

‘Tani?’

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1. ÀYÀNMỌ Ò GBÓÒGÙN (NO WITCHCRAFT CAN CURE FATE.)	3
CHAPTER 2 ÀKÈÈKÈÈ Ò ŠÉ-ÈÈ DÌ NÍBÒ (A SCORPION IS NOT A THING TO CLOSE ONE'S PALMS UPON.)	33
CHAPTER 3 ÒNÀ KAN Ò WỌ QJÀ (IT IS NOT ONLY ONE ROAD THAT LEADS TO THE MARKET.)	55
CHAPTER 4 A KÌ Í GBÉ ÀÁRÍN OJÌ ÈÈYÀN KÁ MÁ ŠÌ WÍ (ONE CANNOT LIVE AMID FORTY PEOPLE AND NEVER MISSPEAK.)	75
CHAPTER 5 ÈBỌ-Ọ LE, KÒ JU ÒKÚ LỌ (THE SACRIFICE IS FORMIDABLE; IT IS NOT WORSE THAN DEATH.)	105
CHAPTER 6 ÀỌ NI TÌLÚ; OBA LÓ L'AGBO. (THE ASSEMBLY IS FOR THE PEOPLE; TO THE KING BELONGS THE CROWD.)	134
CHAPTER 7 A KÌ Í GBÁ ÈNI TÓ YÒBÈ MÚ (ONE DOES NOT GRAB HOLD OF A PERSON WHO HAS PULLED A KNIFE.)	157
CHAPTER 8 BÍ OMO Ò JO SÒKÒTÒ A JO KÍJÌPÁ (IF A CHILD DOES NOT RESEMBLE THE TROUSERS, HE OR SHE SHOULD RESEMBLE THE WRAPPER.)	172
CHAPTER 9 A KÌ Í MÚ ÌBỌN TETERE (ONE DOES NOT HOLD A GUN CARELESSLY.)	194
CHAPTER 10 ÀGÁDÁGODO Ò FINU HAN ARA-A WỌN (PADLOCKS DO NOT SHARE SECRETS WITH ONE ANOTHER.)	219
CHAPTER 11 BÍ OJÚ ALÁDEKUN Ò DÁ IGI, KÌ GÙN ÚN. (IF A MONKEY IS NOT CERTAIN ABOUT A TREE, IT SHOULD NOT CLIMB IT.)	246
CHAPTER 12 IGBA IMỌLÈ KÒ LÈ PA ÈNI TÍ KÒ BÁ ŠÈ. (TWO HUNDRED AND ONE GODS CANNOT KILL SOMEONE WHO HAS NOT OFFENDED THEM.)	280
EPILOG	314

Chapter 1. Àyànmọ ò gbóògùn (No witchcraft can cure fate.)

Tuesday

My ears were itching again.

Sleep pulled away like a receding tide, and the prickly feeling spread, till it covered me like beach sand.

“Oluroumbi, oh,
Joun joun,
Iroko joun joun.”

I pawed at my right ear to keep the singing at bay and ground the other into the sofa. It soon made sense to stop smashing the stained microsuede. I had released locked-in odors — mature farts, congealed sweat, and the leftovers from errant fuckery. I rolled onto my back, sniffed at the still air, and wiggled relief into the spot between my shoulder blades.

Sitting up slowly meant that the invisible fist wrapped around my head took its time, but it still squeezed tight. I muttered thanks to Olódùmarè for the mild weather, kicked off the scratchy blanket, and squinted at my surroundings. There were burnt-out incense sticks everywhere. The sofa pressed against a side table, which held an ornate clay flowerpot. The beautifully patterned container sprouted a lonely bunch of unbroken ash stems. They looked like four skeletal fingers, poking out of a small grave.

Thankfully, the smell of sandalwood recovered, and overpowered the funk of feet. I perked up when I detected another familiar aroma. It pinned the other smells down and smiled

mockingly, while it poked them in the chest. A deep whiff made my eyes grow large. It must have been prime weed if little more than its memory made me light-headed.

My dream faded fast, like all new ones. I struggled to hold on to the waning vision of an unpainted house, high up on a hill. Uneven crenelations that meandered along a grubby roofline were tough to forget. The sense of being a disembodied thought, flitting from one head to another, also lingered. As did the feeling of communal intent, shared with a crowd that trudged up the hill, all eyes fixed on the used-to-be-white building. Little else remained of my memory, and the more I tried to recollect, the further sleep fled.

I cranked myself upright and cocked my head, as splashes of water occasionally drowned out the singing. My bracelet gave off a hum that I felt but could not hear, and which faded when I touched my wrist. I crossed my fingers, then twisted the band. It moved reluctantly, and the itching didn't stop.

The sun forced her way in and what had been a dense carpet of shadows was stretched, then scattered across the opposite wall. A widening band of light had crept across the room, and now it cut across the skirts of a Madonna statuette. She was dark-skinned, reigned from a ledge in the corner, and threw her usual gang signs. Her white gown was partly covered by a black mantle.

My eyes were halted in their tour, by a poster on the wall. It was a riot of blue, brown, and yellow lettering that proclaimed “Àyànmọ ò gbòògùn.” Yesterday was a blur, but I'd have remembered anyone who'd place stock in such a warning. I tried to swing my ashy feet into the sliver of space between the sofa and a papier-mâché-looking coffee table. Its edges still took lumps out of my shin. I bit my tongue as I hopped around, but I must have made a noise. The singing stopped.

So did I, but the room didn't. After my head slowed down its thumping, and the waves of nausea passed, I picked myself up and followed my nose. Both socks were stuffed into my prized Jordans, which were parked underneath the side table. A glance downward confirmed that my jeans and tee shirt were crumpled, but still in place. I dispensed with a vaguely disappointed feeling, shook my head, and winced.

The vague feeling of something being missing grew, until I remembered my backpack. I didn't panic but it was only on their second pass around the room, that my eyes registered it. The bag was propped up at one end of the sofa, and still showed an indent. I rummaged through it and accounted for the all-important business card, my stock of tee shirts and assorted religious paraphernalia.

After zipping it closed, I reached out to the side table and nudged the stems of ash. They crumpled, most into the pot but some onto the floor. Not feeling worse, I hobbled into the tiny kitchen. A water-damaged piece of plywood blocked off the window but the bent nails holding it in place were easy to shift. There was a black, three-legged cooking pot sitting on the fire escape ledge. It was shiny new but looked at home.

The board popped back and the nails held. More out of hope than expectation, I tried the tap. It took me a few seconds to get over my shock when a thread of clean-looking liquid trickled out. I scooped handfuls of rusty-tasting water into my mouth until the pounding between my ears dulled.

The itching faded, and I looked up as she stepped into the room. She was wrapped in a towel, and hesitant wisps of steam reached upwards from her bare shoulders. Even in the almost-sunlit room, she gleamed like a newborn baby, and the droplets of water that slid down her arms looked fat and viscous. She was about my age, not as tall, and more compactly built. Her hips

were like a mermaid's, but it was her eyes that clicked. They were a bottomless brown that turned to black the longer I looked. I closed mine and the memories crowded back:-

The rumor of a gathering that turned out true.

The weirdness of it: part church revival, part I-still-don't-know-what.

The exhilaration of meeting a real-live Nigerian Consulate staffer, drunk enough to give me an appointment.

The surge of white folk that fought to be screened in, when the meeting was opened to the public.

The expectation.

The prayers.

The singing.

The preaching.

The spirit.

The music.

The dancing.

The tiny bottles of airplane booze.

The concerned look in a pair of deep brown eyes.

The sideways totter uptown.

The leaning on somebody to climb a crazy number of stairs.

The itching.

“Hot water? You have hot water?” I didn’t know I could find that harsh of a voice setting.

“You can use whatever’s left.” She muttered something else that sounded Spanish. Or Portuguese. I grabbed my backpack, then I was gone. The bathroom was tiny, with a sink set on top of the tank. A threadbare but clean towel was folded on the toilet seat cover. The mirror slid to the right and revealed very thin shelves, the upper one loaded with pill bottles. The labels were faded and their contents had all hardened into multicolored lumps.

Coiled on the bottom shelf was an opèlè. The string of Ifà divining beads looked smooth, shone like old ivory and felt warm to the touch. My years of lessons came rushing back and I bit my tongue, when the prayer to the Spirit of Destiny started before my brain did. My skin tingled and the dull hum returned, until I put the beads back. A red light glowed on a small boiler mounted on the wall above the shower stall. It looked like a spaceship if its passengers were tiny aliens.

I banged my elbow on the towel rail as I disrobed, and scrunched up my nose as I scraped off crusty underwear. A cracked rubber hose was attached to the mixer, and its other end coiled past the dipper that sat in a bright-green plastic bucket. I gasped aloud when I saw the cake of black soap. I almost took a bite out of it, and closed my eyes as I savored the smell of palm oil, cocoa, with a hint of shea butter. The feeling of warm water on my body was one to savor but I had to hustle. Picking out the tightly curled hairs I’d left behind took a few moments, then I patted myself dry.

The inner pocket of my backpack gave up a nub of a chewing stick, which I used to work my teeth and gums until they’d lost their furry feel. A pink-eyed girl with a drawn expression and a damp afro peered at me from behind the speckled mirror. I pressed down on my Easter Island-statue-shaped head, and sighed. She pressed as hard and sighed back

Digging into my backpack yielded a fresh tee shirt, one of those that displayed the dreadlocked, jeans-clad Black Jesus. Full of lip and negroid of nose, He looked toward the right and dressed conspicuously left. He was barefoot, had a well-cut six-pack, and held the classic pose with one hand on his heart, the other raised in a Black Power salute. He had no pierced hands, feet, or sides. I was really proud of how this shirt had turned out, and it was one of my best-sellers.

Suddenly I couldn't bear the streaks on both sides of my underwear anymore. A finger of water clung to the bottom of the bucket, and I considered giving them a wash. The prospect of pulling them back on while wet or rolling them into my backpack and having them mess up my merchandise killed that idea. I balled the greying panties into yesterday's shirt and put them away. Then I went a little crazy and used one of the bottles of anointing oil as an all-over body cream before wriggling back into my jeans.

In the bedroom, she'd laid out a pair of thick socks, panties, and a bra on the single bed. I sniffed at the bra. It was intimidatingly large and I tended to let the girls roam free, anyway. Mine would hardly poke anyone's eyes out, but sometimes they helped make a point or two.

There was enough light for me to see that the fresh underwear would fit like cargo shorts, but they tempted me mightily. It was forever, since I'd worn anything laundered and these were soft to the touch, and smelled great. Fondling them made me feel like a dirty young man, but the tone of the silence changed and stopped all that. She was smiling at me from the doorway. I felt as if I was back with my third Nigerian foster mother and had been caught not doing my lessons. I dropped the underwear as if it bit me and wiped my hands on the backs of my thighs.

"They're clean..." Her hands curled, then uncurled at her sides.

"Uh, thanks."

The business card whispered at me from inside my backpack, and I thought of the queues growing outside the Consulate as I dawdled.

But ...

“That song?” I had to know.

“Oh, you mean ‘Oluroumbi’? I heard it a lot, back home.”

I thought the air between us shimmered and it looked as if something rippled across her skin.

I blinked, then rubbed my eyes.

“You okay?” She asked.

“Hungover. You’re Nigerian? I thought you were Brazilian...”

“I’m from Salvador de Bahia.” She said it in such a matter-of-fact way, it was hard to query further.

“Tell me, how come ... electricity?” I leaned forward.

“Aah, of course. Its not constant, and I don’t know all the details but its got something to do with salvaged DC generators or something, and an underground network that runs from Roosevelt Island. ”

“The Church?”

She nodded, then stepped forward, as if to show me something, but drew back.

“Is something wrong?” I froze.

Then I remembered.

I cursed my carelessness, and threw a glance over her exposed skin.

“Did you ever see ...?” Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Oh fuck.

“The YouTube clip?”

I curled my hands into fists.

She smiled and nodded. I took a sharp intake of breath and fought the urge to run screaming out of the apartment.

“I’m alright. Honestly. Look” She untucked the towel from her armpit, let it drop, then did a slow turn with her arms stretched away from her sides. Her skin glistened all shades of cafe-au-lait. The only thing that didn’t compute was the gray between her legs, but I was too busy feeling sick with relief to worry about that.

“Okay?” She stooped, picked up the towel, then wrapped it back in place.

“Yeah.” I exhaled a long, shuddering breath.

“And you?”

“Me? I’m all good. Besides, Black folk can’t catch it.”

“Apparently. Yet you’re worried that your unexplained itching is a sign that you will.”

Her eyes and her voice flattened.

“How.did.you.know.about.that?”

“You were far over your limit, last night.”

I shook my head, and again wished I hadn’t.

“I know you were at that place, hoping to meet someone from the Nigerian Consulate.”

She adjusted the towel around her chest.

“Yeah, thanks for letting me crash.” I pulled my socks on, stepped into my sneakers, and grabbed my backpack.

“Can I show you something? You can leave straight afterward.”

“I could leave now.”

“It will open up options for you; much better ones than getting smuggled into Morocco from Europe, and then taking your chance across the desert.” She spread her hands out.

“It feels as if you’re in my head.” I jerked back and frowned.

“Please.”

“Okay. But I’m staying outside.” I stepped to the front door, pulled it open and stood in the gloomy corridor.

“Look.” She opened a drawer that lived in the stand beneath Black Maria, extracted a post-card sized photograph, then walked it over.

The photo was ancient and its translucent edges were frayed. There were sepia tones and streaks of light-colored bands that looked and behaved like ghosts. I held it between fingertips, then tilted it to catch the light.

That was a mistake.

The moment I touched it, I swear the scene came alive. And pulled me in. I was at the bottom of a hill, covered in perspiration and dizzyed by harsh sunlight. My ears felt blocked, but a rhythmic drumming penetrated them, dulled as if by distance. The rough embrace of așò-òké felt heavy on my body and a carpet of sand grains tickled my bare feet.

A dancing, singing mass surrounded me. The rhythm entered my soul and I was swept away by infectious steps. The colors blinded me and I had to wipe droplets away from my forehead with every second motion. A drummer danced close by, her deep blue gown a billowing tent. She had an hourglass-shaped talking drum tucked under her left arm and wielded a curved stick in her right hand. It was a blur and produced sounds that mimicked the voices that it overlaid. My ears popped as her beats reached a crescendo, and the dust rose high as we

danced down low. I brushed up against the drummer and felt a tingle wash over my body. She paused, then looked at me with lips parted and her hand stayed.

Her sleeve rode up and the sun glinted off a bracelet high on her right bicep. I blinked and found myself back in the dimly lit corridor, outside that strange apartment. The photo fluttered from my grasp and I hit the ground before it did.

Only my most disturbing dreams tend to follow me and then hang about in the waking world. In this one, a regular source of puzzlement, I traveled uphill in the dark, through steady rain with my face mushed against something soft and sweet-smelling. I couldn't see anyone else, but I knew I wasn't alone. My movement was a strange yet familiar rocking one, and I smiled at the memory.

This woke me, and I opened my eyes to bright sunshine. My host had changed into a maroon turtle-necked sweater, and her hair was tied back. Faded jeans hugged her sturdy thighs and she wore flat-heeled pumps, as well as a worried look.

She'd somehow got me onto the sofa and pushed the coffee table back. It creaked under her weight. There was a swatch of burning herbs in her hand that smelled like dogonyaro leaves mixed with hope. I brushed fingers over my face and encountered nothing. No goosebumps, no rashes, no pustules, no sores.

As if reading my mind, she produced a small mirror. My eyes were still bloodshot, and the tight frizzy halo was crushed against the angles of my head and sleep lines made my face look like a rumpled pillowcase.

She gestured me into a sitting position and offered a glass of what I thought was water. One coughing fit later, we had cleaned all the spit-up cachaça from the floor, and I felt a little firmer on my feet.

“Okay, tell me.” This time, I sipped.

“Mà bìnù. A kì í fí ài-mò-wè mòòkùn.”

“Funny. Now you think I’m a drunk?”

“No. I think you’re strong.”

“Yesterday wrecked me. Or, perhaps I’m losing my mind.”

“Your mind is fine.”

“Seriously, who was that woman in the picture? The one drumming. Is her bracelet like mine?”

“She is a ... friend. As for the bracelet, it is and it isn’t. There is someone you should meet. He has the answers you need.”

“You were doing so well.”

“Tell me, will you be at your stall later?”

“My stall? You know about that?” I put the glass down.

“You know the CRB, don’t you?” She asked.

“Who doesn’t?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Well, I can tell you that the person who wants to meet you is a key member.”

“If you’re playing...”

“I’m not.”

“But what’s in it for you? Are you just showing Nigerian sister-cousin-aunty love? You nod, but I sense you’re not telling me everything.”

She still held the burning incense loosely at her side, so the smoke curled up and obscured her face. I had a coughing fit, and she reached out, but did not touch me.

“Kò sì ídàgbà, lai sì iròrà.” Her voice fell to a whisper.

“Yeah, yeah, no growth without pain. I’ve had pain.” The rum was smooth, her Yorùbá barely tickled.

“Well, this could be the growth part. You’ve seen proof of a connection between us. Your àwùrè is ... important.”

“My what? The bracelet?”

She nodded.

“That’s it?”

“That’s all I can say.”

“Hmmm. If you work for the CRB, then how come all the Ifà and Santeria stuff?”

“You know about those?”

“My first foster mother was an Iyánifá, a Mother of Mysteries.”

“So you know there’s good to be found there.”

“Hey, you have such a sweet deal. Electricity, hot running water, and a permit to cook on your fire escape. I’d do voodoo if it came with half of this.” I was only half-joking.

“It is well.” She half-smiled.

“In which universe is it well?” I hated that phrase and the way it got thrown about.

“Until soon, then?” She smiled, walked over to the door, and held it open.

“Um, there’s one thing.” I squirmed in my seat and squeezed my thighs together.

“What?” But the way her eyes washed over me told me she’d guessed.

“Something’s been shaken loose. I need to change into clean underwear after all, and if the signs and wonders here include a tampon or two, then it would really be well.”

The air was crisp, and I shivered as I stepped onto 2nd Avenue. The aftermath of the Sickness was everywhere, Upper East Side be damned. I realized I hadn't gotten my host's name. Ms. SdB would have to do. I kept an eye on the freaks on top of the low-rise building across from the station. They'd broken open a water tower, and probably pissed at how empty it was, were beating up on a sheet of solar panels. A steady stream of debris, mixed with curse words rained down from the rooftop. I stepped lively, down the middle of the avenue.

A re-purposed Central Park carriage was parked in the bus lane, further down. As with Ms. SdB's building, most of the entrances showed signs of forced entry. I'd had to tiptoe through a mess of glass shards as I left, doubtless a remnant of the initial spree of looting. This meant the smell of decomposition got out, but at least collection crews could get in. This crew manhandled a mound of rolled-up curtains out of the building, with ease. The bundles were black with flies and bones cracked loud as the bodies were forced into the cab. I covered my nose and mouth, cinched my belt tighter, and walked past.

The borrowed jeans were long enough that the cuffs floated above my kicks, but otherwise, they flapped around me. I kept up a brisk pace down 2nd, keeping an eye open for sinkholes. As usual, Health and Housing squads crawled all over the trashed pharmacies and doctor's rooms, but I was sure all the cupboards in this neck of the woods were bare. I knew because I'd looted my fair share.

I always stopped at 59th, to see if the cable supporting the stuck Roosevelt Island tram car had finally snapped. The ground directly underneath it was permanently stained with the leftover DNA of jumpers. Cracks in the asphalt sprouted multicolored weeds, fed by bodily fluids that had soaked into the ground. Today, in addition, an odd pattern of red twinkling lights shone

through the muck. An odd smell reached out to me from the stain, and I backed away quickly. I squinted at the tram car; impossibly, it looked as if it had edged a bit higher up the cable.

Shaking my head dislodged that crazy idea, and I moved on. 57th was as wide and empty as ever, but I got the feeling that someone or something watched me. I whirled, and her lilac glory caught my eye. She stood in front of a boarded-up pet store. Decked out in a Chanel suit, matching pillbox hat and heels, she carried a fancy pocketbook. A mask with ear loops, a throwback to the practice pandemics of my infancy obscured most of her face. Despite her unthreatening appearance, I stayed in the centre and kept my corner-eye on her. She didn't speak, and I'd have kept walking if I hadn't heard a faint yapping.

The smell that instantly hit me was of the flat, greasy empanadas that Security and Social Services distributed out of Grand Central, at the beginning of the Sickness. I'd been traded a few, and they tasted like spoiled chicken folded into soggy cardboard. It was only in hindsight that I realized the empanada care packages overlapped the period when terriers, poodles, and other portable breeds vanished from the streets of New York.

I shivered and then stopped. A line of the carriages rattled past. Most were loaded with shiny bits of wood. However, the last one transported curtain-wrapped mounds and a wake of buzzards glided overhead.

Like the others, it was pulled by a couple of defensive-tackle-looking guys, and the only sound was the slap of their bare feet on asphalt, punctuated by their breathing. Their skin was several shades darker than the first crew I'd seen, and there was blood in their footprints. After they'd passed, I wondered how much longer they had pledged to the gig. And if they would last half that time.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" I approached her with my hands jazzy.

“Yes, young man. Why wouldn’t I be?” Frosty UES accent, back ramrod straight, eyes fixed on the middle distance.

Her hair was grey as girders and each strand looked welded into place.

“Um, I’m not ... ah, okay.”

“My, what an oddly-shaped head you have.”

I took several deep breaths.

“Ma’am, I see you have a dog.”

“Yes, this is Pinkerton Anders Xavier the Third, and we’re out of his favorite dog food.”

The dog was leashed, and it panted softly while hovering around her ankles.

“Huh. I presume you call him Pax, then?”

“We most certainly do not. He answers to Pinkerton.”

“It’s not safe to be out, Ma’am. For you, or for ... Pinkerton. There are folk who may...” I wondered if she was all there, and how I could explain that these days, her Dachshund was viewed less as a pet by some, and more as protein.

“Not safe? For you as well, surely?” She glanced behind me.

“Um, I’m okay but you should both be indoors, especially, um, Pinkerton.”

“Oh, are you with that church then? The Redeeming Bountiful Church, I think it’s called? I love the colorful costumes you people wear for your services. And the music, the dancing, it’s so ethnic...”

I nearly hyperventilated, so I decided to try a slow count to ten.

“I guess I should say, ‘Praise the Lord’ then, or is it ‘Next year in New Ifè’?” Her eyes, above the mask, remained flinty.

I backed up.

“What’s that hymn, the catchy one that everybody sings these days?” She swayed, eyes closed, her arms raised and trembling like spindly tree branches.

I backed up some more.

“Praise the Lord,
O singo, singo,
Praise the Lord.
Praise his holy name,
O singo, singo,
Praise the Lord.”

Her sound was reed-thin, but also sweet and she carried the tune well.

Pinkerton gazed up at her while she swayed, still singing, still reaching. I wanted to turn and run, but I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“You can have Pinkerton.” Her voice was low.

“Excuse me?”

“The dog. You can have the dog.” Her words poured out in a rush, and she offered me the leash.

“Um, what would I do with your dog, Ma’am?”

“Whatever you people do. He isn’t large, but he’s purebred and there’s good meat on his bones. I have his papers if you want.” She rooted around in her pocketbook.

“Ma’am, that’s disgusting. And you need to stop the ‘you people’ shit. It still matters.”

Her peal of laughter echoed off the surrounding walls and made me look over my shoulder.

“Okay, Ma’am. Have a good life.”

“I know you can help me. Please.” She put the papers away and jerked at the leash as Pinky started whining.

“You’d accept help from one of ‘you people’?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything. I’m desperate. Nothing makes sense...”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay, what exactly do you want from me? And please keep the dog.” I crossed my arms.

“Anything you have. This dreadful disease frightens me terribly. My husband ...”

“Yeah, he dissolved in a puddle of goo. That’s what’ll happen to all of you. Unless you trade Episcopalian for Evangelical and accept Cheesos as your personal Lord and Savior.” I stretched out the “Chee” in “Cheesos” and grinned.

She bowed her head, and her shoulders heaved silently.

“Oh, come on. Okay, okay. I have a vial of anointing oil, blessed by the All-Father himself. If you have faith, it’s a guaranteed cure.”

She produced a two-pack of translucent Bic lighters. My eyes widened. They were still wrapped in clingfilm and by some miracle, both looked full of fluid.

“You know the cure is one thing, but being saved is a whole nother, right?” I dug in my backpack and made sure to give her a bottle branded with the Black Jesus.

“Yes, I know.”

“You’ll have to give your skills for an agreed period, or sell everything you own, and donate what you raise to the church?” She blinked and looked down, but not before I saw tears.

“I know.”

”And if all goes well, and you truly are saved, you will never fear the Sickness, but you will end up looking more like me?” I touched my forearm.

She looked up.

Tears rolled into the mask, but her eyes were dark with rage.

“A pleasure doing business with you, Ma’am.” My work done, I handed her the oil and she dropped the lighters into my palm.

“They’ll find another cure, you know. I just have to survive until they do.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I’m sure they will.”

“Don’t say it like that. I happen to know there’s a secret mission to Egypt. The government has sent their best, to find the truth about who built those pyramids. They will help us, just you wait and see.”

My mouth fell open.

“We won’t need your oils, your dances, or your heathenish ways of worshipping. You’ll see.” Her lower lip trembled, and Pinky yapped his blue-blooded doggie ass off.

“Wait, you believe that aliens built the pyramids, and will come save you?”

“It makes more sense than the outlandish story you are all peddling.”

“Goodbye, Ma’am.”

She sniffed.

Pinky panted louder.

“Ma’am, just one thing.” I had to ask.

“Yes?”

“You must know that the Sickness is spread by contact, but only among ... well, among you people. It isn’t airborne. Why the mask?”

Her eyes held mine as she undid one ear loop. A solid-looking line of marble-sized pustules stretched across her jawline. They had reached the yellowing stage, and I fancied I saw them throb. A line of dried fluid tracked from her chin to the inside of the mask, and she winced as she unhooked the other loop.

“Aah. It is well. Peace out, Pinky.” He yapped at that.

I looked again when I’d reached the relative safety of the far side. She held Pinky to her chest with one hand, and the opened bottle of oil up to her nose with the other. He licked at her face excitedly. I shuddered and ran.

I heard Kojo’s familiar laugh, before I saw him. He was cursing out a work crew at the junction of 2nd and 53rd. A heap of rusted shopping trolleys discouraged access, and further down, there was an oddly-shaped pile of boxes lined up against the wall, covered with tarps. His crew was made up of a half-dozen malnourished and barely clothed individuals, male and female, blond through brunette. None bore any signs of the Sickness, but their haunted expressions told me they soon would.

“Hey, Kojo. How body?” Pidgin English is so much sweeter in the mouth.

“My sister. Praise der Lawd, body dey inside clot’. How you sef?” He wore a black CRB-branded tee shirt, and his usual all-over body smile.

“Wetin happen here? Na only you dey supervise all dese fine people?”

“Fine people? For where? Dese people wey no chop anything, but just dey shit anyhowly? You too funny oh!”

“Seriously, wetin happen?”

“No be small ting oh. Dese na de people wey try kidnap our bredahs end seestahs, so dey go fit do experiment on dem. I even hear say dey catch dem wit plenty plenty gun, complete wit’ bullet.”

I glared at the work crew, my sympathy drained.

“See dat one? Na doctah. De other one over there na doctah. Alla dem na doctah.” He jabbed a finger in turn at the empty-eyed workers.

“And na only laborer work dem dey do?”

“Akshually, your church people dey use dem to find one kind DNA sometin’ from the big-big hospitals wey dey dis side. Dem go follow go do that work jis nor.”

“Eh? Which kind DNA wetin wetin be dat?”

He shrugged.

“As I dey look dem, I tink say some of dem done sick, oh.” I lowered my voice.

