

RETRONAUT:

Prologue



Nené would always remember her 89th birthday. She got to have the pudding that usually gave her gas. She got to insult all the relatives she didn't like. And, oh yes: She got asked to go on a Quest, to a faraway land, to save the world from destruction. With the likelihood that she wouldn't live to reap the benefits. Hé! The consternation that this caused, when announced by the haughty Emissary standing in the centre of the room, looking down his nose at her and her kin, led to a row, which led to a fight, which led to some of the relatives she *did* like, ending up with black eyes, bloody noses and sprained limbs.

Best. Birthday. Ever.

All things considered, 89 was a hell of an age to contemplate going on an adventure. An adventure, moreover, that was so dangerous that the likelihood of surviving was infinitesimal.

That is what Nené thought, anyway.

89 was an age where all that was supposed to be on your mind was whether you had enough teeth, whether your digestive system was at war with the rest of your body, whether your bowels functioned, and whether your damn fool relatives were trying to kill you with their notions of what was good for you.

Nené had all those under control.

She had *all* her own teeth. Her digestive system and bowels worked just fine, thank you very much. Her mind was sharp- except for the odd 'brain fart' as her 10 annuals old great-great-great niece called it. And she used it to thwart periodic attempts to get her to go and live with one or other of her great-great cousins, nieces, or whatever the

wa was. Nené had no intention of doing any such thing. Stupid girl jumped at the slightest sound, couldn't keep Nené's old Service weapons sharp and polished, had nearly fainted at the sight of Nené's gentleman friend coming out of her room in his underthings. (What? Nené was old, not dead. And Fremwe was a fine looking 75). And she smelt of fish. Nené didn't need a nurse, who smelt of fish, thank you very much!

She could walk – well, a fast shuffle, but it would do in a pinch. Not all her contemporaries were dead- thank the Father. Which kept boredom at bay, when she needed someone to bitch to about the incredible stupidity of the younger generation. She had a roof over her head- well, there is an advantage to outliving a number of your relatives, including ones who don't like you. Ha! Take *that*, Sharaa!

All in all, life was not bad.

Of course, she still regretted missing out on marriage, motherhood, and all the things that went with it. And there were a lot, bearing in mind that, five millennia after the Great Death, that had almost destroyed human civilisation, and caused rebuilding it to be the number one priority, marriage was a complex, multi partner institution. She would have had husbands *and* wives, birth children *and* family children. She would have lived in her own compound with anything from four to ten/twenty houses – depending on how extensive the matrimonial bonds.

She would, by now, have been a Matriarch.

And yes, the lack of that still hurt at times. Still, she had done all right. No blood children... but she'd ended up taking five babies after their mothers- her brothers' wives, her cousins' sisters, great nieces- had died in childbirth. She'd raised them, schooled them, loved them, terrorised them. Till they'd forgotten they weren't hers. And now they and their children and grandchildren formed a ferocious barrier between her and anything hostile in the world.

Over the years, they'd built her a house, then built theirs around it. Seen to it that her pen had cattle, and her land was farmed. They sent the young ones to cook and clean. But just because she'd fallen over a couple of times lately, they'd started demanding she live with...what was that girl's name again? Fishy-girl?

Ha! Never!

But that didn't mean that Nené had a death wish. Or anything even vaguely resembling suicidal impulses.

That was why, when the Queen-Mother's Head Priest's, Emissary put it to her that it was time for her to go on the mission that she had ducked out of more than 60 annuals earlier, Nené stared at him incredulously.

She wondered for a scant candlemark, if he was possessed. But since spirit possession was actually a common fact of every day religious worship, and he hadn't fallen to the ground foaming at the mouth or anything, it couldn't be said that he was under the influence of one of the more mischievous spirits, mores the pity.

No, he was dead serious.

He showed her the Order, and she recognised the Queen Mother's spidery writing. And the rule: *Once in Service, always in Service*. Which meant that whether she said yes or no, the chances of Nené living to enjoy her 90th birthday, were slim... to none. But they'd be talking about *her* 89th birthday-walla for the next three generations. So much for that snob, Pulé, with her sending for a musician from Wengwe for her 86th. Or that fool Meru, parading her 63 great-grandchildren at her 88th. Not to mention- pah! All stupid old women. No one remembered them as great warriors in their youth. Or thought they had it in them to do anything but fart and gossip and dribble.

Nené was going to do her duty, and show them all. Reap the glory. Ha!

Best. Birthday. *Ever!*