men had a light tone but were also letting their concern leak through.

Eshidu noticed that the fourth office mate was also absent. "Where is Karl?"

The two men told her that Karl never showed for work and that he hadn't ever missed a day of work outside the mandatory down times. Eshidu barley had time to thank them civilly before she left for the physicians office, on the other side of their complex. Eshidu's worry began to develop into a full panic as she made the trek across the expansive complex. Oxeefar had never visited the physician and as best as she could recall, had never been sick. While most diseases were a thing of the past, people still had minor infections that would make them slightly ill, but not Oxeefar.

He had not been ill and definitely not to the extent that he would go to the physician's office and miss their time together. She knew this could all be part of Oxeefer's elaborate surprise for their anniversary yet she felt her stomach twisting with the possibility that something was wrong.

Eshidu reached the physician's office just as she was in full panic mode. She motioned for the door to open and found the physician syncing his arm unit at the manual terminal. The physician looked up and his greeting did nothing to put her mind at ease.

"Another one? What symptoms are you experiencing?" asked Dr. Jacksom.

"What? I, no. I'm not. I'm looking for Oxeefer Timms." Eshidu answered. "Oh, he left almost three hours ago. Believe it or not he was exhibiting influenza symptoms. He went home to rest. I suspect he will be better within a day or two. I gave him a booster. How are you feeling?" Dr. Jacksom asked, closing the distance and preparing his diagnostic equipment for a scan.

Eshidu was still rattled from Dr. Jacksom's news that Oxeefer was sick. "Me? Oh, I'm fine of course. You said influenza? What exactly is that? Is he ok?"

Dr. Jacksom did his best to calm Eshidu, reading correctly that she was becoming alarmed. "Influenza is extremely rare but definitely nothing to worry about. He will just feel weak for a day or two at the most. We haven't seen it for many many years on Earth and never here, before today. Today there have been two people so far, and I have an appointment within the next few minutes. Its odd how these things are but its nothing to worry about, I assure you."

Dr. Jacksom's calm demeanor did reassure Eshidu some, but she still wanted to go be with Oxeefer. "Thank you. Will he need anything?"

Dr. Jacksom replied "No, just rest. Again, don't worry, he'll be fine."

Eshidu threw a "thank you" in the general direction of the doctor as she flew out the door. Before she reached the front entrance of the complex she had

sent for and received authorization to leave work for the rest of the day. Feelings of fear and selfishness competed for center stage as she thought about how this would affect their night. She didn't want to admit it to herself but despite Dr. Jackson assuring her that influenza was a minor infection, she was worried about Oxeefar. Creeping its way in front of her fear was the feeling of disappointment at the horrible timing of such an event. It would soon be time for their anniversary date, which she had been looking forward to for weeks, and Oxeefar had planned a special evening. "This is so unfair", she exclaimed for no one in particular to hear.

As she made her way into their residence the thought occurred to her that Oxeefar could be exaggerating just to get out of their conversation. As she walked into their room she called out. "Ox, if this is just a trick to get out of..."

Eshidu didn't finish. The sight of her husband's flushed expression, the puffiness of his face, and his washed out skin caused her to cry out. "Ox!"

Eshidu's exclamation startled both of them equally and Oxeefar sprang to his feet, confused of what was happening. "What..? What?"

Eshidu was simultaneously relieved and surprised by his confusion and also a bit amused to see him move so quickly. "You look horrible" chuckled Eshidu.

Oxeefar settled back into a reclined position. "Thanks, I love you too."

Realizing she may have been a bit insensitive, "Oh, sorry, you just... I'm sorry. I was worried about you. How do you feel?"

"Honestly, I feel sick. I don't think I have been sick since I was in primary school. It's just as fun as I remember. I'm really sorry about tonight but I, I just can't." True regret filled his words.

Eshidu felt guilty for suspecting he was putting on a show to duck their earlier conversation. "Of course, don't worry about it. We can do it when you feel better. We have all the time in the world. I'm not going anywhere. You just rest and get better, love you."

Oxeefar Timms
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