“Yes oh. In fact some of de work na to carry coffin from here. They go soon sabi say na for dem own burial.” His eyes flicked over the pile of covered boxes, across the way.

I shook my head.

“Why you dey sorry for dem? You no sabi say na dese people wicked pass?”

“But tell me, how you get to dey do overseer?” I had to change the topic.

“Me? Overseer? Na only one overseer dey oh! The All Father, Pastor Ezra Fawole. After him, na God! Na him be God’s anointed! Na him dey covered in the Blood of Cheesos! All de lords temporal and spiritual dey obey am ! Na him be our Alpha and ...”

“Okay, okay. But tell me how you get dis betta work, first,”

He examined his feet and shuffled from one to the other.

“Kojo? Wetin you do oh?”

“My sister, no vex oh. Na condition make crayfish bend.” He smiled.

His work crew sat with their backs to the wall, pretending not to follow our exchange. A couple of them retreated to the other side of the road, sank onto their haunches, and proceeded to pinch off tiny grey pellets that had almost no smell.

“So wetin happen, now?”

He moved closer, then yanked the neckline of his tee shirt down. His skin was an ashy mess; greasy, pitted with black spots and smelled like sorrow. There was a large tattoo of the NY Security and Civil Defense Corps logo healing on his chest. It had a banner with the words “7th Naija Ninja Brigade of Guards,” floating above it. I raised my gaze to meet his abashed grin.

“Na which time you become Naija?”

“My sister, no be like dat. De remaining obroni wey dey run the Civil Defense no sabi anything. I just blow dem small Yoroba and den fiam! Dey register me as Naija. I beg, no put san’ san’ for my garri.”

“How dem take find enough human beings to pack inside complete seven brigades?”

“You know as your people dey too sharp. Na only one brigade dey for this New York, oh. Na de church say make we start wit’ number seven. E be like say dem too like dat number. Or maybe de other six brigades dey for New Ifè?”

“Hmm.”

“You wan’ reach your consulate, abi? I suppose to turn you back but make you ride on. No try 1st Avenue oh! So so under-watta done spoil de road finish. De potholes fit chop school bus.”

“Me kẹ? I no dey try 1st unless na emergency. But why you gree do all this kind high-risk work?”

He gaped.

“Aah, the work wey de Church dey do for de City, abi?” I’d forgotten that Kojo had been trying to parlay his membership of the CRB into the holy grail of a City job, since I’d met him.

“Na only you no sabi de signs and wonders wey de church dey do. Dem tok say for New Ifè, na gold dust una dey use to mix una cement. Na true African power dem dey bring back, de kind one wey dey for Mali, for Songhai, even Ghana before. As for de All-Father, Pastor Ezra? Na true man of God. In fact. No let me start.” He drew breath to do just that.

“Okay, okay. I done hear you. Make I move on.”

“So wetin you want go find for Naija Consulate? You dey look for exit visa, abi?” He stole a glance at me.

“How you take know? And don’t you mean ‘our’ consulate?”

“Heh heh heh. Yes oh. E go tight oh. Plenty plenty footballers from Brazil just land. De church done promise dem Naija passport and help wit’ exit visa, so dey full ground well well.”

“No wahala. I get hookup wit’ somebody wey dey work there.”

“Okay, go wit’ God.”

“Tank you oh. Make you take am easy.” I rubbed the back of my neck.

“Wetin?”

“This video wey they talk say cause dis wahala. You sef done see am?”

“My sister. Awa pippul tok say, ‘Stew wey hot, you no suppose to rush go chop am.’ Me, I dey siddon look.” He snapped his fingers several times.

“True talk, my brother. Next year in New Ifè.” I smiled and pushed off.

Kojo was right. Two blocks away from the Consulate, 2nd was impassable. Bemused, I stared at the double row of wrecked NYPD cruisers, that had been dragged across the avenue. Entry was through a small gap, controlled by the one vehicle with serviceable tires. Most of the crew manning the barricade wore this year's CRB tee shirt, in menacing black. Some were bare-chested and worked with their shirts hanging off their waistbands, the better to show off their Naija Ninjas tats. I recognized a few from the hustle, but they all had the same straight-armed march and stiff-legged walk that discouraged any greetings.

A prickle of red lights, similiar to the glow I'd seen earlier showed up at a few drain covers. I hoped nobody was using radioactive stuff in desperate clean-up efforts and I covered my nose and mouth. The building looked odd, and it took me a while to figure that was because it was the only one with its curtain wall intact.

I had the business card in my fist as I approached and felt a sense of relief when I recognized Tade. Before the Sickness, we'd worked together at a screen-printing shop, then a motorbike courier company, both in Brooklyn. He'd held the door open for me one day at work, and thought I had to throw him a fuck to show my appreciation. I'd disagreed, but we'd parted friends. I think.

"Praise der Lawd." I thought I'd try informal.

"State your business."

"Hmm. Okay, officer. I have an appointment at the Consulate."

“Please step aside.” He pointed, and the access control car was pushed out of the way. A bunch of athletic-looking young men bounded through. They were all dark-skinned, and most wore the retro Super Eagles change strip; the one that looks like a green *adire* print. A few, the ones that brought up the rear, wore the iconic yellow and green Brazil shirt. Their skin was so supple I wanted to touch one of them, if only to taste the soap and the skin cream that I could smell from ten paces.

“*Ẹ sè sah. A dùpè sah.*” They chanted their thanks in practiced Yorùbá. One or two smiled at me and most of them waved. I looked away.

Tade signaled for the entrance to be closed. The car groaned and its tires squeaked as it was pushed back in place.

“Dude, what the hell? Is it an issue for a Nigerian to visit her Consulate now? And Brazilians can breeze in?” My voice got sharper and louder.

“You know these are not normal times. State your business.”

I handed him the card.

He studied it and his jaw tightened. He was one of the tee-shirt-wearing faction, and I nearly fell over when he gave me a warning glance, then reached under his tee and pulled out a walkie-talkie. He stepped away, so I couldn’t hear the other side of his conversation, but his answers were respectful, almost subservient. After a bit of back and forth, he looked me up and down, then responded, “No Sir, it’s a girl.”

My head spun.

When the enormity of the Sickness was made clear, and the rumors that it spread through YouTube gained ground, there was a mad backlash against all things tech. Telephones, tablets, computers, flat screen TVs, and even solar panels had been destroyed en masse and then ritually

burned by mobs. But even that was nothing. After the sky-high mortality rates among white folk was confirmed, a firehose of shit was turned on random fans. Telecoms towers were toppled, server farms, radio, and TV stations were razed, and for a brief period, carrying anything with a chip in it was a lynching offense in many communities.

The cruiser was rolled back, and he waved me through with another fierce stare. I stumbled down 2nd and hadn't gone half a block before I came across the first tie-and-dyed àdìré tee shirt. This one was bright red, and I picked out the CRB logo weaving in and out of its patterns. It was worn by someone on their hands and knees, pulling up tufts of dead weeds.

Others scrubbed at a large stain, spreading it out from the middle of the splat zone at the foot of some random building. Each had a bucket with lemon halves bobbing in it, beside them. The tangy smell felt familiar, evocative, and overpowering. I stopped and breathed deeply. Half a dozen more red-shirted and eager workers came into view, carrying out random acts of cleaning. I flinched when one waved at me, and almost broke into a run when another gave me a thumbs-up.

It got more surreal when I got to the Consulate. There were two gleaming Lincoln Town Cars, in compulsory black, parked in front. All the tires I could see were fully inflated and someone had taken a cleaning substance to them that also smelled of lemons. I relaxed, certain that I was still drunk. I looked away as I walked past the cars, and resisted the urge to try and touch one of them.

There was movement inside the lobby, and courtesy of the newly cleaned windows, I saw a well-built young man at the front desk. He wore a CRB-branded blue, brown, and yellow tee shirt, and it looked as if it stretched for yards across his chest. He laughed as he handed out similar tees to the footballers and they changed into them immediately. I didn't blame them, the

colors were crisp and made mine look like what it was; made using liberated materials, and printed in abandoned bathrooms, on recycled shirts.

The lobby walls bore a series of old posters, the most prominent one advertising a joint exhibition between the Occidental African University and the Met. I recalled the campaign and idly wondered what had happened to the artifacts. If I found a crumb of a part of one, it would take care of my transport fare to Europe, at the very least. Just below the posters was a row of black and white blown-up images. All I could make out was the 32-toothed grin of someone in a grey suit. Block lettering above the figure asked, ‘HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?’

“Can we help you?” The query came from behind me and was strangely accented.

I turned.

Too fast it seemed, as I immediately felt dizzy and lost my balance.

The car doors shut, and two hulking young white men walked toward me. They wore suits, which was unusual enough, but their ruddy pink complexions made them stand out more. They moved with the synchronization of practice and increased their separation as they advanced. When they’d first exited the cars, I was convinced they were twins, but as they approached, I saw that the one closest to me had a badly scarred face, and I couldn’t be sure.

It was all too much.

I arched my back just as Scarface stepped up to me and covered his advancing foot in a splash of green bile. To his credit, he moved back calmly and stood with a thin line of steam climbing from his boot. It felt safer, so I stayed on my hands and knees, and inspected my vomitus. The thin liquid reminded me how hungry I was, and I wondered how they’d get the stains out of the previously spotless grouting. It was a good thing I stayed crouched. Otherwise, I couldn’t have disguised my reaction when the wave of itching hit me.

“Òmùtì kàn ma ni.” This from Scarface, delivered in a voice that sounded like knives being sharpened.

“Orẹ Tade, abi?” I had to strain to hear the other one.

“Olorokori yẹn. Mo ma kọ l’ogbon to ba ya.”

“T’ibi nkọ? Ẹ ka jẹ ko wole?”

“Kogbede buruku yi? Ti o ni agbara kankan? Lai lai.”

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. It seemed practical to let them think they were correct in their assessment, and play the non-Yorùbá speaking, hapless drunk. The irony was delicious. They propped me upright, and practised curling their lips until a couple of red àdìrẹ tees were drafted. One threw himself into cleaning up my mess, and the other escorted me away. I soon felt stronger and figured the smell of lemons must’ve been too much, too soon.

The red-shirt escorting me had his face distorted by a permanent frown. He hissed at me and kept trying to guide me by my elbow. I, in turn, kept trying to smack his hand away but missed every time. I forced him to stop, by sitting down heavily in the middle of 2nd, about half a block away from Tade’s station. My bracelet felt cold, wet and heavy on my wrist and I tried not to look at it.

“What’s going on here?” I gestured at the workers.

“Pastor Ezra has gathered the scattered, but he can also scatter the gathered. Sinners, like you, will be removed like jiga.”

“Eh?”

“Woman, you have the thumb-print of Satan for a head. You are a Jezebel and will be eaten by dogs. Are you even Nigerian? Does anybody in this city of Sodom know your lineage?

The God I worship would never have allowed you in this sanctum.” He crossed himself every time he looked at me, but his eyes always settled back on my boobs.

“Okay, Virgin.”

His nostrils flared but at least he shut up.

I got up and showed him my back. He delivered me to Tade, then hurried away.

“What the fuck?” Tade clicked his walkie-talkie off as I approached, and his face was dark.

“I had a bad reaction to a couple of Yorùbá-speaking farm boys.”

“Farm boys? Those two liberated Òyòtúnjì, almost by themselves. Yeah, that’s right. They saved a bunch of our people and preserved a huge repository of our culture. They’re serious shit.”

“I agree.”

“Tani. Something’s going on here. It feels like a selection process. I’ve put myself forward, but they barely looked at me. Apparently, somebody predicted that there would be a visitor today. Someone they needed. When you showed up, I thought...” He shrugged.

“Predicted? Me? Don’t start with that shit. And who was that freak? He had the nerve to query my antecedents. Is he high?”

“You’re joking, right? Nobody knows where you come from. And as for being high...” He cocked an eyebrow.

“Yeah, okay. But tell me I didn’t imagine those cars.”

“They’re for real. And if you ever want to come back here, you won’t breathe a word to anyone.”

“Dude, you think you can keep this quiet? According to the treaty, the CRB is Brooklyn, and Brooklyn is the CRB. Look around you. This is Manhattan! What’s the game?”

“Everybody knows that what remains of the US needs the Church to survive. But something’s shifted. We’ve noticed some disappearances among our members in the South and the Mid-West. Also there are rumors of a proudly all-white militia forming, with access to buried caches of guns.”

“Yeah, anyone could’ve predicted that. I can’t go back to living with armed, scared people. I need to get out.”

“That could be the Church’s plan as well. But for the moment, they’re dug in. For how long, your guess is as good as mine.”

“Hmm. Can I get that card back?”

“The joker who wrote it was drunk, right? He probably thought you were a boy. He was caught earlier today, trading access to the Consulate for pretty-boy hand jobs.”

I opened my mouth but could think of no fitting response.

He looked mildly surprised. Right now, Ms. SdB’s un-named benefactor was looking like a pretty good option. I just had to get to Smorgasburg in Prospect Park before the end of tonight’s swap meet. There’d be a downtown bus at 42nd Street, but it never left before noon. The barricade had already been rolled back, enough for me to squeeze through, so I stepped to it.

“Wait.” Tade cleared his throat.

I turned.

“Where can I get hold of you? You know, later?”

“I’ll call you.” I pointed at his walkie-talkie, cocked my thumb and little finger, hitched my backpack up, and headed out.

Chapter 2 Àkèekèé ò şé-eẹ dì níbò (A scorpion is not a thing to close one's palms upon.)

The franken-bus was slanted across 2nd as if it had run out of gas. None of its panels were alike or unbruised, most of its windows were boarded over, and it had zero unbroken lights. It possessed the spirit of the downtown M15, though, and I'd ridden on it once or twice for short hops, balanced on the back bumper.

There was a faded advert proclaiming the coming of that joint exhibition, and I could make out the tagline, "Proof that God is from New Ifè." A stressed-looking redhead had just closed the engine bay and was putting his tools away. His shirt was stripped off, and the dime-sized scars spattered across his pale torso looked like patched up bullet-holes.

The bus entrance was doorless, but he was in a cage, sealed off by a seriously scratched Perspex and metal screen and now wore a blue ádiré tee shirt. The cage was plastered with notices inside and out, up to about waist height.

"Hello, I'm ..." I pressed one of the lighters against the screen.

"I know who you are." He ignored my offering.

"Oh yeah?"

"One of those notices used to be about you." He jabbed a finger at the papers.

"You knew I was hitching free rides?"

"Yeah, we used to try and shake you off."

"Used to?"

"Uh-huh. When the high and holy church fixed our biofuel problem, that gave them a lot of juice. We got word to treat you all like the flowers of African-American womanhood that you are." He glanced at the lighter.

“And you understood that to mean; leave her hanging on the bumper?”

“More fun.” He grinned.

It was an infectious grin.

“Good to know.” I tried not to smile back.

“You got my paperwork?”

I tapped the lighter against the perspex.

“Does it work?” He looked disinterested, but his skin was flushed.

“No reason why it shouldn’t.”

He reached beneath the steering wheel and yanked on a lever.

The cage opened with a loud click and I dropped the lighter into his cupped palm. He caressed it and held it to his nose, then breathed deeply. His thumb trembled over the trigger, but he stopped himself from flicking it, and pushed it into a pocket.

“That should make up for the free rides.” He said.

“I was hoping to get a lift back uptown tomorrow. When will you leave the bridge?”

“I’ll figure that out, if we make it there today.”

“Gotcha.” I sat directly behind him.

Looking over his shoulder, I saw a postcard-sized photograph with familiar block lettering, strapped onto his sun visor with rubber bands.

“Who’s that?” I pointed.

He glanced up and shuddered.

“Well?”

“That...” he jerked his chin at it, “... is the devil.”

“Huh?”

“Did you watch the video?”

It took me a moment.

He watched my hand fly to my mouth and then he nodded.

“He’s the guy? The one they say had a broom, flicked some shit at the camera and ta-dah, you get sick?”

“Yep.”

“Where’d you get the picture? And why the fuck is it there? Is it safe?”

“Your bloody, sorry, esteemed church has been handing that print around. If we see the asshole, we’re supposed to make a note of his whereabouts and report it ASAP.”

“And then what?”

“No idea. I intend to run him over if I see his shiny-suited ass. And no, the still picture isn’t harmful. Looking at that YouTube clip is what did me in.”

“I’ve never spoken with; I mean I’ve never met...”

“Yeah, I know. I wouldn’t believe it if it didn’t happen to me.”

“So you going to be in church, come Sunday?”

“I don’t want to ever catch it again, but I can’t afford to be saved. Your eedoopay ceremony is a bitch.”

“Ìdùpé. It means Thanksgiving.” I smiled.

“It means serious cash money, is what it means. If the Indians had your collection bowl at that first Thanksgiving, the settlers would have hopped back on the Mayflower and fucked off back to England.” He laughed.

So did I.

He pulled a clipboard from the door pocket and started checking stuff off.

“Hey, listen, you have an extra copy of that?”

He frowned, then slid a sheet of paper from the bottom of the pile.

Just as he opened his mouth to say something, the first of the workers stepped into the bus. Red scratched at his chin, mouthed the phrase “Be careful,” then returned to his paperwork. I folded the print and stuffed it into my backpack.

More workers trickled in. They all had the pasty complexion of the cured and wore rumpled, used-to-be-white tee shirts. I could smell the public servant on most of them, and they all stared resolutely ahead when they walked past me. The solitary woman in the group slowed down when she entered. She glanced at the space occupied by my backpack, but I shook my head, and she kept walking. Like me, she wore jeans and sneakers, but she topped hers with a no-name baseball cap.

Red heaved himself out of his seat and I retreated into my head as I tried to resolve what I’d seen at the Consulate. The CRB couldn’t hide that tech for long. If they were readying for a war, I needed that exit visa fast.

“Hey, can you help?” Red appeared beside me, and he looked less than pleased.

“What?”

“It’s Tracy. She won’t let me check her. You know, for signs of the shit.” He nodded toward the back of the bus.

“So?”

“To get on this bus, apart from worthies such as yourself, everyone needs a work permit and a pass from Health & Housing.” He lowered his gaze to the clipboard.

“Uh-huh?”

“Even if they say they’ve been saved, I gotta put eyes on them. Just so there’s no new sores or anything.”

“Aah, I see. You have to look at her boobies.”

“Yeah.” He flushed.

“So she won’t show you her tits. What’s the big deal? She looks healthy enough.” I glanced toward the rear.

“If I don’t check her out, any or all these fuckers would rat me out in a second. And apply for my job, the next.”

“So kick her off.”

“I can’t.” His face was shades redder than his hair.

“Aah, I see. You planning on getting with her?”

“Maybe.” He mumbled.

“Well, I can’t have you driving while impaired. What do you want me to do?”

“She knows the deal. Look, don’t touch. Check for evidence of fresh abscesses, bleeding, boils, carbuncles, discoloration, pustules, seeping, ... ” he paused to draw breath ”... sores, spots, swelling, unusual markings, weeping. Even fresh cuts or bruises.”

“Fresh cuts or bruises?” I asked.

“Some wise guys cut themselves, or take a punch, to disguise symptoms.”

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment and shook my head.

All eyes were on me as I walked toward the back of the bus. She sat close to the rear, on the right. As I approached, she took off her baseball cap. Her blonde hair was braided in tight cornrows. I pulled my gaze away from the sprinkling of dandruff that decorated her shoulders.

“Nice corn-fro.” Not true, but I suspected she needed to hear this.

“Thanks.” Her lips were full, and she had a lot of Nina in her voice.

“So, you’ve been saved?”

Her fingers grazed the barely-there round markings on her face, almost lost in her darkening skin.

“Okay, so what am I doing here?” I asked.

“You’re helping me out. Is that too much?”

“No. It isn’t. But can we move things along?”

“Yeah, in a moment. It’s just that I’m tired of the Sickness. I’m tired of this shitty job. I’m tired of the fear. I’m tired of no food. I’m tired of chipped fingernails, and split ends. I’m tired.”

I was silent.

“Most of all, I’m tired of the way his eyes go slack, when he puts them on me, you know?” She said this in a whisper and nodded toward the front of the bus.

I looked over my shoulder.

Red was half in and half out of his seat. He spread his hands at me, palms upward. I smiled but I don’t think he saw that. He sat back, and pulled his cage shut.

“I just wanted someone to look at me, who would be checking for signs of the Sickness. And nothing else.” Her fingers ran down her shirt front.

“We’re all tired, Miss.” I didn’t know what else to say.

Below her neck, her skin was darker than mine.

Close up, it was greasy and thick with dirt. The sour smell of long-unwashed flesh hit me, but nothing could take away from the tantalizing wobble of her breasts. They weren’t entirely symmetrical. One took aim at my crotch, while the other pointed at a lucky guy behind me on my

left. They were sized to fit in your cupped palms, with their nipples rubbing up against your lifelines. Nipples that now turned plum, and unfurled under my gaze.

The bus had gone quiet, so my intake of breath seemed extra loud. She slammed her shirt shut and I looked at her face, then away. I was frozen. The itching started again, from the backs of my thighs, all over my back, to my arms and chest. I was still trying to figure that out, when she opened her shirt again, more slowly this time. Her gaze was open, her shoulders pulled back.

“You’re fine, Miss.” I set my voice to harsh.

Red was blinking like a dodgy light bulb, as I made it to the front of the bus.

“No signs.” I swung back into my seat.

“Uh-huh.” He grunted and started up the engine.

A loud cloud of smoke erupted from the exhaust. As always, the smell evoked fry kitchens, and I was grateful not to be hanging onto the bumper. I tapped on the Perspex to attract his attention, and he leaned back.

“Um, I think if you went and got saved, it could help. You know, with Tracy.”

The trip downtown was agonizingly slow. We cut across town more than once, to find an avenue that was clearer than 2nd, or one we could clear of blockages. The further we progressed, the skinnier the roads became and the more difficult it was to find stretches unstained by jumpers. We came across way too many uncleared carcasses, human and vehicular. Tracy had to walk ahead of the bus with a snow shovel in her hand and a scarf wrapped over her nose. The rest of the work crew were out in front of her, manhandling the broke-down taxis, cars, and occasional

abandoned food carts out of the way. I tried to join in, but we got spread too thin with everyone edging away from me, so I got back on the bus.

Red whispered to me he'd gotten Tracy onto a crew that had to turf wildlife out of City Hall. There's good meat on bobcats apparently, but this was more of a wild-dog trapping gig. At least there'd be barbecue at the end of the day. I wished him luck and he sighed.

Everywhere, well-built white boys pulled carts, carriages, and rickshaws, loaded up with broken up pieces of furniture, or stacked bundles of paper. Right now, these guys were the bottom of the food chain, but they'd have the last laugh in the next tough winter.

The pavements were nearly impassable, cluttered by scattered bits of dead tech. We had to back up more than once when passage was obstructed by toppled over cellphone transmitter tower thingies.

It was still daylight when we got onto Bowery. A lot of the road signage was missing, and I had no idea how we ended up in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge, in front of a boarded-up Jehovah's Witnesses Hall.

"If the night crew can get a batch of clean-ish fuel to me, I'll leave South Ferry at about lunchtime." Red flipped through his clipboard.

I waved.

The bus rattled on.

I heaved my backpack up, nodded at Tracy, and set my sights headed toward Pace University.

"Wait." She stretched out to touch my arm.

"Huh?" I backed up out of reach.

"There's something you should see."

My eyebrow went up a notch.

“It’s close by. And it’s important. Please.” She chewed at her lip.

The last time somebody asked to show me something, I’d ended up passed out. But Ms. SdB’s hookup was still in play, so I put on my “no guts, no glory” pants. Besides, the sun said I had a couple of hours before the bridge would be locked down.

I waved her in front of me. My neck hurt from checking out the rooftops, as well as the many broken windows. She seemed used to this part of town, and when we reached the hulking shell of City Hall, she didn’t break stride. Her booty was all Black and I wondered if she knew any words or prayers in Yorùbá.

A dull itch spread from the small of my back and was soon quite painful. I followed Tracy blindly and saw spots in front of my eyes if I walked too fast. If I slowed down, flashing lights slid around the inner edges of my eyelids. I remembered I hadn’t had anything to eat all day and wasn’t surprised when I started to see the tiny red pinpricks, in my peripheral vision. I was sweating profusely now and would have keeled over if Tracy hadn’t finally noticed.

“Woah. You look like shit.” She dug into her breast pocket.

“Thanks. I just need a break.”

“You need one of these.” She waved a small, neatly wrapped spliff at me.

I could have kissed her.

“I don’t have a light, though.” She looked at me.

“I do.”

It turned out we were already at the site she’d been so keen for me to see, the African Burial Ground. The smoke was mystical. The itching didn’t go away immediately, but degraded first to goosebumps, then a mild feathering. My eyes were closed, and my mind opened. There, I

saw again, the curved arch of a doorway in the crumbling building. I was distracted by a whispered message, carried on the air that lifted me. I tried to feel the words, but they were overwhelmed by a screeching sound, counterpointed by a slow flapping.

I shook my head and re-engaged my eyesight, just as a dark shape crossed the road in front of the African Burial Ground. We were suddenly in a shifting shadow, and I looked up to see a huge bird floating above us in a tight circle. I blinked, and it was gone. Tracy and I were seated, cross-legged on a bench. I pinched my smoke out and tucked the remains away, together with the lighter.

“That was almost worth the day I’ve had. Where’d you get the stuff?” I rotated my bracelet, and it felt warm and light on my wrist.

“There’s this guy who works with the Church. Huge. Tats like a soccer player. Some a bit like yours. I salvage computer parts for him, mostly from downtown and he pays me in bud. He has rooms full of recovered solar panels in half of these buildings. No idea what he’s going to do with them, though.”

“Huh? Tats? Me?” She was more wasted than I was, then.

“Yeah, and yours were so pretty...” She snickered.

“Huh. Okay. What’s the stuff called?”

“I think he mentioned kalakuta.”

“Figures. So no City Hall detail, then?”

“Only after I’ve chucked some high-end servers out of a window and picked its processors out of the wreckage.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“It is. But that wasn’t what I wanted to show you. The smoke was because you needed a pick-me-up.”

“So?”

“Look.” She gestured.

I looked.

The floor was covered in a thick bed of those blinking red lights. They looked wonderful and smelled like starlight if it was mixed with fresh-brewed coffee. She was pointing at a curved granite wall at the back of the burial plot, though. It was covered in letters, notes, cards, and a fair amount of graffiti. I saw a hint of some strange symbols poking out beneath the overload of messages.

But that was just the start. The fence was also loaded with paper offerings. Many had fallen off, a few were protected by Saran wrap, and some were scribbled onto plastic shopping bags. There must have been thousands of them, layered on each other.

I walked over to the fence and picked one up. The smudged writing was still decipherable as the single word ‘PLEASE.’

“Who wrote these?”

“The sick, then the saved.”

“All white folk?”

“That’s who was sick. That’s who had to be saved.”

“And they all wrote the same thing?”

“The earlier notes, the ones papered over, all read ‘Sorry.’”

“Now they’re sorry?”

“The ones that aren’t sorry, the ones that won’t consider being saved by your church because of what came with it...,” she pointed at the back of her forearm, “...those are the ones you should be worried about, not me.”

“Hey, listen...” I remembered Kojo’s warning, and Tade’s words.

“What?”

“Did you ever hear of anyone ... you know, who still has guns?”

She looked away, took a drag of her roach, and offered it to me, pinched between thumb and forefinger. I leaned over and sucked the life out of it.

Tracy needed to talk. I needed to listen. It turned out that like me, she’d come up through the foster system. Unlike me, she’d been infected by the Sickness. Like me, she’d stayed with families headed by old Black woman in the city, who infected her with a love of R&B, Soul, Jazz, Reggae, and plenty of African music. Unlike me, she found her way to Country & Western. Like me, finding a birth parent was the only item on her bucket list. Unlike me, she didn’t fear a white backlash.

