

Icosahedron

The time of the twenty had come, so soon.

Marek was well prepared. It was an honour to be chosen, and although he had only nineteen summers under his belt, he was considered old enough.

Marek sat just outside the entrance to the cave, reading his book in the hot winter sun. Quietly, sage Amdani eased himself down onto a nearby rock, a lightweight shawl around his ageing shoulders. Dug out long ago from ancient pits, the shawl was said to be the hide of a viscose, though no image of such a creature had ever been found.

They both gazed outwards in silence for a moment, taking in the arid valley below.

“So, Marek, the time of the twenty draws near. I know you have worked hard. Have you learned and understood the skyence? Are you ready?”

“I think so, reverend sage. But I am afraid. I’m not sure I am brave enough to be one of the twenty.”

Amdani nodded, as if expecting this answer.

“No-one knows they are brave enough until the time comes. Remind me, Marek, what we understand of the sacred knowledge.”

Marek shifted nervously, suddenly aware of the hard dirt floor beneath him. He glanced at the holy book, its words copied and copied again by generations of scholars, each patiently recreating the crumbling pages.

“The knowledge is called the skyence, which means it came from the sky. The skyence says that the first life forms took the shape of a twenty-sided shape called an ico... ico...”

“Icosahedron.”

“Yes. And so the icosahedron is the most powerful and sacred shape. It is the source of our living and our dying. Our ancestors did not revere the icosahedron and took its powers for granted, and so it sent a terrible... verse...”

“Virus.”

“A terrible icosahedron virus to destroy them. Millions upon millions died, and then...” Marek floundered, and Amdani gently took the book from his hand.

“Calm, Marek. What does the skyence tell us of the icosahedron virus?”

Marek took a deep breath and watched a kite sail high overhead, until the words came to him.

“Viruses are icosahedral; meaning they are spheres formed by twenty equilateral triangles which are geometrically perfect. Icosahedral viruses can enter any organism. The action of an icosahedral virus is highly destructive, creating a cycle of infection which quickly results in the death of the host.”

“Very good, Marek. Now please summarise what you understand to be the key message of the skyence.”

Marek blushed. "Sir, I think it means that the icosahedron bestows life and death. It is a shape of great power, and its greatest power is the power of twenty."

Amdani considered for a moment, a wry smile forming.

"Excellent. So you see, to be one of the twenty is to be in direct contact with the icosahedron, a privilege accorded to very few. Now, come, I think they are ready."

In the setting sun, Marek and Amdani gathered with the tribe on the plateau of the valley, where a fire burned in a dugout pit. Among them were the nineteen other scholars who had shown an aptitude for the teachings of the sky. These teachings were relics of a past age, holy books holding dense pages of text and diagrams found locked in a heavy metal trunk labelled *Archives: Journal of Virology 2024-2034, UCL School of Medicine*. Only scholars could read any of the words.

"Let us pray," Amdani intoned, spreading his arms wide. "Every twenty years we gather here to worship the power of the icosahedron, appease the power of the virus, and exalt the power of the twenty."

The prayer continued, and Marek joined the scholars to begin the slow dance which replicated the twenty perfect faces of the icosahedron. Stepping away and then together, fingertips touching, arms raised, forming a mesh of triangles, soft chanting as the flames rose.

"And so we acknowledge the purifying fire which destroys the virus and leaves space for new life. We revere the skyence and give to the sky our twenty finest scholars, to honour the twenty faces of the icosahedron and preserve our life. Begin."

At this word, the first of the twenty walked slowly into the fire. Her hair caught first and flared brilliantly before her robe blazed too. She did not scream. Behind her, a man, whose shout of pain was quickly quelled by the fire's roar. A third, who hesitated, then a fourth.

Last in line, Marek's courage failed. This was not what he had learned from the skyence, could not be what the icosahedron required. Knowing he would bring curses down on his family for all eternity, Marek turned, and fled into the dark.