The setting sun tapped me on the shoulder and Tracy said something about some parts she had to track down.

“You’ll be okay out here?” I got up and stretched.

“No worries. I’ll join the others at City Hall soon. There’ll be a bunch of us, so it should be safe to crash there.” She shuffled her feet.

We leaned in, started, then stopped a clumsy attempt at a hug, and grazed clenched fists instead. I hiked my backpack up and we drifted away from each other.

“Hey!” I called out.

“What?”

“Give Red a chance.”

“Red?” She looked puzzled.

“Your bus driver. He wants your Black ass.” I giggled.

So did she, and I moved to step away.

“Wait.” She hesitated.

I waited.

“If I was looking for assholes with an axe to grind, I wouldn’t look among the sick or the vulnerable. I’d start with some of the saved. Maybe the ones that wheel stuff all over town. You can move a lot of guns in those things.” Then she turned and was gone.

I wondered if it was a theory or a hint as I listened to her steps and quickened mine. My backpack suddenly felt quite heavy. The only intact road sign I’d seen since crossing 12th Street was for “Black Lives Matter Boulevard.” I now remembered how it was peppered with holes, the size and spread of buckshot.

I crossed the empty intersection and walked up onto the bridge. This stretch was usually lined with folk looking to make last-minute deals. Folk who couldn’t or wouldn’t go into Brooklyn. The crowd would be friendly, sometimes frisky, and at the most, boisterous. Today it was different.

The discarded oil drums used at the checkpoints were still lined up at the bridge’s entrance, but the drummers that usually danced around them were not. Flames licked out of the

battered metal containers, sending shadows flickering over the tower and the cables that crisscrossed alongside the walkway. The Manhattan Bridge looked as if someone had cranked it closer and smoke hung over burnt-out vehicles, scattered at intervals along its span.

The sprinkling of people on the walkway ignored my greetings. All of them rocked pulled-up hoodies and they followed me with their eyes as I hugged the middle of the path. The only sounds were the shuffling of their feet and a round of hacking coughs.

After I'd passed, a murmuring rose. I fought the urge to turn around. The guys at the bridge checkpoint wore CRB-branded black tee shirts and insisted on a search. I tried to protest but could've been talking to myself. A lanky guy with three long tribal scars on each cheek rifled through my bag and gave me a cursory pat-down.

"Praise der Lawd."

"Alleluyah." His response was automatic, but he returned my bag without looking in the inner pockets.

"What's up with the locals?"

"They've found their tipping point."

"And that was?"

"Some of the saved among them, the ones that didn't like their new sun-tans, got the idea they could go buy some skin-lightening creams in Mexico."

"And they couldn't find any?"

"Worse. The Mexicans have finished the border wall. It's fucking insurmountable. Gun towers and all. Shot their asses off. Those there, are the survivors."

"Aah. That must have stung."

"Yeah. Look." He nodded.

A few slats had been nailed together lengthwise to form a clumsy, fiery statement. Rags, dipped in something smelly were wrapped around the unwieldy wooden pole and now burned smokily. A group of hoodies had been trying to stand this display up. For some reason, that didn't work out well. They all jumped back, and the flaming length of wood hit the ground. Some of them wore old ear-loop masks, and I shuddered at the sight.

"What was that about?" I asked Marks.

"Look. Carefully." This time he pointed.

There was another, shorter slat on the ground, a few steps away from the longer, burnt-out assembly.

It was also blackened and still smoking.

"It was a cross, a burning cross?" I touched my throat.

Marks nodded.

"Can they do that?"

He waved me away.

The rest of the Ninjas had retreated to the concrete section of the pedestrian walkway. They stared beyond me, across the short divide, at the small crowd gathered around the failed cross burning. I continued my walk toward Brooklyn. My mind was jumbled by long-discarded memories and in a few surreal moments, my need for that exit visa had moved from urgent to critical.

I got to the column where the walkway split in two and noticed several more members of the 7th. They carried clubs or pieces of wood, some carved in the style of ceremonial runkus. All but one of them acted as if I was invisible; the last in the sequence snarled at me to carry that my oblong head away.

I needed no encouragement.

Nothing would counter my trembling. I felt as if children that I might or might not have, were already scarred by the memories of that attempt at intimidation. The walkway returned to a single path on the Brooklyn side and along its edges, there were several cool drumming circles and one mad-good one. It featured sabar drummers, and every color of boubou under the sun was represented, among the dancers. It felt good to watch the women and then to lose myself in the music.

Across the way, the WELCOME sign reflected the last droplets of sunlight. It balanced above the old Ice Cream factory, now the site of the busiest dye pits in Brooklyn. The water's edge was lit up by a massive bonfire, and its flickering reds and oranges were reflected in the ribbons of color drained into the river. At the jetty, large bales were unloaded from a skiff with an outboard motor. Somebody yelled up at me in high-pitched Wolof, and I yelled back in Yorùbá. I was soaked, and my legs hurt.

"It is well," I whispered, with the beginnings of a smile on my face.

Once off the bridge, I took the steps down into Dumbo and after I hit Centre Street, my feet knew the way. Smorgasburg was packed. I stopped at a farm produce stall at the entrance into Prospect Park and swapped a Black Jesus tee shirt for an orange, two tomatoes, and a cup of potato vodka. I inhaled the orange, skin, and all, as I set up my stall among the herbalists. The tomatoes were brown and wrinkled so I ate them without looking. I chased my meal with a swig of vodka. It burned beautifully. The rest of it, sipped, was my dessert.

Business was good, and I traded most of my tee shirts and all the anointing oil. Many of my customers came to gawk; I didn't mind, they usually bought something to claim a piece of me. In exchange, I had a fortune in scrip which would move me closer to my departure.

The crowd was evenly mixed between the immune and the saved. The latter were all shades, but I couldn't tell the difference between them and the born Black anymore. I'd met one of the first guys to do an *idùpé*, long after he got his full anointing. He was originally from Connecticut, but now he could dance like Michael Jackson on crack. He'd become so dark, his nickname in the community was "Yellow."

I was just cursing Ms. SdB mentally, when the twins appeared in front of my stall. They slowed their roll when they saw me and exchanged a glance. Someone hung back behind them, dressed in a muted grey *bùbá* and *șòkòtò*. He looked middle-aged but didn't have a hair on his head. Shorter than me, his wobbly midsection stretched the material of his top. His footsteps were taken with care, as if he counted them out and created the effect of someone walking on a pre-ordained, dotted line.

Our eyes met and his "*Ọmọ Ìyá?*" brought a hitch to my throat. No one else in that crowded swap meet was likely to call me "Child of my Mother." My ears tingled a bit but not unpleasantly. I came around from behind my stall, and my stride firmed up as I entered his orbit.

I recognized the crest on his brushed gunmetal cuff links and the fat signet ring just as I clasped his hand in both of mine. My first thought was of the softness of his hands, and my second was to thank every deity I knew that I'd had that wash, earlier. My next thought overtook the others, as the visual translation of the insignia registered in my brain. It was that of the high holy Pastor Ezra Ikùjenyò Fawọle, Founder and All-Father of my home country's most recognizable export, the Church of the Redeemer's Bounty. I was holding onto his son.

"My name is Yò̀mì, what's yours?" He had offered his first name, and I tried to sound it out, but it was too heavy for my mouth. I recalled his "Prince" nickname, and my brain released the words, but they came out as, "Praise der Lawd. Yes, Pree ... sorry, yes Sir. My name is Tani, and yes, Sir."

"Alleluyah! Aaah, you know that name?" His eyebrows knitted, and he tried to retrieve his hand.

"Sorry, Sir. I mean no disrespect."

"No wahala. We are one, and you are more than this place," he stopped pulling away, and continued, in a whisper, "my father has died."

I stepped back and dropped his hand.

I tried to compute what could have kept him here, while his place as the all-new All-Father waited. Another part of my mind wondered if I could ask him to sign a few tee shirts.

"Toward the All-Father's home call, Sir." I wrenched my bracelet off and bowed as I offered it to him two-handed.

He was quiet, and I glanced up to catch the look of awe on his face as he studied the worn lettering on my gift. The gasp from Taiwo and Kẹ́hinde was as unexplained as their matched backward step. They looked sheepish when they resumed their initial position, and I felt the burn of their gazes from behind their sunglasses.

"You're a..." He caught himself.

I had no idea what he meant, but it seemed wise to nod, so I did.

"This is too much." His voice was choked, but he slipped the bracelet into his bùbá pocket.

"Would you like to go home?"

My eyes were wet when I breathed again. Without looking, he stuck an empty palm in the direction of the twins. A black, shiny walkie-talkie handset was placed in it. I left my takings on the stall and didn't think, even for one moment, of returning to my bed-sit.

The town car was super-quiet and didn't smell of cooking oil. Yòmi and I sat in the rear, and Scarface drove without his sunglasses but with a renewed grumpiness. There was a series of checkpoints on the lower level of the bridge, but we barely slowed down for any of them. A dizzying number of twists and turns later, I was hopelessly lost. We continued at speed, swerving around obstacles I couldn't see. Scarface occasionally relayed messages he received over the walkie-talkie.

"Um, where are we going?" My high-pitched tone told all.

Scarface glanced at me with his forefinger to his lips.

"We will talk later." Yòmi patted my arm.

I grimaced. Then I sat on my hands.

I got my bearings again when we were on the FDR. We traveled north and were on 2nd for a long stretch.

"Should we proceed? Over." I recognized the other twin's voice.

"Sir?" Scarface held his handset up and cocked his head at Yòmi.

"There is no need to let anyone know about the grace of God shining on us today. Inform your brother." Yòmi's hand had been in his búbá pocket since we'd left Brooklyn.

"Yes sir." Scarface replied.

“And we will stick together. Our ... uptown cousins should have a response for us tonight, and there is no time to waste in discussing next steps.” Yòmi continued.

“We are a go. Plus, this evening’s development is need to know. Over.” Scarface clicked the call off. I smiled, then leaned back and enjoyed being in a car. I knew there were fewer sinkholes uptown, and if we stayed on the avenues, obstructions weren’t a major issue. Still, my butthole never really unclenched.

I recognized the 86th Street transverse when Central Park appeared on our left. Fires blazed on the elevated spots, and little grey ghosts drifted around them. We turned onto Adam Clayton Powell, and I relaxed. At a certain level, Harlem was home, and if there was an alternate base for the church here, that made a lot of sense. Scarface had switched his headlights off. It was dark and empty, so we knew we were being watched.

We turned onto 135th and pulled up in front of the YMCA. Scarface found a gap, pulled an aggressive U-turn, and we ended up almost in front of the Schomburg. I peered through the rear windscreen and made out his brother’s bulky figure, standing across the street and lengths behind us, in front of the iconic brick building. The trunk of his car popped open, then someone got into a rear passenger seat. I turned away and after a tense few minutes, it felt like sunrise when the other vehicle pulled up behind us and flashed its lights. Scarface took off.

“Ask how the meeting went?” Yòmi said.

“Any update? Over.” Scarface growled.

“It seems the local churches want more time. Over.” Unscarred-face-guy responded.

Yòmi shook his head and glowered as he returned his right hand to his pocket.

The Angelika on 3rd was a welcome sight. From there it was a short hop back to the Consulate. We drove up a few parking levels and Scarface let us out next to a set of elevators.

His brother exited the other car, dragged a cable from the trunk, and walked it to a set of power points. His car doors stayed shut.

I'd somehow remembered to bring my backpack along. Scarface walked us to the elevators and I felt warmth from the floor, through my sneakers. I opened my mouth to ask if anyone else saw the red spots that I did, then closed it. I didn't want to be shushed again.

The elevator door opened to reveal a picture of Pastor Ezra smiling beatifically out at us from the facing wall. Yòmi entered and turned his back to the poster. The rest of us stood sideways-on, and I sneaked glances at it. Pastor Ezra's eyes looked sad.

I rubbed the back of my bare left wrist. It throbbed, and I realized I might have hurt it when I yanked the bracelet off. Yòmi noticed, took my hand in his, and manipulated it, looking at me to see if it hurt. I tried not to, but I grimaced.

"Looks like a sprain. I thank you, and the Church thanks you. You have more than made up for the setback in today's outreach." He smiled, but his eyes were on the back of my arm.

Just as it got uncomfortable, I noticed he'd gently turned my hand over and was studying my inner arm. Instinctively, I pulled my hand back but did it too sharply and let out a gasp of pain. He looked away; I thought in embarrassment. Then I saw his nostrils flare.

"I apologize. I am no doctor, but we have one we can call. She will come up to your suite shortly to have a look at that." I strained to hear him.

I muttered my thanks while the elevator car moved smoothly upward. The smell of weed was stronger in the enclosed space. I had brief bouts of dizziness, and my limbs felt as if they were being worked by a drunk puppeteer. I wasn't itching, but someone or something unseen whispered nonsense words to me while flicking at my skin with the light touch of their fingernails. I cursed the vodka but wished I had more.

I tried not to think about what I'd have to do to deserve a suite and wondered how gummy it would be, in the notoriously down-market Consulate. The doors opened into a corridor that was long, cool, and carpeted, and the Black Jesus-inspired CRB logo was everywhere.

Only one of the many doors that littered the hallway had a working light above it. Unscarred-face-guy walked ahead, opened it with a keycard, then reached in and took the lock off its latch. I'd stepped out of the elevator and hesitated in the corridor, as he re-entered the car. Before I could say a word, the All Father-to-be said, "Get some rest; tomorrow is Wednesday, it will be busy if we are to head home soon." And the elevator doors closed.

Chapter 3 Ọ̀nà kan ò wọ ọ̀jà (It is not only one road that leads to the market.)

The room was sweet. It had windows that offered a panoramic view of the East River's blackness. The bathroom was bigger than my bedsit, and the terrycloth robe swallowed me whole. A bundle of chewing sticks sat in the tooth mug, and the familiar licorice taste made me smile. I nearly drowned in the bathtub. That would've been the definitive happy ending; in my world, unlimited hot water was better than sex. My hangover slowly receded, and if it threatened to come back, I simply opened the hot water tap. I left the bathtub only when I heard someone knock.

It turned out that food was part of the deal. I barely registered the smiley young lady who brought in a historic meal; mounds of freshly pounded yam, dotted with those tiny wood chips that told of its being created in a traditional mortar. Wrapped in leaves, it was accompanied by vegetable stew clogged with chunks of smoked fish and clumps of crushed melon seeds. My long-dormant taste buds stood up and cheered.

I tugged out a fluffy bolus, and muscle memory rolled it into a ball, then my thumb dug a hollow, in which to insert a pinch of stew. It took a physical effort to keep it trembling in my hand, while I gave thanks to Olódùmarè and all the òrìṣàs that had brought me to this moment. Part of my mind registered the sharp salty taste that made me picture sweat dripping into the mortar, from the forehead of whoever was handling the pestle. I ate faster. By the time I drew breath, the food was gone.

There was real, honest-to-God iced water, served in a jug with tinkling, clear cubes. It had no color, smell, surface scum or chewiness. In other words, it probably wasn't harvested from abandoned toilet cisterns. It tasted better than the vodka.

Afterward, my stomach was a hard knot. I tried to walk it off by doing laps of the room, but I think I managed one, before I tottered into the bathroom. The mirror showed my face and hands, layered with oil. I eyed the porcelain throne but willed myself to hang onto the meal. Just for the hell of it, I tried to figure out the shower controls, but I was interrupted by another knock at the door.

She wore a crisp white coat and had a stethoscope dangling from her neck. She was cute and had oversized “I’m a Doctor” glasses on. Her eyes widened slightly as she took in the debris of my meal, and the size of the room. She looked away quickly, but not before her smile thinned out and then disappeared.

“Hello, I’m the doctor. I understand you hurt your wrist?”

“Um, yes.”

Her examination was efficient, and she applied a dab of a balm called Aboniki, and then a strap. The cream burned like fire, before it turned ice cold and my wrist was supple again. I tried to engage with her, but she pursed her lips and shook her head at my every query.

As she left, two others came in. One, an unctuous fellow from the Consular Department who wore an ankara bùbá and sòkòtò, dotted with images of Pastor Ezra. He had a bulky case with him but dropped it to wring his hands, bow, and feed me flattery even before I’d let him in properly. The other was a pasty-faced blonde State Department official in a creased blue suit, and he held a stacked clipboard in one hand. His free hand would drift to the penny-shaped blotches on his face, then stop, only to repeat the motion.

Consular-guy oohed and aahed at everything, leered at me when he thought I wasn’t looking and showed off his shiny new tablet PC, as if he’d designed and built it himself. I flinched at the sight of it, but got over my aversion, fast. He pulled up a form on the device, and

filled it out by tapping one-fingered. After a bit of this, he raised it, then blinded me with the flash. He fiddled a little more, then handed it to me. I bit the inside of my cheek. The documents were passport and exit visa application forms. The picture was regulation passport-photo awful. I looked over the information and frowned when I realized he got my height and weight details correctly. I nodded.

His case turned out to be a portable passport booklet printer. He plugged it in, and the smell of burning plastic filled the room. While he did his thing, State Department-guy shuffled papers and practiced ways of clearing his throat. I had to sign something confirming I had no outstanding arrest warrants, bonds, debt, liens, or parking tickets. I raised my eyebrows at the latter and mentally crossed my fingers behind my back and signed “Burna Girl” in squiggly writing, everywhere he pointed.

My passport, with the departure permit inserted, felt warm, real, and solid in my hand. Short of breath, and of words, I goofed by asking what was next.

“Praise de ever-living, fayah-breathing God!”

“By virtue of the agreement signed between the City of New York and...”

“Praise der Lawd...”

“If there’s ever anything the State Department can do, to facilitate your next visit ...”

“Please sign here for your new passport, Aunty.”

“This is an evaluation form for you to fill out, detailing how happy or not you were with the service you received today.”

“I hope you like de room?”

“I’ll just insert your departure permit in your new passport...”

“You be fine woman Aunty; I have one cousin I fit introduce you to.”

“I wonder if...”

“I fit find you Star beer if you need, Aunty.”

I pushed them both out, then danced until I got a stitch. Then I lay on the bed, breathing heavily, and kissed the departure permit page, in between burps.

...

It was ultra-dark when I was startled awake. My headache had returned and brought with it serious drymouth. The dream faded fast, taking with it the slow flap of a bird’s wings, and the smell of rain on a dusty road shared with fuzzy shapes.

My fingers tingled into life, so I peeled off the strap. I sniffed at my wrist, and smiled at the smell of eucalyptus. It felt fine but looked naked. I encircled it with the forefinger and thumb of my right hand, but it wasn’t the same.

Dousing my face with cold water helped. Then, for the briefest of moments, I felt the thump of a bass line and realized the sounds of a party had woken me. I dumped the strap, turned my underwear and socks inside out, swapped out a fortune in feminine hygiene products then dressed quickly.

I left my door off the latch and stepped into a drafty corridor. The floor was quiet and only had emergency lighting on. I couldn’t work the elevator, so I headed to the stairs. The music hadn’t come back, but the sweet smell of weed took over and pulled me down the flights. I progressed down the landings, and the aroma got bigger and brighter as I descended.

An insistent counterpoint of murmurs, bracketed by the occasional yelp floated up to meet me. Moving more cautiously turned out to be a good idea. Otherwise, I’d have stepped into

the noisiest and most energetic threesome that existed outside of cinema. I peered around the wall column and my eyes adjusted to the sight of a heavily tattooed torso draped lengthwise, taking up an impressive number of the lower steps.

One loudly enthusiastic young lady was on the bottom landing, his hands dug into her impressive backside, which hovered above his lap. She faced away from him, with her skirt around her waist, and did her best to keep up with the music. Another young lady, less weighed down by clothing, was perched higher up the steps. Her thighs rested on his upper arms, and she ground her hips rhythmically into his face. Her arms were stretched out as if in prayer, and her unpainted fingertips almost touched my sneakers. She stared past me with blank eyes and beat on the steps between strokes, while she called upon the òrìṣàs of creation and of thunder.

I couldn't help appreciating that of the two ladies, she was much more in sync with the bassline. I drew back into the shadows, again breathed deep of the second-hand smoke, and laughed to myself.

My headache had gone.

...

I knew not to look but looked anyway. The walls here were greasy, streaked with smudged palm prints. It looked and smelled like the Consulate of old. Rhythmic grunting, the sweaty slap of bodies, and a muffled slurping drowned out the party sounds. Someone must have opened a door just then, as the sounds of the Femi Kuti's "*Beng Beng*" reached out to us. The lyrics made me smile even more.

As I pondered my next steps, I was distracted by a photograph on the wall opposite me. A mess of dead insects and their eggs that had found their way behind the scratched plastic covering. None of that took away from the stunning beauty of the scene, which was of large rock formations, extending out of lush tropical forest.

I couldn't have looked at the image for more than a few moments, but I felt as if I'd been walking that bush for days. The smell of cowshit, rain and wet earth filled my nostrils, and warm sweat covered me. A stream bubbled close by, almost drowning out the sound of an infant cooing.

I screwed my eyes shut tight and opened them again to that grimy stairwell, with only the smell of mildewed carpeting and the sounds of sex for company. I poked the photograph with a finger and traced out the lettering in the label, stuck askew and off-center on the print's lower border. It proclaimed the scene to be of "Rock formation near Òkèmaalù, Òşùn State."

Meanwhile, things on the steps below me progressed to a disjointed conclusion, with both ladies remonstrating loudly, in Yorùbá. Unfortunately for them, and with the worst timing, the main attraction called a quick time out, apparently so he could cough up some hairs. I took that as my cue and tiptoed around and over scattered limbs. The ladies were not amused by the pause, but even less by my presence. Both froze in place, looked at, then beyond me.

"Enjoy the show?" The smile in his voice belied his sarcasm.

I should've kept walking.

But I stopped, looked back, and wagged my hand, palm down, and offered up a "meh" face. He swiped at his mouth with the back of his hand and showed off a dense coat of tattoos on his arms and upper body. His partners had recovered themselves somewhat and one was now seated on the lowest step, posed between his legs with her arms resting throne-like, on his thighs.

She was the prettier of the two, knew it, and protected his modesty with no thought for her own. I couldn't see much of the other, the one who'd been feeding him the breakfast of champions. She hid behind his broad back while she felt on the steps around her for some lost item. The ladies conversed in Yorùbá, the effect of which nudged me toward the exit, but he was still enjoying himself.

"Would you kindly pass that?" He plucked something off his tongue, examined it, then flicked it away.

I raised an eyebrow and he pointed to the pair of panties that had somehow ended up on the doorknob I was almost touching. I picked it up with two fingers, wrinkled my nose and floated it at him. He chuckled as he caught it. The pretty young lady reached for the panties, but he wiped his face with them first, before he pushed her forward then scrubbed at his crotch. I shook my head and left them.

The passage was empty, but the muffled bassline led me across the corridor to the party room. Lucky Dube's "*Different Colors*" broke out just as I entered. The kitchenette, with its slimline countertop covered with half-empty bottles and plastic cups seemed like a logical first stop.

It was more a self-contained apartment than my hotel-style room, and the combined living and dining areas had been co-opted into a dance floor. It wasn't huge, but it coped handily with the three or four revelers, all about my age, dub-stepping on it. A few mismatched chairs had been pushed to the corners of the room and were loaded with outerwear and a few shoes. A disembodied speaker sat on the coffee table, which had been moved to a corner.

Conversation stopped as I entered, although the music didn't. The looks were more curious than welcoming, and my ears tingled when discussion welled up again. The itching seemed much less vicious than usual, but the half-empty bottle of vodka that I'd located probably helped keep things that way.

There were more prints on the walls, from scenes of South-West Nigeria. I tried not to look at them. Between the secondhand smoke and the vodka however, I found myself singing along to the Dube and swaying in front of the nearest frame, a scene of a sunlit forest grove.

I scanned the room to try and figure out who was smoking but I was pulled back into the photograph by a rhythmic chanting that escaped from underneath the rustling of leaves. Vertigo was moments away when someone shoved a broad, pink palm at me. I recalled where his hands had been, so I nodded instead, and tipped the bottle at him.

"Hello again," he said and took the bottle from my grasp.

I grabbed it back from him, but only after he'd taken a swig.

"I'm Bẹkọ," he offered, "Bẹni-Bẹkọ if you like. Who're you?"

I grunted and made a point of wiping the bottle on my sleeve before taking a delicate sip.

"After losing twelve kids in infancy, my parents weren't sure if I'd stay, hence the name. Which I guess you know, means 'It is, it isn't.'" His eyes flicked at my head, but he got points for not saying a word.

I grunted again and raised the bottle.

"Where did you come from? Anyone else with you?" He tried to appear casual but failed.

I smiled and shrugged.

Pretty and Not-So-Pretty sent me steady beams of stink-eye from the dance floor, and I raised the bottle in salute to them both, before taking a longer sip. He scratched at his arms a few

times and I recognized he had been doing this since we'd been in conversation. My pulse quickened.

"Tani." I said.

"That's ... a question, not a name."

"So's yours."

"Are you one of...?" He narrowed his eyes.

When in doubt, I wait questions out.

"Okay, good to keep your cards close. But I meant - who are you to Yòmi?" He'd turned his back to the room and spoke for my ears alone.

"You go first." I crossed my arms over my chest, looked up at him and resolved not to back up.

"Okay. What do you want to know?"

"How come this place ... works?"

"How do you mean?" He knew exactly how I meant, his smirk told me he enjoyed knowing more than me.

"You know. Electricity? Hot running water? People ... cleaning? Cars? I remember when the Consulate staff would move their one working bulb between light fittings, taking it from room to room. But now? The ... the booze, the ... food, the ... the everything?"

"Aah. That's what happens when you serve a living God."

"Seriously?"

"Aah, okay. It took a shitload of work, and yes, you're welcome."

"You did this?"

“Let’s just say, I’m the Lead in the Consulate Restoration Project. And I’m very resourceful.” His chest puffed out.

“What does that mean?”

“We salvaged some geothermal heat pumps from some forward-thinking citizen’s homes before they could be scrapped. Do you want to know how we powered them?”

“Salvaged. Huh. Stole, you mean?”

“They might’ve been destroyed, like every bit of tech in the city. That what you want? At least we have hot water and heating...”

“And I guess you power them with DC generators, also salvaged?” I raised both eyebrows.

He stared at me, and I could hear his muscles going rigid.

“Don’t look so shocked. How long do you think you could keep something like this quiet? There isn’t a working toaster in all the other boroughs, and you’re jollofing like this?”.

“We’re keeping it close.” He mumbled.

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“Well, it won’t be forever...” He caught himself, smiled and looked away.

“What does that mean?”

“Your turn. I knew Yòmi expected someone, but I thought it was a guy. Who’re you in the zoo?”

I kept my face blank, while I pondered the answer to that question.

“We’re all important to the CRB,” he pointed around the room. “She’s running the biggest stem cell recovery project in the world right now. That guy is retrieving most of the New York Public Library inventory from secure locations, spread out all over the city so we can take

them home. She's helping me to create a Network Operations Centre for the one of the major Ifá temples at home. I could go on ..."

"Yeah, don't. Tell me though, how does Ifá gel with your church duties?."

"Stick with me and you'll figure it out."

I drained the bottle, then placed it on the nearest surface.

"As I was saying, we are the brains trust and will be back home soon. We'll need trustworthy people in our corners." He spoke fast.

"Me in your corner, or you in mine?"

"This isn't the time for games. Let me show you something." He reached into a voluminous side pocket and retrieved a tablet PC.

Its screen was mid-sized but viewed sideways, the device was as thick as a Russian novel.

"What the fuck?" Instinct made me retreat.

"Take it easy. It's safe. Just check this out." He drew closer, so I alone could see.

The screen was littered with icons. After opening a music app, he cranked the volume up, then switched to one called 'Òdú Ifá 1024'. It had a bird-like figure as its icon. His eyes shone and his smile was like a child's, on Christmas Day. After fiddling through a bunch of options, he settled on a drop-down calendar. I couldn't see the date he selected but it dissolved into an animation featuring an iyèròsùn, ibò, opèlè, and opón ifá. I kept my face blank, but I couldn't control my shiver as the page was covered with a cloud of zeroes and ones, which separated to reveal a clear pattern.

The Two Hundred and Fifty-Six Òdú of Ifá.

"The Holy Òdú on an app? Yay, I'm so impressed." I gave him a wobbly thumbs-up.

“I had guessed you would know about Ifà. Look again.”

I’d learned enough from the first of my stream of foster mothers to recognize the artifacts used for Ifà divination. However, the number of sections in the texts unfolding on the screen was significantly more than I was used to. I reached for the tablet, but he easily kept it out of my grasp, then he shut it down. I had lost count of the numbers of verses, or èsè’s that scrolled up the screen. Their running total clicked way past the four thousand or so that I expected, and had just surpassed ten thousand, when the still-populating screen went blank.

“Wait. What?”

“Impressed now?”

“Mos def.” I nodded.

“It’s stand-alone now, but when the NOC is up, and we can get the Internet working again, the world will feel it!” His head looked like it would explode, but mine was spinning.

“The Church of the Redeemer’s Bounty? In the mix with African traditional religion? And when how on earth did so many new verses get populated?” I asked.

“First of all, sometimes you gotta work between the lines. And think of the possibilities, laying this philosophy on modern tech. We’ll resolve anythng. Plus it’s all me, not the church.” He pulled his shirt up, to reveal the tattoo of a bird, a knock-kneed, long-tailed specimen that rippled along with his abs.

“I’d pull that shirt down; your girlfriends are getting worked up.”

“Girlfriends? Nah, they know all that stuff, what you saw, was just fun.” He grinned.

Pretty flounced to the front door and grabbed the handle forcefully but hovered there. Not-So-Pretty joined her and they resumed their whispered conversation. My ears burned. Literally.

“Maybe you should tell her that. And no, I don’t know for sure what this represents but I’m going to guess the bird is connected to Ọ̀rúnmilà.”

“You’re smarter than you look.” His grin was ear to ear.

“Thanks, I think.”

“Yeah, it’s a whydah bird, one of the many symbols for Ọ̀rúnmilà, also known as Baba Ifà. But know this, you can’t mention ...”

A pounding at the door cut him off.

Pretty backed away from it as the music was killed and the lights switched off. I looked out of the nearest window and saw it was just getting bright again. We weren’t doing anything illegal, so I walked toward the door to open it. Bẹ̀kọ reached it before me and pulled it open, too forcefully I thought. The twins, now dubbed Taiwo and Kẹ́hinde in my mind, pushed in.

Taiwo, previously referred to as Scarface, switched the lights back on and neither looked pleased. As Kẹ́hinde barked commands, he looked over Bẹ̀kọ’s shoulder and his eyes met mine. His words died in his mouth. I’d have laughed if everyone wasn’t staring at us.

“How did you get down here?” He stuttered.

I pointed beyond them toward the stairwell, and they exchanged guilty glances.

“Any problem?” I pushed my luck.

“Come on, we have to take you back to your room,” Taiwo glowered at me.

“Ok, then,” I waved to the room, “thanks for a wonderful evening.”

“Shut this down.” Taiwo snarled.

“You don’t have to leave.” This brought Bẹ̀kọ back to life.

Taiwo glared at him, jaws bunching.

His scars glowed pinkly and looked as if they would join up to cover his face. I pulled my eyes away from him and gestured Bẹkọ to one side.

“No wahala, I’m good. But save some of that weed for me. Even second-hand, it’s the best I’ve come across.”

“What weed? They junked all mine when we checked in.” Bẹkọ pulled back, a puzzled look on his face.

Taiwo and Kẹhinde made everyone pack up the trash and disperse to their rooms. Everyone except me. I had to wait in the hallway while Taiwo pushed his scars into faces, and Kẹhinde supervised the cleanup. Another dizzy spell came and went. I opened the door to the stairwell and sat on the steps. Pretty and her tag-team partner were the first to depart.

I eyed them and was filled with unexpected envy at their evident friendship, as they twitched their butts down the hallway. The next clump that exited the room was made up of a tall fellow with glasses, a short, muscular chap in an ankara shirt, and a nondescript girl who walked with her eyes down. They gave me variations of the same look as they left; pity mixed with envy, topped with anger. I heard voices raised inside and recognized Bẹkọ’s confident drawl, almost drowned out by the twins’ gravelly combination. I was just considering the long walk back up the stairs when Taiwo came out.

“Are you ... okay to walk?” The pause was supposed to piss me off.

It did.

“Uh-huh.” I lied.

I heard the wind blowing through the trees in the photographs on the wall behind me, and my all-over itch kicked in again. I decided that Bẹkọ must have been joking. Otherwise, I'd have to revisit one of my theories about madness in my missing family tree.

“He will take you up.” Taiwo jerked his head toward his brother.

“Okay.”

He ducked back in and I stumbled toward the door then leaned against the door-frame, hoping for the prickling to recede.

“Watch yourself. That bracelet could mean ... anything.” Through the half-closed door, I heard Taiwo's muttered instruction to his brother.

I had the good sense to return to the steps and sit, with my head bowed and arms resting on my knees.

Kẹhinde rapped on the door frame. I looked up as slowly as I could, and showed him bleary eyes, then failed a few times before I got myself upright. He nodded toward the elevator and waited for me to move. I stumbled down the corridor and watched him produce a key card. The doors opened, and I got in first. I ignored the beaming smile of the All-Father this time and wedged myself into a corner. The ride was smooth but made me feel sick. When the elevator door opened, I waited.

“Out.” He nodded.

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?” He stepped out but kept the door open with a meaty arm.

I raised my hand to touch his as I exited. He flinched and pulled away as if it would burn.

“Why?” I asked.

“Why what?”

“Why are you so afraid of me? Do you think I have the Sickness?”

“Fuck that.”

“Then what is it?”

“I ... we’ve seen things that would make you run screaming toward the Seeping Sickness.” He tried to get around me, but I blocked him off easily.

“Then what do you fear?”

“You Amavi witches eat *aṣẹ* like power bars. Not mine ...”

“Ama-what?”

He raised both arms and started to chant in Yorùbá.

“Look dude, just talk to me. That won’t do you any good.” The itching started, this time at my toes, and washed over me until I could barely stand still.

I didn’t expect his reaction. He yelped, fell backward, and scrabbled his heels, till his back hit the wall.

“Look, stop freaking out. I’m not going to hurt you.” I moved toward him, with my hands spread open.

He started to whimper, so I backed off.

“Hey, this isn’t a good look for you. Yò̀mì might not approve, and the rest of the guys would get to much of a kick out of it.”

He managed a nod.

“I just need you to answer a question or two, then you can leave, and nobody needs to learn about all this.”

He nodded again.

“What’s an Amavi?”

His eyes widened and he looked at my arm, then tapped his wrist.

“Folk who wear my ..., I mean like my bracelet? You’ve met others?”

He nodded.

“Who? Was it a woman in blue?”

“I don’t know.” He looked away and above my head.

“Dude, you’re going to have to do better than that.”

“Jesu Kristi... All right. It started with the battle for Ọyòtúnjì. My brother and I...” he stopped and swallowed.

“Yeah, I heard you guys are the badassess who saved the day.”

“That’s the story, but...”

“But, what?”

“Don’t judge us. We were actually on the wrong side.”

“What?”

“My brother and I were third generation leathernecks ... I mean part of a platoon of Marines. We’d been deployed to Illinois...”

“Illinois?”

“Yeah, the video clip was still rumor but people were losing their shit because only white people were dying. The National Guard were stretched thin with so many nuclear power plants to shut down and we were supposed to backstop them. Command’s official theory was that the US was under biological attack. Then evidence turned up that folk in Ọyòtúnjì were immune. Black folk. It stood to reason that they had a cure. We were diverted there, to tactically acquire it.”

“What happened?”

“It was a clusterfuck. We; my brother and I alone, survived.”

“How? From a platoon? Of Marines?”

“That was my first encounter with the church. And with the Amavi. The churchpeople were fresh of the boat. No color-coded shirts then, everybody was barefoot, and dressed in white soutanes. Then there was your old lady, and yeah she was in blue. They all lined up, a few dozen of them, on the road into the compound. Said they were prayer warriors sent by Pastor Ezra and asked us, real polite, to surrender.”

“What happened?”

“What d’you think? We drew down on them.”

“And?”

“They raised their hands and started to chant. The sky turned black, and it rained some of the biggest-ass snakes I ever saw.”

I frowned and stifled a laugh.

“There were mambas, vipers, constrictors, and I swear I saw a bunch of scorpions.”

“Okaaaay. Then?”

“It took a while, but I figured out that the snakes would keep falling while the church folk had their hands up. Especially that old woman. I tried to check fire, but we had thought we would roll in and roll out, our cover and alignment was for shit. The others, led by my brother, took to shooting snakes out of the air. I think we shot more of each other.” Now he was monotone.

“Did you get bitten?”

“Never saw it coming but I was lucky, I only got bit once.”

“Your brother?”

“I’ll never forget the sight of him trying to pull two vipers off his face. There was a couple of other serpernts coiled around his neck, like scarves. He should’ve died.”

“What happened next?”

“I woke up months later, positive I’d made it to Fiddler’s Green...”

“Fiddler’s Green?”

“You wouldn’t understand. But we were really on a college campus somewhere in New Ife.”

“Wow, I’m impressed.”

“I don’t recall much, but the same old woman led our treatment. She had a bracelet like yours and we were billeted in a cemetary. You know, just in case. She chewed through several other prisoners, drawing the life out of them, and breathing it into us. Yeah, I know how it sounds...” His hand shook as he swiped at his damp forehead.

“Go on.” I whispered.

“Òrúnmilà apparently told her, through ifá, that one or both of us was worth saving. Afterward, we spent just over a year in the CRB Prayer camp outside Lagos, and that’s where we recovered, took the faith properly, learned Yorúbá, and swore to protect the church with our lives...” His words tailed off.

“Huh. But why are you guys still white? Didn’t you do your idùpé after you were cured?”

“Yeah, that.” He closed his eyes.

“Well?”

“One of our first gigs afterward was to provide security for some artifacts that were being shipped from Nigeria, for an exhibition.”

“So?”

“The guy who found the artifacts took them from some mystical place. He was a hot-shit professor who later changed his mind and wanted to put the items back where he found them. He was always mumbling something about having to restore the seven slaves. Crazy chap, always stoned out of his mind. You’d have liked him. He and his staff became a problem, that we had to make go away.” His voice sank to the barest whisper.

The look on my face must have shown how hard I tried to stop my skin from crawling.

“I must leave.” He wouldn’t look at me.

“Okay, but why the myth about you and Ọ̀yòtúnjì?”

“I guess it’s useful for the church to have a couple of good old boys as symbols of the fight against...”

“Against white people.”

I moved away from the elevator door, and he got up off the floor. He leaned against the wall for a moment and wiped his forehead, then he badged himself in, and the elevator door shut in my face. I let myself into my room and was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

Chapter 4 A kì í gbé àárín oji èyàn ká má sì wí (One cannot live amid forty people and never misspeak.)

Wednesday

My dream was a familiar one, and featured a trip from, or to hell, I was never quite sure. It would start with me trapped in a crowded vehicle, unable to speak and cradled in the arms of a grey-faced woman.

Normally the images would take days to dislodge. This time, thankfully, the smell of spoiled meat was already fading, and the feel of the old woman's withered breasts, flapping at my face, had already been replaced by bright sunshine.

I stepped out of bed and walked gingerly over to the windows, in case random birds of prey circled outside. I had to peer through layers of accumulated grime, but the bright sunshine helped. At the foot of the building, the pavement was full of people and there were no birds in sight.

The bathroom called me, and I answered. Right on cue, yesterday's vegetable stew did what it does. My body protested, but it mostly felt good to pinch off logs more substantial than my usual ash-colored briquettes. I leaned into it and beat my knees as my gut emptied, and the toilet bowl filled. Afterward, I leaned back, spent, and waited for the clarity of mind that would surely follow. My mind remained as fuzzy as peach skin.

Three flushes later, I flapped a towel around to disperse the thick, deep brown smells, then selected a chewing stick. I poked, gnawed, and spat until my mouth tasted neutral again. Washing my borrowed underwear while I bathed was a great feeling, and I found myself smiling and humming Fela's "*Expensive Shit*." My headache had subsided, but it lurked in the background, waiting for its cue.

Overnight, I'd leaked a little. I considered stripping the bedsheets when there was a knock at the door. The young lady who'd delivered my meal entered, wearing a red CRB-branded tee shirt and jeans. She brought a pair of khakis that looked my size, boxers, some balled-up socks, and a bunch of the cool tees. She apologized for the selection, apparently she'd expected a guy and promised to find me some pads and panties by the evening. She even asked what size bra I used but I told her not to bother. I pinched myself while she cleared up the mess, after she changed the towels and sheets.

I put in a fresh tampon after a shower and tried the boxers. They were liberating, and clean was becoming a habit again. Dressed, I packed quickly, and rolled Ms. SdB's jeans on top of the new pile of loot in my backpack. Studying the photocopied print that Red had given me took up an indeterminate amount of time. It was blurred as hell to start, but the grey-suited-gent's face got fuzzier, the more I looked at it. My wrist felt great again, and I wondered what else was in that Aboniki balm. It was still early, and I guessed someone would come to fetch me for whatever was next, but I was too clean to sit around waiting.

I let the door click shut behind me. The elevator door button was unresponsive, so I walked to the staircase. That door was now locked, but the elevator doors opened while I was at the end of the corridor, and Kẹhinde stepped out, then marched purposefully to my door. He spent a few moments grimacing while he combed his hair back with his fingers. I padded toward the elevator, and coughed.

"What ...?" He spun, both hands raised and might have hit me if I was closer.

I gave him a wide berth as he held the door open and jerked his head at me. I was busy negotiating the All-Father-that-was's photograph when I noticed Kẹhinde still holding the elevator door open.

“Um, yesterday...” He looked everywhere but at me.

“Yeeees?” I drawled.

“That’s got to remain between us.”

“Sure, but I remembered something.”

“Typical. What?”

“What was the deal in Harlem? Yòmi seemed disappointed about something.”

“I really have no idea.” At that, he let the door close, then punched a button.

The lift jerked to a stop after a few floors, and the door opened.

Ms. SdB walked in.

The random buzzing sounds faded, then my hair and my teeth stopped hurting. She wore the same clothes I’d last seen her in, but her shoulders were hunched, and deep lines ran down the side of her mouth. I cast a sidelong glance and blinked at the grey in her hair.

She’d glanced at my empty wrist as she walked in, just before her eyes went dead.

Kẹhinde concentrated on the line where the door halves met, while I shrank into the corner and rubbed my wrist.

“Erm, Kẹhinde, do you think I can see the Pree... I mean the new All-Father?” I asked.

“What did you call me?” He didn’t turn around.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know your name and had to call you something.”

“And that’s what you came up with? What made you think I was the younger?” He half-turned.

“Well, aren’t you?”

He glared at me, then resumed staring at the door.

“I guess that’s a ‘Yes,’ then?”

“The All Father-to-be will be at your lesson.” She flicked her eyes at him and shook her head.

“Oh. Thank you. Um, what lesson?” I nodded, probably too vigorously.

“You’ll see soon enough.” He snarled.

The car stopped smoothly, then the doors opened.

We stepped out onto a mezzanine floor that overlooked the entry hallway, where a sizable crowd had built up. On seeing movement above them, they surged forward and broke into song, their verses peppered with greetings, salutations, and sundry prayers.

“Alleluyah!”

“Praise da Lord,

O singo singo...,”

“Prince! You done become King Oh!”

“Alleluyah mètè!”

“Alleluyah...”

“...His Mountains are fire; His lakes are pepper-soup!”

“...with the blood of Cheesos!”

Kẹhinde hustled us through a set of double doors that clicked shut behind us but didn’t cut the noise down any. We proceeded down a dusty corridor, lined with pictures of the President, the reds of his eyes more rheumy than usual.

The corridor was narrow, and I nearly ran into Kẹhinde when he stopped to pull open a door. They both marched in ahead of me, while I hesitated. I recognized it as one of the old interview rooms, but devoid of booths. There was another entrance, a set of double doors in the wall facing me, with secure Georgian-wire glass panes set into its top halves. It was sealed shut with a chain wrapped around the handles, further secured by a shiny padlock. There was a tangle of mismatched plastic chairs and the odd table, stacked in front of it.

The room was spacious and had a dozen or so of the chairs arranged in a rough semi-circle close to the rear wall. A filing cabinet, covered with a long-as-fuck stenciled serial number was in a corner at the top of the room. All its drawers sat at one crazy angle or the other, and there was a bank of empty charging stations on top of it. Kẹhinde dropped his walkie-talkie in one. A small projector sat on a scuffed coffee table in the middle of the room, plugged into a power strip which had been daisy-chained off another.

Bẹkọ, Pretty, and the rest of the party people had taken up seats, leaving an empty one in between each of them. They all ignored me as I stood, half in and half out of the room. Ms. SdB and Kẹhinde took up positions facing the seated semi-circle and looked at me, without a hint of a smile between them. I rolled my eyes and stepped in. After a brief struggle, I extracted a chair from the stack and felt the back of my head warm up, as several pairs of eyes settled on it. I dragged my chair to the end of the half-circle and ended up sitting almost directly opposite Bẹkọ, who was supported by two, or possibly three nested chairs at the other end of the arc.

Wordlessly, Ms. SdB switched on the projector, while Kẹhinde removed the obligatory framed portraits from the wall. She centered the screen while he reverently placed the picture of the All-Father-that-was, on top of the filing cabinet. The other photos, of the Nigerian President and Foreign Affairs Minister, ended up face down on the floor. Bẹkọ's eyes met mine, and his

face cracked into a confident smile. Mine would have been shaky at best.

“What’s the feature?” Bëkọ asked.

Ms. SdB didn’t respond as she pointed her empty palm, face up, at him.

He jerked his head back, and after losing the stare-down, reached into one of his side pockets, extracted his tablet and raised it. His eyebrows were squished. She nodded, waited for him to unlock it then took it from him.

“You’re not going to...” His words disappeared.

“Anyone else worried?” She looked first at him, then me, before she scanned the others.

Nobody met her gaze, but there was a lot of foot-shuffling and murmuring.

“Fine.” She set the tablet down.

“You’ve all heard about the YouTube clip that supposedly can infect you with the Sleeping Sickness, right?” She moved a step closer, and we all recoiled.

“How many of you have watched it?”

At first, nobody responded, then Bëkọ put up his hand, followed by Tall-with-glasses.

“Ah. The brave ones. Well, we’re all going to watch it. Together.”

A wave passed through the class but everyone seemed to end up with eyes downcast and lips sealed.

“But, what’s the point? Even if it’s for real, all of us are immune. Right?” I was impressed by how calm I sounded.

“Right. Nothing to fear then? Think of it as a compulsory qualification test.”

“And if we refuse?” I asked.

“No wahala. Then you can go back to selling your artisanal tee shirts and knick-knacks.... You...” she pointed at Tall-with-glasses, “...go back to hawking pints of your blood

in Chicago's South Side ... You, back to Harlem and your ... creative Ifà divinations. You..."

Her finger swung away from Not-So-Pretty.

"Okay, okay. We get it. But what if..." I couldn't finish the thought, much less the question.

"You get infected?"

I nodded.

"I'll not lie and say that won't happen, but if it does, anyone infected would have help."

"Help? Help how?" I sounded squeaky.

"Help to find a cure or help with getting and keeping comfortable. I do not know. But we need to find out now, not later, if any of you is susceptible to this thing. If anyone wishes to leave, that's the door." She pointed.

Nobody moved.

Kehinde switched off the lights, she fiddled with the tablet, then pressed "Play".

The camera work was trembly, and I heard the hiccupping sobs of whichever unfortunate soul taped it. The screen was dark, but a handy streetlight soon illuminated the backdrop of a road sign. The picture zoomed out, and shaky as it was, the stylized eagle and block lettering were immediately recognizable. Whoever made this clip had a cute sense of irony; they did it at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta.

The camera switched views and showed the rear of a figure walking across a wide thoroughfare, approaching the CDC building. The figure was male and wore a grey suit that

looked like it was made from the kind of paper that once lined cigarette packs. He moved in exaggerated, mincing steps, as if dancing, and had a cudgel in one hand. With his next step, I saw he held a short, stubby broom in the other. A thick brown cloud trailed the broom, and it made me woozy to look at it. I coughed and waved my hand in front of my face.

Ms. Nondescript was closest to me, and she tore her eyes from the screen to shush me. Kẹhinde had his hand on the doorknob. The sign was now in full view and Grey-suit-guy whistled as he walked toward it. As he approached the sign, Grey-suit-guy waved the broom over his head in graceful, slow movements. The sobbing sound from whoever was recording the scene intensified. The broom bristles were dull red and had cowrie shells sewn into its handle. Apart from the whistling, and an occasional sob, the clicking of the cowrie shells was the only other addition to the soundscape.

The heavy odor of foreboding accompanied the smoke, and almost overwhelmed the painful scents that the broom released. The stench told of pain and suffering, of dreams destroyed, and of the death of community. I wrinkled my nose, gagged, and barked out a cough. Ms. Nondescript hissed at me, but I was too busy being freaked out by Grey-suit-guy. He'd stopped prancing when I coughed and he spun round to gaze into the camera. I gasped and jumped to my feet as he flicked his broom at the lens. The viewpoint spun and went dark.

Tendrils of black smoke floated out of the screen. I staggered backward, as they turned into tiny green pods, which splashed when they fell on the floor around me. I hopped all over the place and beat at my clothes, my face, arms, and chest. My classmates looked at me as if I was mad. I could barely breathe as black and green droplets materialised around me.

But none on me.

Kẹhinde switched on the lights, and stayed at the door, while Ms. SdB stopped the clip.

“Are you all right?” She asked.

“Me? No, I’m not! Didn’t you see that?” I waved at the empty square on the wall.

“See what?” Ms. Nondescript kept her distance.

“The broom, The guy. The stuff.” I panted.

And then I saw fresh round indentations, dotted all over Ms. Nondescript’s face and arms, oozing clear fluid.

I took a huge step back.

“What? What is it?” She looked down at her arms, then swiped at her head.

I turned to Ms. SdB.

“Arike, you will be escorted to the doctor.” Ms. SdB’s voice was soothing as she switched off the tablet and handed it back to Bëko.

Ms. Nondescript, aka Arike, pushed her chair back and stood up shakily, with a worried twist to her face.

The marks on her skin had started to bubble when she crumpled to the ground. Ms. SdB reached into the pocket of her jeans for a small bottle. She muttered to herself as she shook it. Its content foamed and hissed.

“Get her to the sick bay and tell the doctor she might be one of the White Hairs. Come straight back here and wipe your hands, and anything you touch, with this.” She handed the bottle to Këhinde.

He didn’t look happy, but he plucked his walkie-talkie from the charging station and helped the stricken girl to her feet. Her eyes were sightless, and the penny-shaped circles on her skin were an angry red. She muttered something about the rivers of Babylon, the mighty blood of Cheesos, and sins she was paying for, as they left. Ms. SdB turned to me, then pointed to the rest

of the room and raised her eyebrow. I cast my eyes over them quickly, looked at Ms. SdB, and shook my head.

“Look again!” She snapped.

I stepped forward, and after while they cringed away from me, I sniffed at their clothes, parted their hair, looked behind collars and even behind their ears. I found nothing. Ms. SdB produced another bottle, went around the room, and decanted a splash into each right hand. Then she showed us how to work the oil into our palms for as long as it took to reel off the names of Nigeria’s states and their capital cities, then rub it into any exposed skin. I mumbled my way through the list and lost track way before I got to the sixties. The oil made my skin tingle again, but in a cool way. It felt as if a top layer of skin had sloughed off, leaving behind cool skin and a calm mind.

“What the fuck was that? Didn’t anyone else see what he was doing?” I asked.

“We are lucky to have you here. Very few people can see the physical manifestation of Sònpòna’s rites. We might yet save Arikẹ.” Ms. SdB said.

“Sònpòna? You mean the Sickness is ... Smallpox?” My face twisted.

“It’s a variation of smallpox and it has just changed. To our detriment”

“No shit. Did you know Black folk could be infected?” Tall-with-glasses sounded calm but looked anything but.

“Sorry, I have a stupid question. Who or what is Sònpòna?” Pretty’s voice was small.

All eyes turned to her, and she shrank into her chair.

We all looked to Ms. SdB.

“No, it’s a good question. We should all be on the same page. Some would have heard the tales of the six, commonly referred to as the hot Orìṣàs. They are free in ọ̀rùn, or heaven but

if they venture to your world, they are bound.” She commanded our attention.

“Seven, there are seven,” Bẹkọ interjected.

“The seventh is said to be a fail-safe that Olódùmarè sent, to be on hand in case any or all the six, escape and fuck things up. Again.” Stocky Ankara-shirt guy piped up.

“In any case, it seems that Şònpòna, the òrisha of smallpox and of disease, managed to break free from his bindings and launched the Sickness at White people. I’m unsure why he did it in the first place, although I have my suspicions. But I have no idea why he has changed it now. In any case, despite the inherent conflict with the teachings of the Church, until we can find another explanation, I suggest we take this theory very seriously.” She scanned the room and held each of our gazes in turn.

“It could have been worse, I guess.” Bẹkọ mused.

“How?” Pretty asked.

“It could have been Eşù.”

The lights flickered, and we all shifted uneasily.

“That’s the trickster orisha right? The shape-shifting, crossroad-guarding, keeper of àṣẹ?”

Pretty asked , with alarm in her voice.

Ms. SdB nodded.

“Um, what does the All-Father-to-be say, about all this?” I asked.

“I think he would want you to make up your own minds.”

“Who are the White Hairs?” Bẹkọ sounded subdued.

“That’s how we have so far, referred to the corpses of infected Black folk.”

“Corpses? Nobody has survived yet?” Bẹkọ’s voice fell even further.

“As far as we know, Arikẹ has survived the longest.” She nodded.

The silence following this statement was a long one.

“All the corpses have been white-haired? Do you mean, they were aged by the Sickness?” Stocky Ankara-shirt-guy probably felt left out.

“No, they sprout white hairs as a precursor to infection. The interesting thing is where the hairs are found.” Ms. SdB said.

“I think I’m regretting this already, but where?” My legs trembled, so I found myself a seat.

“Under their tongues.”

“I.did.not.expect.that.”

“And is this also happening back home?” Bẹkọ stood up to speak.

“Unfortunately, yes and it seems to be spreading. For the moment, no incidents have been reported among Church members there. But the infected populace are not happy.” She replied.

“How long have you known about this?” Not-So-Pretty sounded pissed.

Ms. SdB smiled and shrugged.

“You know the way white people get darker after they’ve been cured and then they perform idùpẹ? I’m curious what happens to Black Folk? Do we turn ... grey?” Bẹkọ loomed over the class.

“We may be able to let you know with Arikẹ.”

Silence.

Then, there was a flurry of activity as shirts and tops were discarded, and pants dropped to the floor.

“Hey, what are you all doing? Yòmi is on his way ...” Ms. SdB protested.

“No vex, teacher. Bring dat ya oil quick-quick. Tani, I beg, come check us again.” Bẹkọ

spoke for all, and his devolving into Pidgin felt immediate, and appropriate.

Kẹhinde returned and gave up the bottle, but only after the third time of Ms. SdB's asking. The room was still unsettled, and the half-moon of chairs had fanned out, with Bẹkọ and I still at opposite ends of the row of chairs. I'm not sure if he'd moved or they did, but there was now a larger gap between Bẹkọ's seat and the next filled one. Conversely, Tall-with-glasses was so close to me, I could smell his fear. Meanwhile, Ms. SdB switched off the projector, took her place in front of the class and Kẹhinde dawdled close by.

A sharp knock echoed through the room and made us all jump. Puzzled, we looked at each other, then Bẹkọ moved toward the front door. It was the sound of Kẹhinde dragging furniture out of the way that helped us figure out the knock had been on glass. The panels were opaque, but we recognized Taiwo's looming mass through them. The chain rattled as Kẹhinde opened the doors.

I got up as the others surged toward the door. Something made me look at Ms. SdB, who was closer to the front door than the open glass one. She frowned and I felt an all-over tingle, then the words "*You.must.get.that.bracelet.back.*" echoed in my mind.

I whirled but nobody was near me. The room went quiet. Yòmì wore a black búbà and sòkòtò outfit this time, resplendent with embossed images of the late All-Father. His face was blank and he fiddled with his sòkòtò pocket. Taiwo shut the glass doors and re-wrapped the chain around the handles. He offered Yòmì a seat, but the All Father-to-be ignored him and cleared his throat to speak.

“Baba wa ti mbẹ ni ọrun...”

“Our Father, who art in heaven...” Taiwo screamed the translation out loud.

“Ki a bọwọ fun orukọ rẹ...”

“Hallowed be thy name...”

My classmates all stood with arms part outstretched, and hands cupped facing upward. I thought this was an invitation to hold hands, so I grabbed Tall-with-glasses’ outstretched fingertips. He shook my hand off, gave me an irritated look, stretched his arms, and redoubled his prayers. Taking the hint, I mumbled along just as Yòmi, Taiwo, and Kẹhinde burst into short bursts of gibberish, set to a tune I was familiar with.

“He is alive, amen...”

He is alive, amen...

Jesus is alive,

Forever, he’s alive, amen.”

The others joined in, and Pretty, Not-So-Pretty, Ankara-wearing stocky guy, and Tall-with-glasses displayed some disturbing paroxysms in between verses. I oscillated between moments of contempt when I was sure they were faking it, and envy when it looked for real. Bẹkọ kept his head down, mumbled to himself, and shuffled from foot to foot. He occasionally put his hands in the air, but it didn’t look convincing. I stared, with my mouth open. The singing and the spirit-possession ended as suddenly as it started.

Yòmi, who had kept up his flow through it all, carried on.

“Awọn ọta wa ti yọ’ju!” He emphasized each word with a stiffened palm, brought down

sharply in a chopping motion.

“Our enemies have shown themselves!” Taiwo tried to keep up.

“Awon oni’run fun fun l’abe ahan ti yọ’ju!”

“Those with white hair underneath their tongues have appeared!”

“Awon opurọ, awon ole, won ọlọtẹ, gbogbo won!”

“Liars, thieves, traitors, all of them!”

“Awon oloselu!!!”

“Politicians!!!”

“Jesu ma gbe wa s’oke won!”

“Jesus will raise us above them!”

“Jesu ma fi ọna han wa!”

“Jesus will show us the way!”

“Jesu ma wa pelu wa, lailai ati lailai!”

“Jesus will be with us forever!”

“Alleluyah!”

“Alleluia!”

The alleluias went on, until everybody came back to earth.

“What was that?” I whispered to Ms. SdB

“Be careful.” She murmured back.

“But the translating? That seemed practiced?”

“I get the impression you haven’t been at a church service in a while, or maybe ever?”

“I didn’t see the point.”

“Well Yòmi’s preaching always packs out the house, especially when Taiwo translates.”

“We missed something; do white folk have those hairs as well?” I nodded at the twins.

“Most do, but these ones don’t.” She raised a finger to her lips

Yòmi warmed down, with a few more “Praise the Lord”s followed by the obligatory seven “Alleluyah”s.

“Thank you, everyone. That was unexpected but the Spirit moved me. I hope you could all feel it?” Yòmi’s eyes were glittering black marbles.

“Yes, All-Father!”

“Thank you, All-Father!”

“Thank you, Jesus!”

“You went up the mountain and brought fayah!”

“I am not yet the All-Father but thank you. I am glad to bring the Spirit to you, after what you went through today.” He looked at me.

“The devil has a space shuttle.” His words started as a whisper and ended in a shout.

“The devil has a space shuttle! Did you hear what I said?” He emphasized each syllable with a jab of his forefinger.

“Yes!” I found myself sucked in.

“When we take one barefoot step, the devil has gone round the world, twice.”

“One step! Round the world, oh!”

“With faith and with family, we will defeat the devil, and we will midwife Africa’s rebirth!”

“Faith! Family!! Rebirth!!!” I babbled along.

“Okay, thank you. First the good news. Arikẹ is responding to treatment, and by the special blood of Jesus, she will be healed!”

“Thank you! Thank you, Jesus!” Seats overturned, clapping, hysteria ensued.

“But there is bad news. We have failed to convince our brethren in Harlem and elsewhere to leave this sinking ship and come home with us.” He glanced at Ms. SdB. She remained stone-faced.

Nobody knew how to respond.

“Unfortunately we have more serious things to occupy us. In worse news, the mobile phone network back at home has just collapsed. Radio and TV stations are off the air, and our people are back in the grip of a serious backlash against of technology.” Yòmì unfastened his cufflinks, rolled up his sleeves, and stood with feet planted wide.

His words took a moment to sink in, then the prayer responses died away and we all stared at him.

“We have this variant to blame. We have been let down, by our partners and by bad prophecies.” He paused.

Across the room, Bẹkọ shrank into himself.

“The Bible tells us that, ‘a kì í dùbúlẹ̀ şubú.’ In other words, ‘He that is down, need fear no fall.’ We have suffered worse and have always come back stronger. We will renew our people’s faith, and we will return to the heights we are destined for!” His armpits were soaked.

We cheered until we were hoarse.

“But the bad news is not confined to our home. Our treaty with the City of New York, which allowed us to do so much good work and kept guns off the streets, is being breached as we speak.”

We hushed ourselves.

“The gun-worshippers; those that have been campaigning for the repeal of our treaty can

smell weakness.” He mopped at his face with a huge handkerchief.

“We know them! They would rather die lily-white than have their souls and their skins touched by our special living God ...” Eyes flashing, bosom heaving, Pretty was a sight to behold.

“Thank you Chi-chi, we know what is in their hearts and we will not allow it to burst free.” Yòmi waved his handkerchief at her.

“God forbid!”

“The devil is a liar!”

“Even worse, I am reliably informed that the resurrected gun lobby has been working secretly with our so-called government.” He gestured at the frames that were face-down on the floor.

“What?” Pretty.

“Since when?” Tall-with-glasses.

“How can we stop them?” Me, incensed and shaking a fist.

“Fortunately, State Department is yet to get hold of any real evidence of infections among us. After today’s incident, that’s only a matter of time. To make matters worse, they are pushing the rumor that we, the Church, are spreading the Sickness so the All-Father would have enough souls escorting him to the afterlife.” He shook his head.

We looked at each other in stunned silence.

“Our government are aware of our arrangements to return home by sea. They are trying to convince the US to commandeer the ship and place Nigerian government personnel in charge for the return journey.”

You could have heard a tear drop.

“But with faith, with prayer, and with the gifts God has given us, we will evade them as Daniel evaded the lions and Joseph came out of Egypt!” He waved the handkerchief above his head.

We all jumped up and cheered.

Ms. SdB hummed a familiar tune as she squeezed past me to pick up overturned chairs and push them to the back of the room.

“I have an urgent meeting with representatives of the British Crown tomorrow. They brought a sizeable down payment for future services...,” he smiled, “I will see what else they want in exchange and maybe get them to put pressure on our government. The devil is a liar, we will, we must overcome! Africa will be, must be reborn!” Arms raised like a prizefighter, Yòmì was on a roll.

We cheered, hugged, laughed, and danced. I joined in until I bumped into Taiwo, and the mood got killed. I wandered to the rear of the class and an idle thought about Pretty’s real name crossed my mind. “Chi-chi” felt apt, but it also felt odd that this should matter.

“The morning has been long. Food has been prepared for you, then you will be taken to your rooms. The fate of our Church, the rebirth we have been working on, for New Ifẹ, our country and of our continent, could rest on our next steps. Go with God.” Yòmì sailed past Taiwo and stopped at the glass-paned doors.

While the chain was being removed, he looked straight at Bẹkọ.

“Arike’s absence. I trust this will not affect the project?” Yòmì was unsmiling.

“No Sir. She had secured the boxes, we just have to change the power supplies for voltage reasons...” Bẹkọ leaped to his feet.

“I’m relying on you.” Yòmì cut him off, then left with Taiwo.

Bekọ sank back onto his chairs and fumbled at his tablet.

“Next week...” Pretty started it up.

“...in New Ifẹ !!! ” We all chorused.

Just as another round of high fives got going, I felt the itch start on the backs of my legs.

I saw the front door was slightly ajar, and Ms. SdB was nowhere in sight. As the itching took my mind over, I was able to place the melody she’d been humming. It was the hypnotic chorus to one of my favorite Fela Kuti tracks, “*Teacher, Don’t Teach Me Nonsense.*”

The food smelled great. The canteen was a converted conference room, dominated by a large rectangular table. It had a clutch of overstuffed office chairs, each missing at least one castor, scattered around it. The room was poorly ventilated, and the worn carpeting matched the drab walls. My classmates were arranged along one side, facing the wall of windows that looked out over 2nd. From the rear of the room, a likeness of the All-Father-that-was grinned down at us, beside two pale, dust-edged squares.

I got there just as the food was brought in on a squeaky-wheeled trolley, complete with a station to wash hands in. I recognized the same young lady who’d brought salvation in various forms to my room last night. I knew I wouldn’t be able to stop if I started scratching, so I went straight to the trolleys and loaded up. Today’s vegetable stew must have required an act of God. In addition to the chunks of smoked fish, I spied periwinkles, still in their shells. I took a small ball of *ẹba*, a huge bowl of stew, washed my hands and went to work.

Meanwhile, everyone else except Kẹhinde piled their plates high and all eyes turned to

me, as if waiting for prayers. I dug my thumb in and closed my eyes for that first swallow. Maneuvering the shellfish in my mouth so I could suck out the tender meat and then spit the shells out into my palm, turned out to be a skill that once learned, never leaves.

I ignored the silence and from my corner-eye, I noticed them all drop their plastic cutlery, then go wash their hands. When I went to the food trolleys again, the young lady had brought in some fried plantains. The room stirred and a line formed behind me, as I loaded a fresh plate, then added more vegetable stew. Food-trolley-girl confirmed she'd bring the promised pads and clean underwear to my room later.

At my seat, Bẹkọ spilled over on both sides of the chair next to mine.

“The real bread of life, right?” He nodded at my plate.

I attacked the golden-brown slices of heaven.

“I wish I had an appetite, though.” He continued.

An array of dishes surrounded him, separately heaped with jollof rice and fried meat, amala and ewedu mixed with chicken stew, and yet another dedicated to mọyin-mọyin. I looked at him, wide-eyed.

“Shut your yaps. This is a mess-hall, not a sleepover.” Kẹhinde growled from across the room.

“That crack about poor predictions was about your app, right?” I lowered my voice.

His jaw tightened as he bent over his plate, but when he looked up, he gave me the smallest nod.

“How bad will it be? Back home, I mean. I was looking forward to Googling stuff again.” I asked.

“Our people went Biblical on anything tech when the Sickness first hit. Fortunately, they

didn't do as much damage as was done here. It seems they're basically finishing the job now."

He paused to belch.

"Still very shitty. But what did you make of this White Hairs story?" I resisted the urge to jam my fingers into my mouth and root around beneath my tongue.

"Not good. If folk back home can catch the Sickness, that's ... sub-optimal."

"You think? Listen we've got to figure out everyone's under-tongue situation and fast."

"Under-tongue? Are you serious?"

"Serious as smallpox. What do you think, you check the guys and I'll do the girls?" I leaned forward.

"That'll never work. Nobody knows you well enough yet."

"Yeah. True. By the way, how well did you know Arike?" I asked.

"Good question. I don't know if it matters, but she was a government plant." He unwrapped another mound of amala.

"What? Which government?"

"You're not serious. That so-called government back home is full of blunt instruments. They don't do finesse."

"You think she was working for the US?"

"Well, she was one of my best scavengers, but she always seemed to be able to find a piece of tech or software that even I didn't know about."

"Maybe she's just good at her job?"

"Good thing that I am as well, then. We got an infestation of CIA-style bugs, soon after she joined us. I also rescued deleted copies of her dispatches, from a server she didn't know I was aware of." He finished the amala and paused for breath.

“Oh. That’s how you were able to figure out what the US is up to?”

“Clever, eh?” He pulled the plate of jollof rice forward , selected a white plastic spoon and started in on that.

I couldn’t stop staring.

I felt eyes on me and looked up to see Pretty Chi-chi look at me with a half-smile. I grimaced and scratched the back of one hand.

“Hmmm,” Bẹkọ said.

“Hmm, what?”

“Let me think on the under-tongue thing, but first, I can help you with that.” He glanced at my arms.

“Bẹkọ, you know the rules. You’re working on a lot of need-to-know stuff.” Kẹhinde loomed over us.

Everyone stopped eating.

Bẹkọ glared at him, and with a sound like a polite gunshot, his plastic spoon, loaded with rice snapped. The red oily grains flew everywhere. I coughed delicately and when Kẹhinde looked at me, I raised both eyebrows and tilted my head a nano-quarter-inch. His nostrils flared, but the air went out of him, and he turned away.

“Just hurry it up, you go back to your rooms soon.” He snarled, stalked out of the room, and slammed the door shut.

Everyone stared at me. Again.

“How did you do that? Bẹkọ stopped eating for the first time since he’d sat down.

“You can help me with what?” I forced a smile and waggled my fingers at the others until they looked away.

“Look. You act like you don’t know anything then you do that?” He pointed at the door.

“Okay, assume I don’t know anything.”

I finished my food, and he stared at me for two wraps of mōyin-mōyin.

“Listen.” His voice dropped so low that, even as close as I was, I had to listen hard.

“Well?” I scratched softly at my arms again.

“Your name seems like the placeholder kind, common with young initiates of this guild I know about.”

I nodded.

“When I was a kid, there were stories about this group of women priestesses. They were supposed to have had a crazy amount of power.” His expression was pinched.

“You mean the Amavi?” I whispered.

“Hmm, not so ignorant then?” His eyes widened.

“Lucky guess.”

“I’ve heard...” he looked away from me, “...that Amavi priestesses can communicate by producing messages on their bodies. This skill is supposed to be itchy and very painful when it first develops.” His gaze returned, and he looked at my arms.

“That’s ridiculous, I’m no juju witch. I also don’t have any writing on my body.” I tried to whisper but almost laughed out of relief.

“Keep your voice down. I’m not saying you are, or that you’re not. Whatever. But I’ve also heard that there’s a certain blend of kaya that brings relief from this itching.”

“Now you’re talking! But wait, I thought you didn’t have any stuff in here?”

“I found someone willing to hold for me.” He smiled and licked his fingers.

I looked at Pretty Chi-chi, but she was busy perspiring over a bowl of pepper soup.

“Not Chi-chi!”

“Who, then?”

“Tinuke will bring you a little something something later.” He waved at the food trolley.

I looked and caught the sappy look that Food-trolley-girl threw at him, just before she wiped her face clean.

“You’re disgusting. Will you put it into anyone?”

“Nah, just anyone I like, especially if she asks me nicely. But it’s your turn now. Spill.”

“Spill? Spill what? As we’ve just established, I know less than nothing.”

“Not true. You seem to know that mammy-watta, the old-young babe who’s been helping Yòmi? Who is she and where does she get her juice? I don’t think she’s Amavi but Yòmi doesn’t play where she’s concerned.”

“Mammy-watta? Our teacher? The woman from Salvador de Bahia? I don’t even know her name.”

“Aah, Salvador de ... Hmmm, that’s interesting.”

“Why do you call her mammy-watta?”

“Haven’t you noticed how sleek she always looks? By late evening, when her morning bath wears off, she looks positively haggard. Don’t look at me like that.”

“Yeah, I hope you’ve got more than that....”

“Well, those Brazilian footballers were crazy excited to see her. They kept bringing her rosaries and statues to bless.”

“That could mean anything. But where are they? I’d love to talk with them.” The ancient snapshot from Ms. SdB’s apartment still nagged at me.

“You’ll have to wait. They’ve gone.”

“Gone? Gone where?”

“On to the ship. Excited as fuck, if I might add. They’ll play an exhibition match when we get to New Ifè as part of the funeral ceremonies. Your mammy-watta friend’s idea. But back to you. Where did you meet...”

Then Taiwo and Kẹhinde burst into the room.

The older twin’s scars were lit up like fireworks.

It was the thought of the leftover blunt, nestled in the deep recesses of my backpack that got me through a second rant in two days. Kẹhinde wasn’t spared. His face got paler, and his shoulders sagged further, with every expletive Taiwo hurled at him. Eventually, I was ferried off to my room by Kẹhinde, and I left Bẹkọ with clenched fists and bunched jawline, standing between Taiwo and the rest of the group. I leaned against the elevator wall, with my eyes closed until we got to my floor. Kẹhinde stalked ahead of me, let me in without a word, then headed back.

“Hey.” I called out from my door.

He stopped but didn’t turn around.

“I’m sorry.”

Without responding, he stepped into the elevator, then was gone.

I sighed, let the lock click, then dug into the inner pocket of my backpack; a session of kalakuta-aided meditation was long overdue. I had almost forgotten about the print I’d taken off Red until it jumped into my hand. I looked at it and saw the figure from the CDC. I hurried it to the nearest light and peered at it until a wave of dizziness made me shut my eyes.

I'd heard about waking dreams, but this was my first one.

In between breaths, I was whisked back up that hill, and deposited at the doorway to the weatherbeaten building. The smell of fresh rain and damp earth surrounded me like a wet cloud. Without moving a muscle, I eased to the front door as if floating and heard my name called out by something or someone close by.

A warm glow came from the mat at the door, and the call faded to a whisper when I peeled the corner of the mat back and slid under it. A small rusted key took up a lot of the space there and together we flew into the lock. A turn and a click later, the door swayed open. I blinked at the dull light that washed over a circular hall. It was randomly dotted with differently sized and some oddly shaped windows. All had some sort of shutter, curtain or covering securing them. A few of them clicked quietly, some hummed, but many rattled and banged as if trying to open. I felt drawn to a set of wooden blinds, which burst open when I approached.

I blinked and was back into my room at the Consulate. There was a quiet knock and I wasn't sure in what plane I'd heard it. I kept still and squeezed my eyes shut. The tap came again, a little louder this time. The leftover joint looked as sorry as I felt. I tucked it into my pocket and went to yank the door open. Tinuke darted in and closed the doorway till only a sliver remained. She stood with her eye on this for a while, panting slightly. Satisfied, she let the door click shut.

"What?" I couldn't hide my irritation.

"Take." She thrust a rolled-up towel at me.

"Aah, thank you." I stepped to the bed and unrolled my bounty.

A couple of sanitary pads and five tightly bundled pairs of underpants bounced onto the bed. I untangled one and revealed the most perfectly-rolled fatty I'd ever seen.

“Na lie! One happy week, àbì?”

“Bẹkọ tok say make you take am softly, softly oh. Dis ịgbò get too much power.”

“I hope so.” I raised one wrap to my nose and breathed deeply.

My itching stopped cold.

I gasped, while she hid her mouth behind a raised hand and giggled.

“Una do well oh, Tinuke. How you take enter? De lift still dey work?” I extracted the rest of the blunts and took a quality control sniff of each one.

My mind was soothed when I put them away, together with my half-smoked one.

“No, I follow trek upstairs. I get key,” She showed me a densely populated key ring.

“Aah. I tank you for dis ting wey you bring oh. E go help me; no be small.”

“Bẹkọ tok say make I help you, bicos you fit help all of us.”

“You like Bẹkọ, șa.” I teased.

“Yes oh. Na fine man. Him go send my Papa one hundred cows! Dem get cow too much for him place.” She laughed.

“Tinuke, you fit help me with another ting?” I’d noticed how her eyes gleamed when she looked at my stash of tee shirts.

“Wetin?” Her face slammed shut.

“As you wan comot now, make I follow you, borrow dis ya key. After I go do one small bizness, I go fit re-come back enter my room. I go give you ya key back tomorrow morning when we dey chop.” I plucked out a brown, blue and gold tee shirt and held it against her frame.

“Aah, Aunt. I no fit oh.” Her smile wavered, and she blinked rapidly.

But she’d pressed the shirt against her frame and stuck out a leg.

“Bẹkọ go dey happy as you help me again. De shart fit you well, well. In fact...” I added

another tee, one of my own.

“Kai! Aunty. But e go betta if we go now now. Dose two oyinbo dey chop. After, dey fit comot again, but na early momo before dem go sleep.” She took the two shirts with trembling hands.

“You be betta somebody oh. That Bẹkọ dey too lucky!” She snickered again, as I dashed into the bathroom, changed into a dark colored tee, and retrieved Ms. SdB’s borrowed articles then stuffed them into my backpack.

“Oya, make we dey go.” I hitched my backpack up.

“Dem go come check your door for morning oh.” She eyed me uncertainly.

“No wahala, I no go tay too much.” I nudged her toward the door.

I left my door unlatched, and we tiptoed to the stairwell. She locked the access door to the stairs after us, and we made quiet but slow progress to the basement level. We stopped at an upright locker, where she retrieved a shoulder bag, and pushed the tee shirts deep into it. A swap of her flat shoes for black Converse later, we headed out.

Tinuke then led me through a sequence of doors to a pedestrian gate, which opened out onto a delivery area on 45th. We stopped so she could peel off the keys I needed and hand those to me. Moments later, we were face to face with a drowsy selection of the 7th Naija Ninjas.

“No worry, dey be yẹyẹ men. Dem too like women, dey no go trouble us.” She whispered.

In truth it took a perfunctory bit of flirting to get past them. The next roadblock was easier, they cheered us as we strutted past. She was going downtown, so I went a few blocks with her and stopped just before 42nd.

“Aunty.”

“No worry. I no go disappoint.” I listened to her receding footsteps for a while, then struck out toward the river.

At this time, 1st was counter-intuitively the best route uptown. It was still as scary as fuck, considering the proximity to the river, and the wildlife that periodically ghosted out of the sinkholes, but that meant I met no one else for blocks. I only ran into one roadblock but the donation of a spliff got me a hero’s welcome. I was in the 70s before I knew it and it took me a few missed turns before errant light bounced off a shiny new cooking pot a few floors up, on the fire escape.

Chapter 5 Ẹbọ-ọ le, kò ju ọkú lọ (The sacrifice is formidable; it is not worse than death.)

Thursday

The fire escape drop-ladder had been detached, and I crunched through the carpet of broken glass that still lined the entrance hallway. It was as black as Brooklyn, and I had to shuffle along with my hands outstretched until I kicked the staircase. A brief flick of my lighter helped me tackle each flight. The only sound was my harsh breathing and the thunder of somebody's crazy loud heartbeat pounding in my head. I wasn't sure how many flights I'd climbed when the smell of sandalwood pulled me onto her landing.

Her door was the only one ajar. I stumbled in and was surrounded by the memories of the meeting that had changed my life. The light switch gave a comforting click but nothing else and the side of my knee found the side-table. I kept my arms extended and shuffled my way to the bedroom. It felt empty, un-lived in, and when I tried the bathroom taps, all that escaped was a series of polite wheezes.

Sick with disappointment, I headed to the living room and lit the room up briefly. The lighter showed that the Black Madonna was gone, and the drawer underneath her pedestal hung open and empty. I took the borrowed jeans and underwear out, hesitated, then stuffed them back into my backpack. The itching had eased up with the long walk, but I figured the landing was a good place for an insurance smoke. I lit a fresh joint and with my first drag, the unmistakable sound of singing, came from above.

“Oluroumbi, oh,

Joun joun,

Iroko joun joun.”

I’d climbed a couple of flights when the muted clunk of car doors shutting reached me. I took a last drag then killed the chronic.

“This is a waste of time.” As usual, he sounded like knives being sharpened, but today there was a hint of shovel blades piercing wet earth thrown in.

I froze.

“Yeah, I know. I hope she’s really MIA, she creeps me out.” Kẹhinde’s voice was almost buried by the sound of their steps, scraping the broken glass along.

“We’ve met worse.”

“Yeah. But the shit that old woman did was for us, not to us.” A flashlight beam bounced everywhere as they climbed the stairs.

“You know, I think Yòṁì is a little scared of this one.”

“I thought he had the hots for her.”

“Him? He’s got no time for that. Unlike his old boy, I don’t think the new All-Father will be fucking around with his congregation.”

“Have some respect.”

“I would, if the old goat had any respect for himself.”

“Do you ever think about ... you know ... what happened to him?”

“I’ve warned you. That’s still an unconfirmed kill, in my book. Plus it was not our gig. And we most definitely, do not talk about it!” Taiwo’s words were whispered, but they hit me in all caps and I was sure I pissed myself a tiny bit.

“Okay, okay. Listen do you think Yòṁì is alright? The brethren from uptown refusing to

go along with him must have been a blow. Does he seem a little off?”

“Later bro. Look!”

“Sure that’s her door?”

“Yeah, and why’s it open?”

“You smell anything?”

“Hmm, yeah. Incense. You?”

“I thought I caught a whiff of that killer weed.”

The hallway went dim, and I didn’t hear anything for a while.

I was tempted to bolt, but the smell of the singing came back and soothed me still.

“Looters?” They stumbled, and Kẹhinde’s whisper sounded hopeful.

“Bit of broken glass were tracked straight into the bedroom, then out again. That would be a very specific looter.” The torchlight came back on and sent a beam of light up the stairs.

“Perhaps it’s another of their insane rituals, and she disappeared herself? You know they can do that, right?” Kẹhinde followed the beam up, but only for one flight.

“Unless...” Taiwo sounded pensive.

“Unless what?”

“What size are that fucking new gal’s sneakers?”

“Come on, how would she have got here?”

“We can check on her room when we get back.”

“Yeah, okay.” Kẹhinde sounded relieved.

“We need to keep an eye on that one. Bẹkọ was bad enough, but at least he’s occupied with his newly fucked up app.”

“We will outlast them all.”

“Yeah. I know. First, we need to check the Roosevelt Island connect.” From the sound of Taiwo’s rapid steps, he had to work hard to catch up with his brother.

I waited till I heard two car doors shut before I raced up the steps, but the rest of the house was empty. It was on my way down, that I noticed the door to the flat directly above hers was also open. It was devoid of furniture but littered with mattresses and smelled of locker rooms. On one mattress, there was a single, turned-inside-out Brazilian soccer shirt.

Beating the twins back to the Consulate was my only priority, but I had to the guards on duty to contend with. I was blowing hard when I got to the 47th Street roadblock. Kojo’s laugh reached my ears, and I thanked the orishàs that look out for fools, drunkards, and pot-heads.

I palmed him a smoke, and he ushered me through.

“Kai! My sister, hope notin’.” He looked at me sidelong as we jogged down the avenue.

“Kojo, no be small thing. I get to reach dat building before...”

“Before what?”

“Na Tade dey for dis checkpoint, abi?” I hoped against hope.

“If na Tade, e for be betta thing. Na one I-too-sabi guy wey dey dere. In fact, you no go vex oh, but I mus’ turn back. E better if dat yeye man no see me. If katakata burst, I go talk say I go piss, na dat time you take pass.” His face was damp, and I knew it was not all from the exertion.

“You done try, tank you, my brother. Praise der Lawd.”

“Alleluyah.” He turned back.

The cackle of random orìsàs raised hairs on the back of my neck as I pressed on.

“State your name.” He wore a black shirt now, but his eyes lit up when he saw me, though his mouth turned down.

“You know who I am.”

“Yes, I do. I know by the shape of your head; you are a demon. I know you are a Jezebel; I know you lie with women; I know you are a fornicator.” He plucked a walkie-talkie handset from his waistband.

“Look, let me in and I’ll explain. Take this, first.” I thrust the tee shirt at him.

He laughed out loud and brought the walkie-talkie up to his ear.

“Listen, dickless. I’ll see your hand cut off before I let you turn me in.” I reached across with my free hand and grabbed his arm.

That was a mistake.

I was swept back to that house on the hill, arrived in the circular room with a thought, and a breath set me floating to a stop in front of a large window. The walls of the room were tinged in red, and the window had a rusted metal frame. It had no shutters, curtains or coverings and I peered in greedily. The room it opened into was filled with billows of red smoke and looking at each wisp hurt my eyes. I pulled back but a blur of movement, accompanied by thrashing sounds made me look in again.

That was my second, compounding mistake.

The smoke cleared enough so that the images I saw could burn into my brain. A kinky haired girl with a funny-shaped head and a machete in her hand was crouched over a supine black-shirted form. Worse followed, as I felt the roughness of the machete handle against my palm, and its heft as it began its downswing. A wet thud was followed by an all-over body

spasm, followed by a deep grunt from the Virgin. I screamed, but the sound did not escape my head. Then I was back on 2nd Ave, clutching a quivering young man by the arm. My skin was on fire and my eyes felt hot and itchy.

“My... my hand.” He dropped the walkie-talkie, then collapsed.

I fell to my knees and tried to hush him. The itching stopped and I shivered in the shadow of the Consulate.

I pulled away at first, before I realized it was Kojo, lifting me up. The Virgin twitched uncontrollably at our feet, stretched out in a growing puddle of piss.

“My sister, you done pass me, oh.” Considering the situation, Kojo was remarkably calm.

I was not.

“I no sabi wetin do de guy oh, na so he just begin dey halla...” My chest felt as if a ball of fire had formed in it and was forcing its way up my throat.

“Take am easy. Na useless guy, dat him kwe kwe head done catch am today.” Kojo looked down and carefully let go of my arm.

“Okay, you sabi wetin we go do?” He pulled the weed from his pocket and put it in his unconscious colleague’s.

“Wetin?”

“I go talk say na so I see am. I go say him just craze for my very before. Dem go find the gbana for him pocket. Case closed.”

“Kojo, you dey pass be careful oh. You sure?”

“I done talk say dis ya head as dem mold am, sometin’ dey there. I hear say the All-Father done quench. I know say the new All-Father go need you. Dose oyinbo twins suppose to fear somebody, abi I lie? Carry go, no be me go try stop you.”

“I no go forget.” I walked backward for a while, then waved to him before I turned, and jogged toward the Consulate.

The crackle of static, followed by the sound of car brakes squealing made me break into a run.

I worked the keys and climbed as if remotely controlled and made it to the room just in time. My shoes flew off by the door, then I skidded on my knees into the bathroom and to the toilet bowl. I’m not sure how long I retched for, but when I looked up, the sun had taken over the room as if she’d paid for it.

I stripped off my clothes and trashed the rusty-looking tampon. The boxers felt like an ill omen and I junked them as well. I sat on the floor in the stall, shivering from the chill of my memories despite the unending needles of hot water.

His arm continued to thrum in my grasp; while somewhere else, somewhere that didn’t make sense, I hacked off his right hand. The images played on a loop in the front of my mind. I saw pale bone exposed, grey tendons sliced, pink vessels popping out, and then all was red.

My knees needed hugging. I gazed at the water running down the drain and told myself that the Virgin was disturbed, that my touch was at most coincidental. I told myself I was not a monster, nor a witch, and didn’t have any markings on my body so I couldn’t be Amavi.

I eventually hauled myself upright, changed into a bathrobe and sat on the bed. Another wave of itching hit, prompting a soft whisper from the weed in my backpack. Before I could respond, there was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” I put a yawn in my voice and padded across the room.

“Room check.” He still sounded like a grave-digging knife sharpener.

“What’s up?” I opened the door a crack.

“There was a disturbance outside the building. We are checking to see if any of you saw or heard anything?”

“All the way up here?”

“Well, did you?.”

“I heard nothing.” I moved to shut the door.

“One moment.”

“Yeah?”

“What’s that smell?”

“I don’t know. What is it?” I kept my face blank, but it hurt.

“Hmm.” His eyes flashed beyond me, into the room.

“Goodbye.”

“You should take better care of your shoes. Those must be quite valuable.” He smiled, and the scars on his face smiled with him.

“Uh-huh,” I half-turned, thought better, and pushed the door shut.

One of my sneakers had landed on its side.

The tiny shards of embedded glass in its sole reflected the room lighting. It was quite pretty.

I kicked the guilty shoe halfway across the room. My thoughts were still jumbled, and I stopped rubbing my bare wrist as soon as I got the doobie between my fingers. The lighter flame burned the same color as Taiwo's scars. I hesitated, put the smoke away, and went back to my Jordans.

It took about a half hour to pick out the larger bits of glass, with help from the odd sniff of a tightly rolled cigarette. My itching quieted down, and I changed into a clean tee, packed again, then sat on a chair to wait.

Sleep pulled me in, but I was frequently startled awake by vivid dreams. The memories faded swiftly, but I desperately chased and clung to one in which a beautiful blue-grey hawk with reddish bars on her chest glided in lazy circles outside my window. When I woke, I went to the window, idly wondering how I'd known the hawk was a "Her." I fancied I could hear the Virgin's moans, floating up from the pavement.

Kehinde showed up to escort me downstairs. He wore an ankara shirt, the ubiquitous CRB logo embedded in its pattern, and khaki pants, over combat boots.

"What news of Arike?" I asked.

He shook his head and yawned his way through the short trip.

Handover of the keys went smoothly, and Tinuke kept her face so blank, as she dished me yam and egg stew, I walked away a little scared of her. I downed a jug of water with my two helpings.

Taiwo and Kehinde took turns sitting by the door so that although Beko sat across from me, we barely communicated. Pretty Chi-chi, Not-So-Pretty, Tall-with-glasses, and Stocky Ankara-shirt guy sat at the end of the table and treated me as if I'd sprouted blonde locks.

I waited till Taiwo had guard duty. He looked incongruous in his ankara top, and kept adjusting a non-existent tie. The image of the Virgin lying in a puddle, convulsing, and moaning,

pushed me to approach him.

“Yes?” He looked startled.

“So was anyone hurt? During the disturbance ?” I asked.

“Shut the fuck up!” He hissed.

“What’s that?” Bẹkọ looked up from futzing with his tablet.

The others stopped eating.

“The disturbance? Early this morning? Taiwo came to check if I heard anything. Did any of you ?” I looked at my classmates.

They all looked blank.

“Seriously? Nobody else? You checked with nobody else?!” I felt lightheaded but couldn’t back down.

“You witch...” He uncoiled out of his chair, and I shut my eyes.

Things might have become messy if Kẹhinde, then Yòmi hadn’t walked into the room.

“Èwò wa ni yen?” Yòmi’s tone was of the kind you’d reserve for kindergartners.

“Sorry, Sir. Ẹ ma binu Sir.” Taiwo folded both hands behind his back.

“Binu kẹ? Surely you jest. At this moment, when we are at our most vulnerable, you choose to lose your discipline? I should send you back to the field where we found you.” Yòmi crossed his arms.

“I am sorry Sir; I might have provoked him. We’ve been wondering ... what happened with Arike.” I felt my bracelet sitting in his pocket, whispering its impatience.

“Arike is resting. I understand you have dubbed these gentlemen Taiwo and Kẹhinde?”

“Sorry Sir, I didn’t know what to call them.”

“You could have asked. But I like Taiwo and Kẹhinde, though. It brings them closer.”

“Okay, Sir.”

“I have no meetings outside, this morning. Taiwo was to take you to view a site for me. Perhaps you’d better go with Kẹhinde?” He took the teacher’s spot at the top of the room.

“Bọdunrin, Taiwo will take you and the ladies to check on the latest deliveries. Please confirm the status of climate control and ensure the records are updated. Kọlá, you will be dropped off at Chelsea Piers, so you validate the rest of the manifest. Bẹkọ, we need to talk about the new project. Any questions?” Yòmi’s hand was back in his pocket.

“Sir? Do we leave today?” Bẹkọ asked.

Yòmi nodded.

We looked at each other, and the nervous energy was almost visible.

“So, we will travel on the ship that the Nigerian government expects us to, after all?” Bẹkọ’s brow was furrowed.

“There are safeguards. The Brazilian contingent and part of the British one will travel with us, and I let it be known that there is a lot of treasure on board. Even if the Nigerian government discounted the presence of such illustrious passengers, they would want to get their hands on any valuables they can. The ship is safe.” His lips pursed as he glanced at me, then at his wristwatch.

“Sir? The site?” I asked.

He pointed to Kẹhinde.

“Sorry, Sir.” I dodged Taiwo’s eye-fuckery and trailed his brother out of the room. The whispers faded as we left.

The elevator car felt roomier. It took a while to sink in, but the picture of the All Father-that-was had been removed. The elevator descended to the basement in silence, and I followed Kẹhinde to the Town Cars. We entered the more battered vehicle, and I sat in the rear.

I shoved my backpack into the footwell and clicked on the seatbelt. As we exited the elevator, the itching had started up again, but it eased off in stages. There were a lot of 7th Naija Ninjas at the roadblocks and Kẹhinde had to step out each time, to talk us through. I leaned back against the headrest and considered the option of doing a drop, tuck and roll once he got moving. I followed that train and tugged at the door handle. It snickered at me, and I couldn't find the central locking catch. Kẹhinde got back in, and we took off across town. He'd barely acknowledged me all day, so I was surprised when he spoke.

"Somebody called Tade just asked after you."

"Uh-huh. What'd you tell him?"

"Nothing. Are you alright?"

"What do you care?"

"I don't but you need to get back to being a bitch, or you're no use to the church. Or to the rest of us." He glanced up at the rearview mirror.

"Where are we going?" Somehow he'd gotten us onto 5th and was headed uptown.

"You'll see."

"What did he mean, Arikẹ is resting?" I sat up.

He was quiet, but I saw his grimace.

"Okay, I'll try something simpler. What happened at the roadblock last night?"

"How did you know where the disturbance occurred?" His eyes flashed up to the mirror

and held mine.

“Calm down. There were no disturbances reported, but there was an army at each checkpoint just now, instead of the usual one or two guards. Somebody must have tried to enter and was repelled?”

“Hmm. Yeah, okay. One of the guards was messed up by weed. With that mammy-watta missing in action, we don’t have anyone who can help him.”

“But he’s alive?”

“What’s it to you?” He glanced at the mirror again.

“Mammy-watta? The Brazilian lady? She’s gone?”

“Yeah. It’s strange, we haven’t seen her since yesterday. Any idea where she might be?”

“Who, me? Not the foggiest. But final question; is it true the streets of New Ifè are lined with gold?”

He laughed so hard; he almost ran into an empty row of e-bike parking slots.

“Where did you get that from?” He snorted.

“Well, there’ve always been rumours. And Yòmì as much as admitted that the Brits paid handsomely for the church’s services. Which begs the question, how did the US pay for all the favors the church has done so far? Gold would be a logical answer. Yòmì also mentioned that the ship was loaded with ‘treasure.’ I don’t think he was speaking about a few statues.” I rubbed my hands on my pants legs and tried to laugh.

“Well, I can confirm that the streets of New Ifè or any other city in Nigeria are NOT paved with gold. And did you think that maybe we’re just doing God’s work? That is its own reward.” He drove.

“Hmm.”

“And a word to the wise. Stop baiting my brother.” He kept his eyes on the road and switched sides on the dual carriageway till we got to the 86th Street transverse.

There were a few potholes, and plant life was well-established in most of them. He turned onto Central Park West and again, ancient memories made me feel unease from travelling down an up street. Road signs were mostly missing, but I recognized that we were at the corner of 85th when he pulled over, switched off the engine, then released the central locking door catch.

“Now what?” I asked.

“The All-Father-to-be asked me to stick with you, but he’s not been himself. There’d be nothing left of the ride if I did. So the deal is you go into this slice of the park and observe for a while. Those wild kids usually sleep all day but be careful, you never know.” He got out of the car and shut the door gently, as he scanned the countless empty window frames that looked down at us.

“Observe? Observe what?”

“How would I know? Just get to it, the park is that way.” He snapped.

“Okay. Okay.” I opened the door and stepped out.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“You have to leave your bag.” He pointed at my backpack.

I was still laughing as I hitched my backpack up and climbed the slope that fed me into the park. To the left of the entrance, there was a partly fenced-off kid’s playground. Dozens of carriages were parked on the grass, and a bunch of felled trees was piled on the verge beside them. It was rare to find such a space; one that didn’t smell of dried-out shit or rotting corpses. An instinct made me look up, but the postcard-blue sky didn’t have a cloud in it. Except for a dot

hovering far above, barely flapping its wings.

The ground sloped downwards then to the right, so I allowed it to pull me that way. The weeds were at head-height, but specks of red flickered at ground level if I looked hard enough. A sweet smell came at me with each shimmer, and I breathed deep.

I felt giddy and squinted at the track of deep footprints that showed up shades greener than the surrounding turf. My vision blurred and I staggered in their wake. A few moments later, I came across a roughly carved flight of steps, etched into the side of a massive rock. My legs were as heavy as sin, and my tee shirt was soaked when I got to the top of the steps. I unhitched my backpack, then dug out my lighter and one of the spliffs. I keeled over before I could do much more.

So there I was, flat on my back, balanced on top of an abandoned meteorite, holy herb in one hand, and my lighter in the other. Blazing up while lying down is usually a soulful experience but again, I hesitated. I had to work through a headache before I could put the weed and the lighter away. Right on cue, I heard flapping wings and felt the soft caress of a shadow passing over me.

The dizziness receded, and exchanged places with a familiar song,

“Oluroumbi, oh,
Joun joun,
Iroko joun joun.”

I joined in for a couple of choruses and waited for her to come to me.

“*Can you see me?*” I figured it was another of those waking dreams, so I kept my eyes,

and my mouth shut.

“Yes, what can YOU see?” Her presence was back to it’s warm, brown-eyed self.

“My eyes are closed and you’re in my imagination, so I don’t know the rules.”

“Do you know where you are?”

“I thought I did, until you asked. But you’ll tell me, right?”

“I cannot open your eyes for you.”

“Yeah, yeah. I like them closed right now. Listen, the woman in that photo in your apartment ...

“If you will fulfill your destiny, if you will grow into that head, you must begin by educating yourself. You must also have patience. Until soon, then.”

“Wait. What?” I shouted, opened my eyes, and heaved myself upright.

Typical, even my imaginary friends are taking shots at me. There was nobody else up on that rock with me, but the sound of someone pounding up the stairs was real.

“We must leave.” Kẹhinde was sweating but wasn’t out of breath.

“Did you see anybody?”

“Not so loud. You’re attracting attention with your singing. A couple of kids just checked me out and dashed off.”

“So they’ve gone, then?”

“We have to move!” He pulled me to my feet by my shirt, shoved my backpack into my hand, and hustled me toward the steps.

I pulled free and looked back at the rock, just in time to see the spots of red fade away.

“Come on!” He tried to grab my arm.

I swung at him with everything I had left.

Fortunately for us both, I missed by a mile and fell over. He tried to help me up, then thought better of it.

“Stop pushing me around!” I screamed.

“Um, technically I was pulling at you, but...”

“Aaaaaaaarrrrrgggghhhhh!!!!” My throat was raw, but it felt good.

He folded his arms while I sat there, chest heaving. I couldn’t stop the tears.

“We are exposed here. We need to get back to the car before those little bastards come back with big bastards. You understand?” He motioned as if herding chickens.

My tears degraded into sobs, and then by way of some demented-sounding giggles, went sideways into laughter.

“Great. You’d better get it together. I’ll go fetch the car and I’ll meet you out there.” He muttered something under his breath, then he was off.

I was still laughing as I put my stuff away, then jogged down the stone steps toward the 81st Street exit. Kehinde was already at the 85th Street junction, shooing away a couple of kids as he entered the car. They wouldn’t be shooed. I ran up the avenue toward him but was stopped cold by the street-level view into the park. The outcropping I’d just been standing on took up most of the available horizon. It looked like it should’ve been named Pride Rock and my laughter left me, as its exposed side glittered with red veins.

Behind me, a scattering of barely clothed kids appeared on the transverse that led out from the park onto the 81st Street exit. Beyond them, more small bodies tumbled out of the trees and hit the ground with legs already pumping. The car screeched to a stop, and I jumped into the front seat. Just before we took off, something thunked into the roof. Their screaming faces were near enough for me to see their scars and broken teeth. We didn’t stop.

The car limped into the Consulate with about a double-A battery's worth of charge left in it. I hauled myself out to find Kẹhinde already rolling out the charging cables.

"If we hustle, we might be able to get something to eat before we leave." He shouted over his shoulder.

"Look." I pointed.

There was an honest-to-God arrow stuck at an angle into the roof of the car.

Kẹhinde dropped the cable and did a backward hop. His eyes bugged out and he let out a long stream of swear words. Then he started over, in English. After a few deep breaths, he untangled the cabling and plugged the car into the wall.

"Arrows? Fucking arrows?" He walked around the car.

I felt a twinge as if the itching was preparing an assault, but I rubbed my neck and it faded.

"I.need.to.show.this.to.my.brother..." Kẹhinde grunted with each tug, then raised the arrow aloft when the car roof released its grip.

"May I see that?" I asked.

He hesitated, then pointed the fletching at me.

The arrowhead felt heavy. It also looked layered, as if strips of metal had been folded onto each other, and it had blocky white lettering on a green background.

"Street signs," he said, "They're repurposing street signs."

"Time to get out of Dodge?" I handed it back.

“He will know what to do.” He badged us into the elevator.

“You really respect Tai ... your brother, don’t you?”

He was silent.

“I wish I had a brother. Shit, I wish I had somebody, anybody.” I kept very still.

“He saved my life, too many times to count.”

“At Ọyòtúnjì?”

“Even before that madness. I had a girl. She wasn’t who the family ... wanted for me. He was the only person who stuck by us.”

“Aah. Your family, eh? She was Black, right?”

“You must understand. In NC, we tend to stay in our lanes. Then the Sickness happened, and everybody became crazy.” He wiped his face with his sleeve, and almost stabbed himself.

“Here, let me take that.” I stripped his fingers back and took the arrow.

“You don’t understand.. Things were getting hot, with conspiracy theories flying around. She and her family moved into the Ọyòtúnjì compound. She wanted me to come with her. But...”

“You didn’t go.”

His arms hung straight down, and I patted his huge forearm.

“Do you think you can find out how Arikẹ is? And the guy at the checkpoint” The doors chose that moment to open on Yòmì, Bẹkọ and Taiwo. Bẹkọ was handing them each a walkie-talkie handset.

I let my hand drop, and Kẹhinde pulled back.

“I think it’s your turn, Taiwo.” Yòmì nodded at me.

“Yes Sir.”

“Are you all right?” Yòmi looked at Kẹhinde, who wiped his eyes with both hands, then nodded back.

“You. How was your expedition?” He leaned toward me.

“It was a bust, Sir. We had to escape a mob of armed feral kids. It might have helped if I knew ...”

“Hmm. That’s a pity. Remind me again, who’s Taiwo and who’s Kẹhinde ?” He stepped into the elevator and held the door open.

“You’ve got Kẹhinde,” I muttered, as I stepped out.

“Kẹhinde, you will drive me to the pier. We can debrief on the way. Taiwo, swap keys with your brother and bring her up to speed. Bẹkọ, please give Kẹhinde his handset.” Yòmi’s buoyant mood puzzled me.

The elevator door closed but Kẹhinde stopped it from shutting.

“I won’t need this. You might.” He handed his access card to his brother, then they were gone.

“Leave him alone! You hear me?” I backed up as Taiwo crowded me.

“Hey, take it easy.” Bẹkọ stepped between us and took the arrow.

“She’s clearly one of them!” Spittle flew everywhere, and Taiwo’s scars lit up.

“Where did you get this?” Bẹkọ studied the arrowhead.

“Um, some real New York kids chased us out of Central Park, and we came away with this souvenir.” I kept my eyes on Taiwo.

“Aah, you were at the Seneca Village site, then?” Bẹkọ brought it up to his face.

“The what, now?”

“Aah, fuck the two of you. I’m going to check the transport.” Taiwo called the elevator,

and he stalked in.

Bekọ and I looked at him expressionlessly.

He glared back at us, until the elevator doors closed.

“That guy does not like you,” Bekọ said.

“You think?”

“I’d be careful. Here, he’s largely supervised by the All Father-to-be. When we’re in New Ifẹ, things will be a little less structured. You’ll need to watch your back.”

“My life keeps getting better. First, thanks for the smokes, but what’s this Sneaker Village ?”

“Kai! SE.NE.CA, not sneaker. Seneca Village. It’s a site that predates Central Park and used to house an African-American settlement. It was razed, to make way for the park sometime in the 1800s.” He sighed, deeply.

“How didn’t I know about this? And you got all that from this bit of metal?” I pointed at the arrow.

“Two of the small letter Ms survived their crude metalworking. I guessed it came from ‘Summit Rock.’ The highest point in the park and a key location in the Village when it thrived.” He chewed at his lower lip.

“That’s a stretch, although I might have encountered the rock.” I frowned.

“The All-Fath ... Yòmi sent me to a place that also reeked of a painful, suppressed history. I was also supposed to ‘see what I could see.’ And report back to him.”

“Huh. Where was this?”

“Washington Square Park. Downtown.”

“I know where it is. What did you see?”

“Did you know that Washington Square used to be a gravesite in the late 18th and early 19th centuries? It was mainly for slaves, or folk that couldn’t afford a proper funeral. By that I mean slaves.”

“No fucking way...” I gasped.

“Yeah. It was tough. You can’t un-feel the pain if you know what I mean?” He glanced at me.

“Yeah, I think I do. What’d you tell him?”

“I told him I didn’t see shit. He couldn’t ask me directly, anyhow, especially as we’re a Chuuuurch. I mean, was I supposed to tell him that the smell of extinguished lives hung over the park? And that the souls wander until their foreshortened lives somehow re-gain some meaning?” He looked away.

“Ìrò gbà!” I slapped my hands against my cheeks.

“Chi-chi and I may have work-shopped some likely responses; just in case.”

“Oh. Chi-chi knows about this?” My smoke was wearing off; the itch picked up again.

“Yeah, he sent her to the African Burial Ground. That place was atiff with suffering.”

“Yeah Shall we find the others?” I headed down the corridor.

“Listen, until I work up a tech solution, we need to make a plan to monitor the under-tongue thing.” He pulled his tablet computer out of his cargo pants pocket, and fired it up as we walked, “And I need to figure out why I’m getting the same reading for every divination I make with this damn program.”

“Um, okay?”

“And we still need to talk about your Brazilian friend.”

“First, do you have any idea what Yòmi needed from church elders in Harlem?”

“No, beyond their tithes you mean?” he looked at me, then away.

“Yeah, forget it.”

“Any ideas about the missing mammy-watta, then?”

“Yeah, I um, found something that made me think she’s been working with those footballers.”

“Hmm. She asked me way too casually about the list of artworks being repatriated. Could she have got them to tamper with anything?”

“No idea. Crap, this is too confusing ...”

“And I’m guessing that you, um, found that clue during your recent excursion?”

“Damn, Tinuke couldn’t keep her mouth shut, could she?” I shook my head.

“Of what use would she be then?” He fell about, laughing.

The hubbub in the conference-room-turned-cafeteria faded when Bëko and I pushed in. Eyes switched beyond us expectantly, but I shut the door firmly. For a beat, we stood at the top of the room, side-by-side. There was a smattering of applause and a few whoops. I saw Tinuke’s back, curved over a trash bin, and was torn between going to her, and responding to the room.

The decision was made for me, when Not-So-Pretty waved me over. I walked around the table, behind Tall-with-glasses and Stocky Ankara-shirt guy. Their names still wouldn’t stick, so I bumped fists and threw a “Hey, bud,” and a “What’s up, bro,” in passing. They both nodded, and I saw a scattering of mirrored glass shards on the table in front of them, next to a pile of sandpaper sheets.

“What’s the deal?” I nodded at the table.

“Well, somebody had the genius idea of making up small mirrors, so we can all monitor the growth of white hairs in any strange areas.” Stocky Ankara-shirt-guy smirked.

“So you had an idea, Kólá. About time.” Tall-with-glasses rejoined.

“Yeah, cool idea bro, but perhaps we should build in a fail-safe?” I said.

“What do you mean?” Stocky asked.

“I think she means, just in case one of us does find something, what guarantee is there that he or she would self-report?” Bẹkọ said.

They both looked up, then at each other.

“Well, I might not have used those words, but there you are.” I said.

“I’m not far from a tech-based solution, just so you know.” Bẹkọ drifted over to the food trolley and opened random serving dishes. Tinukẹ’s face lit up.

“So what’s the point?” Tall-with-glasses threw his spectacless, as well as the bit of sand-paper he was working with, onto the table.

“Hey. The mirrors are a great idea. But we should also pair up so that after we check, somebody else verifies.” I picked up a piece and rubbed at its edges for smoothness, then I wagged my tongue at it. Everyone paused, so I gave a thumb’s up, then put it into one of the side pockets of my backpack. Bẹkọ looked at me, with his head cocked to one side. Then he smiled and nodded.

If I’d ever gone to school, I imagine the first day would have felt like this. I had Pretty Chi-chi and Not-So-Pretty spinning my chair first one way, then the other to share gossip about the men. Stocky Ankara-shirt-guy and Tall-with-glasses both went, “Aaaaah” at the same time, then had to negotiate who would stick out his tongue first, and who would look. Bẹkọ looked

bemused. There was giggling, laughter, and dizziness. And there was itching, on my part.

It was wonderful.

“We don’t have time for this! Listen, I will check Bẹkọ. You guys, face each other.” I looked at Bẹkọ, and he picked up a mirrored shard and scowled at it.

“Okay but you’ll need a couple of tic-tacs before I let you breath at me.” He had another plate of food in front of him.

“Ugh, just like a man. We know where your tongue has been. Do any of us want to inspect that, ladies?” I thought it was funny, and the room erupted.

Bẹkọ smiled as he dropped the mirror and tackled his latest meal.

I got up to investigate the food trolley, and as I did, my eyes met Tinuke’s.

Her ladle hung straight down by her side, and it dripped slick, red droplets onto the carpet. Her eyes flashed from Bẹkọ to me, then back again. Trailing spots of oily stew, she walked out.

I winced, clenched both fists, and pointed out her disappearing back to Bẹkọ. He shrugged. I got to the door just as Taiwo entered.

“Where do you think you’re going?” He pulled the door shut.

“I need to have a word with Tinuke.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“Hey, Taiwo. What’s up? Are we going to the boat now or what?” Bẹkọ smiled.

“Don’t call me that! You’re going to get a call.” He pointed to Bẹkọ’s handset, just before it squawked.

Bẹkọ looked at the walkie-talkie, then sat up straight and answered.

The static was bad, but when he walked to a corner and stood with one hand behind his

back as he responded, we all figured he was speaking with Yòmì.

“Yes, Sir...”

“What? How? Whose ...”

“Yes, they’ll fit. No problem...” He pulled out his tablet PC as he spoke and switched it on.

“All of us?”

Static.

“Now?” He grimaced and shook his head as he spoke.

Garbled message.

“Okay, um, over.” He cut the call.

“Hey, guys. There’s been a massive change of plan. We’ll be going ...” Bẹkọ started.

“That’s enough. You go and load up; I’ll be right behind you. You can explain to your crew on the way down.” Taiwo interrupted.

“But will we have enough space?” Bẹkọ scrolled through an open spreadsheet.

“The samples have been sorted. Kọla has confirmed that your salvaged stuff, and his books are all secured. You just need to worry about your specialized equipment. You know, for your other project.” Taiwo was the most jovial I’d ever seen him.

“Okay, okay. How about the elevator?” Bẹkọ frowned.

“Catch.” Taiwo flicked him a card.

Bẹkọ caught it and looked at me.

“No, no, no, young lady. You stay.” Taiwo relished the finger wag, but I think he enjoyed the look on Bẹkọ’s face more.

“What do you mean she stays?” Bẹkọ burst out.

We looked from Bẹkọ to Taiwo and back again.

“Is this the All-Father’s wish?” Bẹkọ asked.

“I’m following orders and would suggest you do the same. Call him if you doubt. And if you dare.” His eyes were red, but the scars on his face remained as white as bacon fat.

Bẹkọ hefted the walkie-talkie but didn’t call.

“Let’s go guys. Tani, we’ll see you at the ... we’ll see you soon. I’ll call Yòmi if there are any further delays.” He walked to the door and held it open.

Pretty Chi-chi hesitated and was almost at the door when she spun on her heel, came back, and hugged me.

“Stay safe.” She gave Taiwo a filthy look.

The other three looked at the floor before they each gave a quick wave, stopped to pick up pieces of mirrored glass, and trooped out.

The door shut behind them, and it felt awful.

“Okay, so what now?” I clutched the straps of my backpack.

“Now, you wait. There’s something I need to check.” Taiwo left, and I heard a key turn in the lock.

I ripped up the photo I’d taken from Red, and dug out the kalakuta. I really intended to junk the three remaining fatties, but they looked so cool and tempting, that I relented. I rolled them into a clean pair of underpants, pushed it to the bottom of the backpack, and hoped for the best. Just in case opportunity presented itself, I took out the half-smoke I’d had since the African Burial Ground and put that in my pocket with the lighter.

Bẹkọ had left the arrow on the table, and I tried to snap the shaft, but it didn’t even bend. I gave up just as I heard the door unlock.

“Let’s go.” Taiwo came in.

“What’s going on?”

“I’ll take that.” He grabbed the arrow.

He gestured with it, and I walked out sideways. As I passed him, he peeled my backpack off my shoulder and easily held me off afterward. I was forced to follow him. The elevator was waiting, so he stepped in and held the door for me.

I stood in a corner then forced air in and out of my lungs until I could speak calmly.

“What’s the change in plans?” I asked.

“The All-Father-to-be struck a deal with the British Royals. We’ll be using their plane and they will travel by sea.” He swished the arrow as if it was a riding crop.

“Ìrò! How? Why would they...?”

“The unspoken part of the deal is that we won’t put a time limit on their visit to New Ifè. We found enough aviation fuel so the plane will get to Lagos, but not much further. So we gain a plane.” He smiled.

“But will they be safe?”

“There are so many repatriated artifacts on board; statues of deities and whatnot, that I can’t think of a better-protected vessel.” He laughed as if he’d cracked the world’s funniest joke.

“Huh.”

“I’d be worrying more about myself if I was you.”

“Oh yeah? Why?”

“Because I just had a chat with the messwoman. She’s very upset with you. And with Bẹkọ, for some reason.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Aaah, I think you do. She claims you entered her head and made her an accomplice, the night you left the building and assaulted that poor, innocent security guard. She is sure that the proof will be found in this backpack. I think you’d be too smart to have kept any contraband on you. But we’ll find out soon, won’t we?” His eyes gleamed.

Right on cue, the door opened on the parking level, and I was consumed by a fresh wave of itching.

Chapter 6 Àjọ ni tilú; Ọba ló l'agbo. (The assembly is for the people; to the king belongs the crowd.)

The car was still plugged into the wall outlet, and the hole in its roof looked right at home.

“Where’s everyone?” I forced a smile into my voice.

“The bus won’t make it up the ramps. They’ll be loading it up out in front.” He opened the trunk and dropped my backpack in.

Next, he went to coil the cables away, and I sat in the back, directly behind his seat. We drove down the parking floors, and stopped at the lip of the ramp as a decrepit-looking bus backed in from the avenue, its near-side wheels bumped up onto the curb. In profile, the driver looked familiar, but I drew a blank at the sight of his copper-colored skin.

Steps away, Bẹkọ supervised a small army of multicolored shirts, as they stacked large, silver-colored equipment boxes onto the pavement in front of the Consulate. Taiwo got out of the car, and the slam of his door merged with the click of the central locking system. I knew it was no use, but I tugged at the door catch anyway.

Taiwo huddled with Bẹkọ and the others in the shadow of the bus and used the arrow for emphasis while he spoke. Bẹkọ stood with arms crossed and chin jutting out. Taiwo was more animated than I’d ever seen him, and everyone gave him a wide berth. At one stage, he pointed the arrow in my direction. They turned as one, gave me the same bitter smile, and then looked away.

Pretty Chi-chi and Not-So-Pretty dragged wheeled cabin bags but the guys all had backpacks and duffels. Bẹkọ ferried a crazy number of pieces into the bus, and tired from screaming, I watched as the back seats filled up. The bus driver kicked tires and checked engine vitals, and when he looked in my direction, he waved. I waved back frantically but he’d resumed

his checks.

My classmates boarded the bus without a backward look, and soon they were lost in a billow of greasy smoke. Taiwo sprinted to the Town Car, threw the arrow into the passenger side footwell, then nosed after them.

I blinked furiously and tried to ignore his drumming on the steering wheel. We headed toward the East River, and at every block, there were clumps of saluting members of the 7th Naija Ninjas. Taiwo's handest routinely picked up crosstalk but we mostly rode in silence.

"How many are there?" I asked.

"As many as necessary." He sounded like a proud father.

"I didn't know..."

"That the All Father-to-be generates so much love? He is a great man and has huge plans for New Ife's and Africa's rebirth. His people can sense that."

"Uh-huh."

"I would die for him."

"I don't doubt that."

"Understand this. When Pastor Ezra passed away, I recommended we get rid of the diviners, the fetishists, and the deceivers. But..."

"Wait, what?"

"Oh, you didn't know Pastor Ezra started this shit show?"

"I didn't, and why're you telling me all this now?"

He didn't respond.

We approached the Queens Midtown tunnel, and I was even more impressed by the army of CRB volunteers that appeared, always just in time to slide obstacles away from our path and

push them back into place after us. It was a miracle of choreography and blind faith, but I'd have liked it more, if one of them didn't look as if he planned to murder me at the end of this ride.

"How's Arike?"

"A martyr."

"And the young man from the roadblock?"

"Don't think I believe any of your fake concern. You wrecked his mind and his reputation." He sneered.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." I recalled the events that led up to the Virgin's losing his mind, and felt for the half-smoke and lighter in my pocket.

"Yes you do." We were on the Long Island Expressway and the distances between the roadside CRB crews increased.

"They think he's in the car, don't they?"

"Shut up." He snarled.

Taiwo was glued to his walkie-talkie handset and constantly barked queries. Ahead of us, the bus backfired, then slowed down. Fortunately, we had gravity on our side, and they coasted onto the JFK access lane.

Taiwo overtook the bus and gunned it. A surviving sign indicated we were headed toward the car rentals return area, but we soon left those ravaged buildings behind. I looked back and saw that the bus had dropped further behind. Taiwo reached for the arrow and placed it in his lap. From behind him, I saw his jaws working and my mind raced.

Presently we arrived at a couple of single-story terminals in an otherwise deserted section of the airport. Taiwo screeched down a narrow path, which ran down the side of the first building. Signage painted into the road directed us to "Executive Parking." My heart sank

further, as I realized the bus would not be able to follow. In the parking lot, a high fence separated us from the tarmac, and Taiwo parked in a far corner. As he opened his door and stepped out, he broke the arrow as casually as a promise, then held the part with the arrowhead in his right hand, dagger style.

I opened my door, and he crooked his finger at me.

His scars were bright red.

“This is a mistake,” I said.

“After seeing what you did to that sap, it would be a mistake to let you live.”

“Will Yòmi agree?”

“He will see what a bigger risk you could become, in New Ifè. Besides, he has your awùrè, so I just need to extract a means to control that object from you before I end you.”

“And if I don’t have any secrets to tell?”

“I am the Bullet of God. You will bear witness and the All-Father-to-be will figure out the secrets of the awùrè without you.” He looked and sounded so calm; I almost believed him.

“Okay. Last favor for a condemned woman, then?” I raised the lit blunt and took a deep drag.

Initially, he shrugged, then he frowned and lunged at me.

I flicked the cigarette at him. It bounced off his cheek. He didn’t stop. He was too big for me to get around, so I leaned into him. He pulled me in with one hand and raised the arrowhead in the other. I’d spent a moment, thinking of choice ways for Taiwo to die. In that instant, the image on top of my mind was the final one, common to all the scenarios I’d run through.

I saw him on a patch of ground, with his silhouette stiffened by blood. A vulture sat on his chest, wings outstretched, and its neck pulled into its shoulders, while it shat into his open

mouth.

When I opened my eyes, I was on my hands and knees. A whimpering sound distracted me from the buzzing one that had made itself at home, in the base of my skull. Focusing was difficult, but I eventually tracked the whining to Taiwo. He was a few steps away from me, curled on his side, with his knees pulled up to his chest. He'd picked up the reefer and was trying to suck it back into life. With his other hand, he fended off unseen assailants with the arrowhead. He would occasionally stop to cock his head, while he sang the opening bars of Asa's "*Jailer*."

I lay down and hoped I would hear a familiar song, but that didn't happen. After searching the sky in vain, I blinked my eyes clear and stood up slowly. Not slowly enough. The vomit was of the projectile kind, so my clothing was unmarked. I wiped my mouth with the back of a hand and kept Taiwo in view as I groped behind me for the Town Car.

From the tarmac, a horrific whine started up and got louder. I couldn't see the plane, but its exhaust was warm and pungent. I figured out how to pop the trunk, extracted my backpack, and staggered toward the access road. The bus was parked and empty, save for the driver, who dragged a couple of duffel bags down the steps as I stumbled up.

"Dang. You look like death." He smiled as he said this.

"Where's everybody?"

"Getting a pep talk from your fearless leader. I'd hustle if I was you." He pointed toward the building entrance.

"Yòmi? Yòmi's here? How?" I looked around, the bus was the only vehicle in sight.

“Oh, that guy’s real slick. He and another big white guy in a Hawaiian shirt rocked up on foot, from between those trees. Seems they traveled by boat from Chelsea Piers. They came all the way round Brighton Beach and through Jamaica Bay.”

“What? You can do that?”

“Who’s to stop them? It must have taken forever but nobody was looking in that direction, that’s for sure.” He picked up both duffels.

“Okay, walk slowly. I may need to fall over at some stage.” I took a few tentative steps.

“You don’t remember me, do you?”

“Should I?”

“It’s me.” He dropped the bags, then leaned over and parted the hairs of his afro, so I could see the wiry, auburn roots.

“Red?” I rubbed at my brow.

“Yep. Your all-new bro.”

“Wow. You’re taking it well.”

“The best thing I ever did, going to that service. I confessed to shit that even my subconscious had forgotten. I danced for two days straight and lost half my body weight. It was a righteous idoopay.”

“Good for you. And it’s idupè.”

“Yeah, yeah. That’s what I said, isn’t it?” He laughed.

“And Tracy? Did you see her again?”

His ears darkened, and he looked down.

“Right on. Hey listen there’s some more shit out there you’ll need to lookout for...”

“The White Hairs thing? Thanks, I’m all good. Seems like once you’re saved, you’re

sorted.”

“Cool, but keep an eye out.” I walked.

“Thanks, I will. Hang on.”

“What?”

“You should know, before we drove off, that fuckface told your buddies that you were some kind of crazy witch. He said you’d killed a guy called Ricky? Apparently, you ate Ricky’s shit, or something. He said he was going to hand you over at the State Department airport office. He also said Yòmì knew about this, but that doesn’t compute.” He scratched at his chin.

“Arikẹ? He said I ate her àşẹ?” I looked back at the trail, where I’d left a drooling Taiwo, and my feelings of guilt receded fast.

“Yeah. By the way, what happened to him?” He picked up the bags, and we both set off.

“He’s back there. Plenty on his mind.” I nodded toward the path.

“I was right to fear you. But watch your back, one of your buddies was easily turned.”

“Um, which one?”

“That big guy, the one with the tats. The others didn’t say much, but the pretty girl wanted to give you a chance.”

On the tarmac, we could see Yòmì and Kẹhinde, still holding onto bright orange life vests. They were deep in conversation and stood slightly apart from Bẹkọ, Pretty Chi-chi, and the others. Kẹhinde spoke urgently into his walkie-talkie, and he looked up just as Red and I stepped out. His shoulders sagged and he closed his eyes briefly. At that, Yòmì also looked up, and locked eyes with mine. He thrust his hand into his sòkòtò pocket and took a half-step toward me. Kẹhinde blocked him off, then steered him toward the plane. Yòmì nodded, handed over his life vest, and Kẹhinde charged toward us.

We communicated with signs, and by the time Kẹhinde and Red ran off through the building, I was exhausted. A few black-clad CRB staffers helped Bẹkọ, Tall-with-glasses, and Stocky Ankara-shirt-guy load mountains of equipment into the plane's underbelly. I waited for Pretty Chi-chi or Not-So-Pretty to walk up to me or wave or something. Anything.

They hesitated, then went after Yòmì, dragging their bags behind them. I followed. The plane had a sand-blasted look and needed repainting. It also had a discreet HRH badge, with the name "Moremi" printed beneath it. The lettering looked handwritten.

Yòmì stood in front of the cockpit, talking into a handset. The girls squeezed past him, but I waited.

"... components ... tokunbọh ... power cables..." His words were chewed up by the roar of the jet engines.

"How are you?" He cut his call and nodded at me, but before I could respond, another squawk came through on his handset.

"He is what?" He snapped his eyes at me.

"Yes, but did the driver see any of this?"

"Okay, get him here as quickly as you can." He stashed the handset in a pocket of his búbá and waved me on board.

I clambered past him.

"What happened out there?"

I shrugged.

"Are you all right?" He glanced at my arms and the exposed parts of my chest.

I shook my head.

"Okay, we are waitng for one or two items, and Taiwo." He waved me into the cabin.

It was luxurious, littered with the Union Jack and decorated in blues and reds.

There was a clutch of chairs set up facing each other toward the rear, occupying the space in front of a wood-paneled door. Fortunately, there was also a couple of comfortable-looking seats close to the doorway on either side of the aisle. I collapsed into one of them and scratched at my arms absent-mindedly.

Kẹhinde didn't look at me when he half-carried his brother on board. Taiwo cackled inanely and cocked his finger at me, pistol fashion as they passed. I made sure I looked out of the window when Bẹko and the others boarded and I was blanket-covered, seat-belted when the doorway was shut.

Take off was smooth and my descent into sleep, smoother still.

Friday

I was startled awake by someone placing a flask of water, some tangerines, and cold àkàrà in a plastic food container on my pop-out table. I consumed it all by feel. I fell asleep immediately afterward but was woken again by painful-sounding snoring, coming from across the aisle. I was on my side, curled crayfish-style with my seatbelt still fastened over my blanket. A slick of drool had gathered on my lap and the debris of tangerine peelings, and assorted crumbs covered the table. I scanned the space for my backpack and found it stuffed into a pocket between my seat and the wall. The flask thankfully, had a few mouthfuls of cold water left. Determined to get up and stop the snoring, I drifted off again.

My dreams troubled me until we landed, and for a good while afterward. They featured the house on the hill again. As usual, I'd drifted inside and surveyed the rows of windows. This

time, the wall openings decided to slide around the circular hall. The sheer variety of shapes, sizes, colors, and identifying signs to the windows was dizzying. Santeria symbology competed with the names of subway stations on the Q line. There was an entire sequence of R&B singers names, and the street signage common to my many foster homes made me recoil.

I finally settled in front of an oval window, which allowed a green-tinged light to seep out from its edges. I peered in and was welcomed by the sight of one person digging in the glow of a small kerosene lantern. The background swallowed up any light that tried to pierce it, but I could see that it was in the center of a small grove. The digging stopped, and kerosene-lantern-guy bent down to pick up something small, and red colored. He carried it with both hands and whispered urgently at it for a while, then carefully placed it back in the hole. Before he covered it with dirt again, purple tinted power bubbled out of the hole. The memory made me sob.

“Are you alright?” It was Bëko, sitting upright across from me.

I nodded curtly and almost hurt myself, trying to get up before I realized I still had my seat belt on.

“The bathroom?” I avoided looking at him as I stretched out a cramp.

He pointed. The plane was still taxiing but I staggered in, yanked my pants down, and sat. The fart wasn’t very loud, but it was ripe as hell, and it quickly turned solid. I heard a clunk, and a mechanical whine, probably from the main cabin door being cranked open. I was dying to get my first impressions out of the way, but it felt important to leave my shit on the plane. So I did.

Saturday

I shut the door as quickly as I could, peered outside, and took a first deep breath of the air from the Motherland. It was like breathing warmed up, damp cotton wool. Together with the muggy heat, an unctuous pair of figures oozed in and set about bowing and scraping as if in the presence of royalty. Anytime their heads bobbed back up, they unleashed a steady stream of “Yes, Sah”s and “Thank you, Sah”s, aimed at nobody and at everybody.

Bẹkọ stepped to them, and I watched as the two fellows swapped their greetings for our passports, a pile of paperwork, and a huge wedge of familiar-looking currency. I waved my document goodbye and hoped I’d never need to use it again.

They stammered their thanks, while their hungry eyes ate up every detail of life within the plane. I ducked away from their gaze as if it would hurt. Yòmi must have been anxious to disembark, he’d placed himself just behind Bẹkọ. I went to my seat, pulled my backpack on, and rubbed my hands over my arms then the back of my neck. Our welcoming committee had been communicating in Yorùbá, but I felt no itching.

My erstwhile classmates remained seated and busied themselves with surreptitiously stuck out tongues, and bits of mirrored glass. I tried to smile, failed, and followed Yòmi and Bẹkọ out the cabin door. The knot in my chest was the size of a man’s fist.

It was only when I got to the steps, moments behind Yòmi, that I looked up. A streaky brown sky grabbed my eyes, and the moon had a soft orange tinge that made me think of the tangerine I’d consumed mid-flight. The heat felt like a warm damp towel and my tee shirt was soaked in moments.

In the middle distance, there was a couple of beat-up-looking Toyota trucks lined up at the edge of the runway, but it looked like every Nigerian there ever was had lined up between us and the transport. I’m not sure how they’d managed to be so quiet up till that moment, but the

roar that poured forth as Yòmi appeared at the top of the steps, almost knocked me on my ass.

They bunched around the steps, then under the nose of the jet and the assembly throbbed with the vibe of a church revival, and the energy of a political rally. The CRB logo was everywhere, and Black Jesus was never worn so joyfully.

Yòmi stopped halfway down the steps and raised both arms, one hand holding a worn copy of the Bible aloft, and the other, a framed picture of his late father. The result was a barely believable increase in the volume and ferocity of the noise. There was a risky number of pregnant women at the edge of the crowd, and they bounced their boobs and their bellies at the plane. I averted my eyes as if unseeing them would reduce the risk of spontaneous births.

Yòmi's face was half-covered by sunglasses, and he wore his usual dark-colored búbà and sòkòtò outfit, over casual leather slip-ons. His arms must have hurt, and I wondered if he'd stowed my bracelet on the plane.

I watched with growing alarm as he descended the steps, seemingly intent on joining the crowd. Bẹkọ, almost on the last step, looked up at me and smiled. I frowned and flicked the sweat from my forehead, then backed into the plane.

"He's good isn't he?" Impossibly, I heard Yòmi's softly modulated tones, behind me.

This Yòmi wore a black CRB-branded tee shirt over jeans and sneakers, topped off by a self-satisfied smirk. Pretty Chi-chi, Not-So-Pretty, and Tall-with-glasses were lined up behind him. There was no sign of Stocky Ankara-shirt-guy. I looked back into the crowd and recognized him just as he reached into his pockets and threw several sheaves of green notes into the air. The wind took the notes away, and the crowd accompanied them.

I stared into the wave of bodies as they hid stocky Ankara-shirt-guy from view. My embarrassment turned to shame when I strained to recall his name.

Yòmì crouched at the top of the steps and signaled Bẹkọ back up, then went into the cockpit while Bẹkọ pushed through the others, toward the rear of the plane. My classmates inched toward me, eyes downcast. I leaned into the bulkhead, and they squeezed past.

“Yòmì told us the truth. We didn’t really believe Taiwo, mind.” Pretty Chi-chi tugged at the neck of her tee shirt, and didn’t look up until she’d finished speaking.

I looked at the others, and they eventually met my gaze, but never for long.

I shrugged and they all slouched off the flight. Bẹkọ came back from the rear in stages, and moved a couple of aluminum cases, two large duffel bags and a mid-sized black case. He opened the black case and produced a couple of sleek, black motorbike helmets. We could hear Yòmì thanking the crew in his “church voice.”

“You ok?” Bẹkọ asked me.

“Uh-huh.” I kept my chin down.

“Okay, hang back here for a bit. The twins are still in the stateroom, Taiwo took a turn for the worse, but we’ll get help back here soon. The crowd will disperse and then a truck will bring you all to the prayer camp.” He dragged the duffel bags to the exit, chucked them out and then came back for the aluminum cases.

“Change of plans, Bẹkọ.” Yòmì came out of the cockpit, and I saw the two pilots behind him, leafing through shiny-new Nigerian passports, and beaming like crazy.

“Sir?” Bẹkọ froze, then placed the cases back on the floor.

“Give that to her.” He pointed at the helmet in Bẹkọ’s hand.

“Sir, the ... erm ... project plan suggests otherwise.” Bẹkọ pulled his fat tablet from his fatter side pocket and waved it.

“Bẹkọ, your program has become blind to the Spirit of Manifestation. I no longer put my faith in it. I ... we will follow my instincts.” Yòmì plunged his hand into his trouser pocket.

Bẹkọ glowered at me and looked as if he was chewing rocks.

“Hope it fits.” None too gently, he thrust it at me.

Scowling, he leaned forward to counter the weight of his backpack and then put the tablet away. His hands dangled, empty at the ends of his tattooed, powerful arms. I looked from Yòmì to Bẹkọ, then at the helmet in my hand, and opened my mouth to speak.

“Sir, how about the Tokunboh project? Should I continue to plan for two subjects? The power cables are difficult to fashion. Maybe you have other ideas for that as well?” Bẹkọ’s words were flat, monotone.

“Don’t test me, Bẹkọ. We will speak about that later.” Yòmì glanced at me, then stared up at Bẹkọ.

“Sir.” Bẹkọ blinked first and looked at his feet.

“See to the luggage.” Yòmì slowed but didn’t break stride and pulled his helmet on, before leaving the plane.

“Sir, remember the policemen here are not ours, and I’ve swapped the crystals, but we haven’t tested the walkie-talkies!” Bẹkọ shouted.

I mouthed a “What the fuck?” at him. He looked at me blankly as he picked up his equipment cases, then flexed his shoulders.

“We expected a crowd but not on the tarmac. As you know, the twins are out of action,” He shook his head, as I tried to interject and continued, “Stick with the ... the All Father-to-be.

We will meet up at Òṣòdì Bus stop, the upper level.”

“What about the others?”

“Bodunrin and the ladies will be with me. I’m worried about Kólá, he’s gotten carried away with his decoy gig and is currently mixed in that crowd, gone deeper than a lost condom. Two ‘Okadas,’ are waiting close by the trucks. Don’t say anything stupid to him. I’ll pick up your passports.” He headed out.

Kólá. His name is Kólá.

“Come on!” Bẹkọ shouted from the steps.

I jumped, then followed him. My backpack felt lumpy.

Two battered-looking motorbikes waited at the edge of the apron. Their handlebars were fore-shortened and pointed upwards like broken-off impala horns. Both drivers wore bruised helmets and tattered tee shirts over jeans, and one of them had filthy green flip-flops on. Yòmi was perched behind the other driver, twiddling his handset. I tried to make my backpack comfortable and clambered on.

Kọla, currently known as Fake-Yòmi, led a long, loud prayer session through a megaphone. In between the Alleluyah’s, he flung more blocks of cash up in the air and the notes fluttered down onto the roaring crowd. I caught a glimpse of him, surrounded by the pregnant ladies. He was ecstatic.

I squeezed my helmet on, and both bikes took off. It took me seconds to name my driver ‘Flip-Flops,’ and another one to realize I’d be able to pick him out of a packed stadium, by his

smell alone. I'm sure he'd been eating road-kill for months. His sweat was at the same time gritty and oily. It was impossible to get a grip on his shoulders. My hands would slide down his arms until I held him at about elbow level, and he'd irritatedly flap them off, like a pissed-off vulture. Then we'd start again. Eventually, he stopped and made me clasp my hands around his midriff, then we proceeded. Another tee shirt trashed.

One of the high-denomination notes got pinned against my visor, and I clutched at it in shock when I recognized it was a mint US hundred dollar bill. I didn't remember the last time I'd seen any US currency and wondered if Yòmì was a fool for distributing what was essentially a failed currency or a genius for giving the people what they wanted. The wind grabbed the note back and I took hold of Flip-flops again with a shake of my head.

The drivers took us toward the cargo shed area and we drove between rusting piles of shipping containers. The turned-up handlebars were invaluable in the cramped lanes, and we soon came up against a corroded chicken wire fence that stretched out for ever in both directions.

We drove parallel to it for a while until we got to a gap. Dismounting was necessary, so the drivers could push the bikes down and then up and out of a gully that split the ground, just beyond the fence. We climbed after them, panting, and found ourselves on a two-lane, unlit highway.

Yòmì grunted aloud a few times and kept fiddling with his sòkòtò drawstring. He signaled the need for quiet, so we walked along the road shoulder, past an empty toll plaza, while our drivers pushed the motorbikes. The mosquitoes were out in strength, and swiftly covered us, so I kept the helmet on and swung wildly when I had the strength to.

We came across an empty collection of rickety stalls assembled close to the road. I staggered to a bench, freed my head, and gulped in deep breaths of air. The moon showed itself,

and its unusual red glow highlighted undulating swarms of mosquitoes which hovered, cape-like, behind the drivers without touching either of them. I still had traces of Flip-flops' sweat on my arms, so I shut my eyes, then rubbed it into my face and the back of my neck. The mosquitoes that had been dive-bombing me spun out of the air, dazed. I grinned but my eyes watered.

There were signs of life nearby. A solitary kerosene lamp provided some form of illumination outside a container about a hundred yards up the road from us. It was largely empty but the smell and smoke from roasted bush meat hung over the area. A pair of drunken voices proceeded to give a pretty good rendition of Prince Nico Mbarga's mega-hit, "*Sweet Mother*." I'd heard the song a few times, especially when I was in my second Nigerian foster home. I'd always liked its upbeat melodies, but now, the lyrics put that fist back in my chest.

Yòmi had been speaking quietly into his handset for a while, and I didn't take much notice until I saw the set to his jaw as he held onto the handset.

"Are the components secured? Confirm so we proceed." He asked this question several times.

"...neura ... repeat ... uralast ... parts confirmed ... okay. Out." The response was buried in static but seemed to satisfy him.

He smiled as he returned the handset to the pocket of his bùbá. The song "*Sweet Mother*" was never played just once, and up the road, it was being belted out again. The motorbike drivers acted as if I was a fart; something mildly irritating which would disappear if they ignored it. Their eyes were fixed on Yòmi, and they moved as if connected to him by invisible string. I

worked myself up to cough loudly in his direction, but the singing stopped abruptly. A few moments later, a couple of figures stumbled out of the container and staggered toward us.

They both jittered sideways a step or two for every step that they advanced, and the short distance tested them sorely. The one closest to us struggled to release the drawstring of his sòkòtó as he approached. Coming up behind him, his friend enjoyed the advantage of elasticated drawstrings and leaned on a walking stick, with his trousers around his knees. They ended up side by side, as far away from the road as they could get, thrusting their hips at the gully.

Their slurred words didn't help, so I only understood fragments of their conversation.

"...Papa Ekaette..."

"...fall down..."

"...wait for me, now..."

"Moshood ... you dey piss for my leg oh!"

"...hehehehe..."

Flip-flops had kicked off his footwear at some stage, so for a moment, I didn't know what to call him. I decided the name would stick if the other driver didn't go barefoot as well. They padded to their transports, and each returned with a long, thin piece of metal. The moon escaped cloud cover and shone its red rays on the bicycle spokes. The lengths of metal were black with dirt but shiny and pointy at one end, and the drivers held them mostly hidden from sight along their forearms. Silently, they took up crouched positions a few steps behind the two drunks. Yòmì responded with a palm turned downward and a staying motion. I got off the bench and inched back the way we had come.

I figured out that the erstwhile singer was the smellier of the two old men. He stood out of pissing range of his friend with the elasticated drawstrings, politely looking away as the latter

resolutely tried to coax his bladder into action. Drawstring-guy's jaw worked as he strained, and he thrust at his walking stick as if changing gears. After moments filled with grunts and little else, the singer, aka Papa Ekaette, sank onto his haunches, prompting his friend Moshood to glance sideways at him.

"Papa Ekaette, any show?"

"Moshood, no be you I dey wait?"

"De ting no gree oh."

"E go do, prick wey no gree stand, at least e must gree piss. Abi I lie?"

"You no lie, Papa Ekaette."

"Wait first, Moshood. Na you dey smell, abi na me?"

"Na your papa dey smell!"

Behind them, Yòmi caught the driver's eyes and raised his hand.

"Moshood, as we dey here, e get something I wan' ask you since."

"My friend, na today I sabi you? I know say your head dey heavy."

"In fact, I dey tink wether na dis hunter's moon plus including April Full dey worry me.

Sometin' go still happen today. E fit no good oh ..."

"God forbid! Betta done flow already with that money wey we pluck from inside airport, abi?"

"You talk true, my broda."

"But wetin dey worry you?"

"Baba Ekaette, I must ask you. Na which kind eye you take see dese church people?"

Yòmi's back was to me, so I couldn't see his face. However, he appeared unsteady and when he walked, he threw his left foot at the turf in a slapping motion, then dragged it slightly

before picking it up. He lowered his hand, further confusing the drivers, and seemed intent on hearing the rest of the drunken conversation. So was I.

Moving stealthily was a waste of time as the two old men constantly spoke over each other, their conversation replete with requests to speak up, then to stop shouting. I listened, as Yòmì did, and I feared for their safety when it became clear neither was a fan of the CRB.

” ... why must we spend another country money here, just bicos one church man go pack de dirty money wey they no fit spend for their side... ?”

“...you talk true oh. Na awa people, dem like imported imported ting too too much...”

“...I dey happy to chop de money but dose people dey use juju too much, I swear.”

“How you go talk dat kind thing? This na hunter’s moon, we go follow do sacrifice for our own shrine, after, abi?” He gestured into the skies.

I looked up just as the red moon was covered by clouds again.

“En hen, but at least me, I no hide behind any kind church, come dey follow pretend say I be holy-holy.” Moshood had stopped straining and drew lines in the ground with his walking stick.

“I hear you my broda. In fact, I also follow hear that na one type of women-women fetish priests dey supply dem churchpeople wit’ correct juju.”

“You see now! Why I no go get African insurance against dem? De day dem go decide to pafuka us, we who no be Yorùbá, how we go do?”

“In fact. And as dat Pastor Ezra done quench, dem wan’ take all of the remainder of us do suya, so de Pastor go follow chop awa head inside heaven abi?”

“Na God go punish dem!”

“Yes oh. Our people talk say, ‘Na stubborn fly dey follow corpse enter grave.’”

“Is true. They also say we suppose to leave shit for de night-soil men....”

The moon drifted into sight and its red glow lit up our tiny slice of hell. Yòmi stepped toward the two old drunks, and he grunted something unintelligible. This was all the signal that Flip-Flops and his partner required.

I took a half a step in the time it took them to pull the two old men down onto their knees, tilt their heads back and jab the business ends of the bicycle spokes at their under-jaws. Moshood, bulky and trouser-less, responded by finally urinating furiously. Papa Ekaette had an unfortunate set of ears on him and looked as if they could break him in half. He, however, called on Ahmadioha, the thunder god to use lightning to fuck their mothers. Yòmi’s passivity was frightening. If he was not in control of the situation, then who was?

Apparently, I was.

I recalled very little of the house on the hill afterward, and mostly remembered the red of the walls and the feeling from the window I settled at. I woke up with a blinding headache and blocked ears. My helmet was at my feet, had a huge crack in it, and I had a bloody lip. The drivers hadn’t fared as well. Flip-flops had crawled a short distance before succumbing to the bicycle spoke thrust downward into his clavicle. The other guy was lying on his back. He had a prominent erection; his left eye was wide open, but the other eye was closed by the approximately six inches of bicycle spoke that stuck out of it.

They were surrounded by silhouettes of red that sparkled in the dim light. I turned away and tried not to inhale the sweet smells that boomed off them. The dust was still settling down as I sat up, and I felt the warm trickle of something sticky across my face. Yòmi crouched on his hands and knees, staring owlishly at me. Papa Ekaette had dragged Moshood up the road and was almost spent as he cursed loudly with every futile heave.

I spoke out loud a couple of times, worked my jaw, and dug into my ears with a fingertip. It took two or three tries before my ears popped and I could hear myself speak. I called out to Yòmi and shook with relief when he turned to me with the spark restored behind his eyes. The bracelet was quiet in his pocket. He touched it a couple of times, then left it alone and climbed gingerly to his feet.

“What happened?” His voice was hoarse.

“You don’t remember?” I doubt I’ve ever had a faster thought.

He limped toward me as he pulled out his walkie-talkie and switched it on.

“You did this.” I gestured toward the bloody corpses.

“What?”

“Something made them kill each other.”

“What? Hold on...” He shushed the frantic words coming through on his handset.

“You kept touching your pocket.” I pointed.

“Aaah!” His eyes widened.

“Who were they? Did they work for the church?” I asked.

“They worked for my late father. They were keen to prove themselves equal to your Taiwo and Kẹhinde.” He still looked dazed.

“Hmm. Not so good then?” I muttered.

He spoke quickly into the walkie-talkie, then turned to me.

“There were two other men here. Where are they?”

“Yes, they were drunk. They left before you did anything.” I looked away.

“No problem, I recall one of them had ears like a bat, they should be easy enough to find.” He walked toward the bodies, while he spoke urgently into the handset.

This fast-thinking thing is clearly an acquired skill; my mind was blank as I tried to figure out how my lie would stand up in front of witnesses.

“Will this thing fit?” He handed me Flip-flops’ helmet. His hands were bloody.

I grimaced, then pulled the helmet on and flipped the visor down just as the tears escaped.

Chapter 7 A kì í gbá ẹnì tó yòbẹ mú (One does not grab hold of a person who has pulled a knife.)

My forearms ached from grappling with the upturned handlebars. I hunched over as I squinted through the mosquito-specked visor. I shook my head to clear my tears, but the motorbike responded and almost swerved off the road. I didn't do that again. The moon remained obscured by heavy clouds, and the freeway from the airport was as dark as my thoughts.

I was past perspiration and now sweating all over. Yòmi had insisted we keep the helmets on, but the heat and the bug-stained visor made me want to get off to walk. My lip throbbed, and my backpack was all wrong. I thought briefly of reaching behind me to free my underwear, now well and truly wedged, but thought better of it.

Yòmi had also demanded we switch off our headlamps, and since our recently departed drivers had disabled the brake lights, we could be heard but barely be seen. We curved off the road and up a skinny bridge that rose high and then dipped over a dark void. If there was a cup of tarmac spread out over that entire structure, I didn't encounter it. It was nerve-wracking driving, but I clung to one side, skidded through random hillocks of mud, and heaved a sigh of relief when the bridge fed us onto an expressway.

The road straightened out and I leaned back, then slid my grip of the handlebars a little lower until I almost felt comfortable. I lost sight of Yòmi and opened the throttle. A mass of a building rose out of the horizon and it was only when I got close, that I realised there were three buildings jammed up close, two of them connected by a gantry.

I reached a crest and the freeway loomed large and empty ahead of me, so I pulled over to the roadside and parked at right angles, then hunched my shoulders to push off the helmet. I let it fall at my feet and levered myself off the bike. A sigh came from my butt crack as I freed

my stuck underwear. The roadside shoulder fell away steeply, so all I could see was a swaying bank of grass and weeds that reached up past head height.

I thought about allowing the motorbike roll down the incline and take its memories with it, but I set the kickstand down and let it rest. My lip had stopped hurting, but I could still smell the blood from multiple donors, drying on my shirt.

Enough legible lettering was left on the remaining wall panels, to confirm I was at the Oṣodi Bus Terminus. Downhill and to my right, Yòṁì showed up briefly in silhouette, the handset at his ear. He stopped talking long enough to wave me over. I went to pick up the helmet but recoiled at the bloody fingerprints he had left on it. I kicked it away and it skittered down the slope to be swallowed by the undergrowth. I stared after it until my heartbeat slowed, then went to the bike.

That was when I noticed a bundle of sharpened bicycle spokes tucked underneath the fuel tank. They'd been fixed to the frame with cable ties, so it was easy to slide one out and curl it into my backpack. The bike tires had flattened considerably, and the bike pulled all over the place as I wheeled it downhill. Yòṁì had one hand to his ear and the other in his pocket. The brakes screeched over his words, so I let go and allowed the bike to pull me down the slope.

“Kai! Woman! That thing could have killed me!”

“The handles were slippery.”

“Well, check that it's not damaged. Bẹkọ and the others should be here soon. If we still need the bikes, keep up with me, or follow the signs to the Ibadan Expressway.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Are you alright?”

“No.”

“I see. We have all been through a lot, but you have endured the most. You alone witnessed a key moment in our rebirth. The work of our hands will not be in vain. Praise the Lord.”

“Alleluia, but...”

“Look around you. The state has long failed us. Adam has fallen again; our former oppressors have raced past us to the bottom, yet we remain a study in missed opportunities. But you will continue to bear witness — Who we bless will be blessed and who we curse will wish they had never been born.”

“Erm ...”

“That’s all you have to say?”

“It’s just that ... you’re sweating so much, and your eyes”

“Holy Ghost fire has taken control; the everlasting blood of Jesus has taken over”

“Perhaps it’s because of what happened? I’m also struggling. I ..., I mean we witnessed two human beings losing their lives. How did ... I mean, what power is in that thing, and how did it ... happen?”

“Aaah. You are truly a novice. I am glad it is I that carries the burden of the awùrè. Put that incident out of your mind and think of it as part of our reset. Psalm 144 says, ‘Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle.’ They have started the war, but we will finish it.”

“Maybe you should sit down.”

“There is too much to do. We must restore God’s protection to all our people, starting in New Ife, then then we will rescue our brethren that are cast in the wilderness. The ones who were too blind to follow us but who deserve the land of milk and honey that we will create here.”

“Um, how will you do that?”

“Can you hear cars?”

“Yeah.”

“Do not say a word about what happened. It’s better, Bẹkọ and the others, and even the church, hear about tonight’s incidents from me.”

“Most definitely.”

There was an awkward moment when the prickling of my skin wouldn’t allow me to get into the lead truck. I looked in, and Pretty Chi-chi glowered at me from the back seat, so I skipped to the next vehicle. Both were of the double-cabin variety, and our bags, as well as Bẹkọ’s equipment boxes, had been stacked on the cargo beds. Yòmì barked orders as he slipped into the front seat, and I heard him ask about the results of a search. I feared for Papa Ekaette, for Moshood. And for myself.

I’d slung my bag in when a third truck pulled up, and Bẹkọ called out. I shook my head. He reached out of the front window and waved something. A handful of fluffy-looking, barely soiled tee shirts. I had to laugh and switched trucks to his. I got in as Yòmì’s truck took off, and we sped after it.

“There’s more of these if you like,” he offered.

“Good morning, Aunty,” the driver smiled.

“What?” I gaped.

“Yeah, get used to that. This is Bayo.” Bëko’s eyes widened as he handed me the wad of tee shirts.

“What happened to your face?” He asked.

“Is that blood?” He pointed.

“Who did that?” His face shut down.

“Calm down; I walked into a door.” I tried to smile, but my face would not respond.

“No, really? Tell me what happened.”

“I told you already, and by the way, the ‘Aunty’ thing is gross; he’s probably older than me. I was objecting more to his ‘Good morning.’ There’s been nothing good about it.”

“Yeah, that is true.” He glanced at Bayo, “But seriously....”

“I’ve said all I will say. Now please turn around; I want to change.” I flicked my fingers at him.

“No problem, I need to sort out this app. It looked good for a while, but all the new verses I find now point to the same consciousness. Again. What the fuck?” He muttered and switched his tablet on.

“And you, Bayo, is it?” I looked at the driver.

“Yes, Aunty.”

“I am not your Aunty, and my name is Tani. Please use that instead.”

“Yes, Aunty Tani.”

Bëko guffawed.

“Whatever. Please tilt that mirror away.” I pulled off my gummy tee shirt, slid into one of

the new ones and stuffed the others into my backpack.

“Girl, you’re rank! How’d you get so smelly?” Bẹkọ’s voice had a smile in it.

“Bẹkọ...”

“Yes?” He turned around.

I shook my head and tried to hold his gaze, but my eyes filled, and I had to close them.

He grunted, and I heard the soft click of his keyboard. I leaned back and couldn’t stop the tears from trickling out. The walkie-talkie squelched into life, and Bẹkọ answered with a series of “Uh huh’s,” then looked at me over his shoulder.

“Our guys just found Kólá. He was beaten to death, then dumped back on the plane after they’d extracted Taiwo and Kẹhinde.” His face was grim.

I leaned forward, rested my head on the back of Bẹkọ’s seat and noisily blew my nose on the discarded tee shirt.

“Oya Bayo, tẹ ‘pa mọ’şẹ. We can’t hang about. Tani, please sit back.” Yòmi’s truck was already pulling away from us.

“Yes, Sah.” Bayo bobbed his head, and we kept up easily.

“How much further to the camp?” Bẹkọ asked.

“We are nearly there, Sah.”

It took another two hours.

The first sign we were close was from the rows of faded billboards, some over-run by greenery. Those that were visible showed the ghosts of well-fed pastors and their better-fed wives, beaming down at us. Their words were long gone, but the look in their eyes and the fullness of their jowls retained a promise of prosperity.

“Who are those?” I asked.

“This stretch of the Lagos - Ibadan Expressway was popular with Nigeria's first waves of evangelical churches. They lined up competing prayer camps and fought over hearts and minds. And pockets.” He grinned.

“So what happened to them?”

“They faded in a wave of crap prophecies and world-class scandals. The CRB took over all their campsites, so we have a stretch of real estate on the right side of the expressway, almost all the way to Ibadan.”

“Hmm.”

The next sign was the new-looking breeze-block wall that showed up behind the billboards. It was topped with coils of barbed wire, and every two hundred yards or so, a fluorescent lighting tube was wedged into it. For the first time, I saw dozens of people out on foot. All wore tee shirts or ankara cloth branded with the CRB logo and the late Pastor's face.

We approached a turn-off that ended in a huge double-leaf black gate, manned by several young men in expected black tees. A row of colorful wood-frame buses was allowed out as we approached. They all bore badly-rendered images of the late Pastor Ezra, but it was too dark for me to make out the lettering that framed his face.

A shoal of Okadas broke around us and pulled up beyond the gate. The motorbikes dropped passengers off, and new ones climbed on and were ferried away. The passengers and their drivers, all seemed oblivious to the white hairs risk. I caught a glimpse of crisp green currency, and looked to see if the drivers wore flip-flops. My throat became thick again. Yòmi's truck, a few moments ahead of us, was at the gate and the jubilation among all the security staff as well as passers-by was a relief to see.

We followed them in and had to drive at a crawl as we were mobbed by dozens, then

hundreds of people. They drummed on our rooftops, danced beside us, and sang.

“He’s alive, amen.

He is alive, amen.

Jesus is alive,

Forever, he is alive, Amen.”

As we drove deeper into the compound, talking drums and trumpets joined in. There was a confusing number of languages at play and flags from all over Africa competed with the CRB’s Black Jesus logo. I learned several new songs, mostly involving lifting Jesus higher and higher every day and reminding all concerned that He was the mighty God, the strong tower, the great I am, Alleluyah, and so on and so forth.

Bẹkọ protested when I opened the door, but I stretched, shrugged my backpack on and stepped into a crowd that doubled in size every time I turned around. We inched onward, and I drank in the welcome.

We approached a major junction, and the vehicles stopped across from a clearing where a large canopy reigned. Beneath the awnings, there were rows of chairs arranged to face a podium and some speakers. Yòmì squeezed his way through the crowd, and I caught sight of Bẹkọ as he loitered at the fringes of the giddy throng, close to Pretty and the others, with Bayọ behind him.

Yòmì was soaked in sweat when he finally got on stage. His smiles and handshakes looked sincere, and he frequently stopped for long conversations with individual church members. He touched his pocket briefly and waved with both hands as the “All-Father” chant rang out. Finally at the podium, he stopped and swatted at the air before grabbing hold of the

microphone.

“Praise the Lord!”

“Alleluyah!” The response was deafening.

“My brothers and sisters, thank you!” He pulled a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and dabbed at his face.

“Thank you, All-Father!” The responses were consistent, loud, and musical, “We thank God for you and Pastor Ezra!”

“I know why I give you thanks. I thank you for your faith. I thank you for your love. I thank you for your prayers. Without all these, who knows what would have happened? The enemies already sent their agents to waylay me on the way from the airport this morning!” His hand dipped into his trouser pocket and came out holding onto something coiled and rusty-looking.

He put down the microphone and took a while to straighten out the two bicycle spokes, and after he did, he pointed their business ends into the crowd. The ends that shone black with dried blood. The cries of protest turned to tears, and those, to anger.

“Softly, softly, my brothers and sisters.” He tapped on the microphone several times until a measure of quiet returned.

I looked around me and saw tense faces, rigid muscles, and sensed a readiness to go to war. They pressed forward, and I allowed them to push me along until we got to our transport. I held on to a door while they surged around the vehicle and moved closer to the canopy.

“But the God we serve is a mighty God. He heard your prayers and provided an answer through a real soldier of Christ.” He peered through the crowd and raised an enquiring palm at Bêkə.

Bekọ responded with a shrug and muttered something to Bayo, who promptly forced his way through the crowd, heading in my general direction.

“You all know I went to America at my father’s request, and he was determined to share our knowledge with that most powerful nation, and for me to take the word to them. My father also commanded me to bring back as many of our brothers and sisters as I could, so they provide the resources we need to ensure the rebirth of New Ifè and Africa. This is just the beginning of that quest ... ,” he swept his arm toward Bekọ, pointed at the clump of my classmates, then continued, “... more will come, I promise you. We will move heaven and earth to bring rescue your oppressed brothers and sisters and bring them home!”

A ragged cheer rose up and I saw many tear-stained faces.

“For now, only church members will be allowed inside the camp and will benefit from His blessings. We are all covered in His blood and within these four walls, we are safe from any Sickness, any weapon and definitely any White Hairs!”

“Paise da Lord !!!” Their response hurt my ears.

“If anyone wants to visit our bakery, tell them we will sell bread at the gate. If anyone wants to attend our church service, tell them God will hear their prayers anywhere. Our school, the clinic, and the pharmacy are closed to outsiders, and if you see anyone in the camp that you do not know or recognize, I permit you to arrest them.” His smile was not pleasant.

The crowd roared its approval.

“Well, I thank you, and I thank God that I was able to bring back our sister, Tani. Without her, you would have been planning two funerals.” He shaded his eyes and scanned the crowd again.

I crouched down.

“Some people would question how she looks, dresses, or even her name, Tani. Tani? indeed. But remember, my surname, Fawole, is also a relic from a bygone time and a different belief system. Even where we are standing was formerly used for blasphemy. But we have reclaimed it! It will forever be a place where our faith is renewed and strengthened.”

There was a lot of nodding, casting of eyes heavenward, and the general raising of arms while swaying.

“You will know her if you see her, she is the only woman among you wearing trousers, and she carries her life on her back like a tortoise! Let us welcome her to our camp and into our hearts.”

They went nuts.

“If anybody asks again, Tani? We must answer, Òmò tò da ni! Òmò wà ni!” And just like that, my anonymity was gone.

“Òmò tò da ni! Òmò wà ni!” They loved it.

Somebody unleashed Burna Boy’s version of the throwback mega-hit “Jerusalema,” through the speakers on the stage. I peeped over the chassis and saw Yòmì and Bẹkọ greeting their way out of the crowd. Some of them surged toward Yòmì, but a fair number of the children and some uniformed adults started to drift away. I tried to follow but bumped into Bayọ. He was fidgety, wouldn’t make eye contact, and kept rubbing his hands on his trouser leg.

“Hi, Bayọ, do you want to dance?”

“Kai! Aunty, no, oh.” He pulled such a horrified face I had to laugh.

“You know how to hurt a girl’s feelings, don’t you?”

“It’s Oga Bẹkọ that is calling you.” He pointed into the crowd, and I saw the mass of Bẹkọ, making space for Yòmì and getting closer every moment.

“Well, please tell Oga Bẹkọ that I’ll get back to him.” I entered the stream of bodies and was transported deeper into the complex.

The thoroughfare I was on sloped downward, and rows of low buildings faced each other across the road. The houses on the right backed up to the same wall I had observed as we approached the camp. On the left side of the road, the structures had a mass of dense shrubbery looming behind them.

The crowd had thinned out, and those close to me waved and smiled, and many clapped out a tune as they chanted “Òmò Tani?” then “Òmò wani!” I waved back and continued walking. The signage was excellent, and I discovered I was on “CRB Way.” A steady stream of children had also separated from the crowd, and they kept me company. They were in green and white school uniforms and were far from shy.

The greetings continued, but I noted that a small portion of the men at large was of the Ankara-wearing, Bible-carrying variety. They sent me vibes that reminded me of the Virgin. This brand of church member tended to look everywhere but directly at me. If they did acknowledge me, they’d glance at my chest, then my pants. And then away. I grabbed both of my shoulder straps so I could push out what little chest I had and carried on walking.

One young girl with beautifully plaited hair approached me and asked, “Are you Aunty Tani who saved our new All-Father from armed robbers this morning?” My smile faded.

She hid hers behind a hand and ran off to her friends. I kept walking. In short order, I encountered a Security Office, a Clinic, and a Pharmacy and was looking out for the Post Office

when a distinctive smell assailed me. A smell which, legend has it, can trigger spontaneous childbirth; that of plantains frying. I cast around for the source of the aroma and felt a warm palm slip into mine. My young friend tugged me onto a pathway that pointed off-road. The schoolchildren were heading the same way, and since the smell of frying got stronger with each step, I didn't resist.

We pushed through overhanging branches, stepped over a drain, and approached the back entrance of a large hall. A long line of chattering kids moved along quickly until they were seated for their breakfasts. Bowls of pap, topped with splashes of condensed milk were passed along by servers who marched down the center of the hall. These were followed by covered dishes of steaming, sweet-smelling ákàrà. My stomach groaned, and I grabbed an enamel plate and helped myself. I had taken a bite when my young friend frowned at me, cast her eyes down, and put her hands together.

"Sorry," I mumbled and chewed slowly as a lady at the top of the hall said prayers. As soon as the "Amen!" rang out, I probably embarrassed myself by wolfing down anything that passed in front of me. The entire table laughed and imitated my slurping and finger-licking. After plenty of this, the table went quiet. I looked up from mock-fighting with one of the kids for the last piece of ákàrà to see the same lady who led the prayers standing over us. Slim and pretty, she had perfect skin and beautifully plaited hair.

"That's my Mummy." My new friend whispered.

"Aunty Tani, welcome to our humble table." The lady smiled.

"Nothing humble about this table or these bean cakes, madam. And please call me Tani."

I gave up the last ákàrà and wiped my mouth with the back of a hand.

"Thank you, but we are honored by your presence. The entire camp thanks you and gives

glory to God for your intervention this morning.”

“I did nothing, madam, but I wonder if I could ask you a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Well, this ákàrà is amazing but is that dodo I can smell?” I wasn’t joking.

“Aah, Auntie Tani. No problem. We are preparing for the second shift workers, and fried plantain is their staple. If you come to my office, I can see what we can do.” She stepped back and gestured.

I grabbed my backpack from beneath my seat and waved goodbye to the table.

“Your daughter is very clever. You must be proud of her. What’s her name?”

“Girl.” Her face went blank.

“Seriously?”

“Yes. Her father used the naming ceremony to show his disappointment at me, for not giving him a boy.”

“Really? Does he also work at the camp?”

“We haven’t seen him since the naming.” Her face tightened.

“I’m so sorry; I didn’t intend to”

“No matter, it is done. We only look forward now.” We approached a door with ‘Kitchen Manager’ painted onto it, which she pushed open and then ushered me in.

“Thanks. What can I call you?”

“My name is long forgotten; people call me ‘Hebegirl.’”

“Eh?”

“That was the last statement my husband made before he disappeared. Now please sit while I go and organize some dodo for you.”

Her desk was busy but tidy, and she did not have a personal item as far as I could see. There was a large set of windows, guarded by burglar bars behind her desk and two chairs took up the space in front of it, one upright and one easy. I chose the upright one and determined to keep my mouth shut until I needed to put some food in it.

However, I leaped to my feet a few minutes later when I heard the door creak open again.

“I’m sorry about” I started.

Yòmì strode in as if he owned the place.

Chapter 8 Bí ọmọ ò jọ ẹ̀kòtò a jọ kìjìpá (If a child does not resemble the trousers, he or she should resemble the wrapper.)

He shut the door then stumbled slightly as he stepped into the room. A reflex took my gaze up to the louvers above the door, then I allowed myself to sink back into the chair. Yòmi wore a crisply laundered black búbà and ẹ̀kòtò outfit, and his smell was of soap and talcum powder. I felt the weight of every speck of dirt on my body.

He crossed the room to swing the windows open. The breeze that came in was half-hearted at first, but it rallied to push some papers from Hebegirl's desk onto the floor. Yòmi looked at me, then at the papers. I looked away, then studied my fingernails. He sighed and bent over to gather the documents. A movement caught my eye, and I looked up at a reflection in the horizontally-placed louvers; a head of hair that could only belong to Hebegirl hovered by the door. She didn't have my fried plantains.

By the time Yòmi squared all the papers away, I'd eased past him, and positioned myself beside the windows. He muttered to himself and claimed the easy chair. Almost as soon as he sat down, his face went blank. His look recalled the one he had on the roadside, just before what happened, happened. I was much closer to him this time, and saw his complexion turn gray, and the armpits of his búbà darken. We still hadn't exchanged any words, when he slid off the chair.

I stepped toward his crumpled body with the initial thought of searching for the bracelet. My second impulse was to look up at the louvers. Hebegirl was still there, with her hand on the door handle. Before she could turn it, I had wrenched the door open, and pulled her in. I took a quick look down the empty corridor, before I shut the door.

"What have you done to Yòmi; I mean the All Father-to-be?" She brought her hands to her face.

“I didn’t do anything; he fainted.”

“Fainted? Yòmi never faints.”

“‘Yòmi,’ is it? And why were you eavesdropping? Get back here. He needs help, not panic!” I made and held fierce eye contact.

She stumbled into the room and collapsed on her knees beside him. We rolled him onto his side, and I exhaled aloud when I heard his rhythmic breathing. I patted him down and turned out his pockets but found nothing except keys. A leather strap peeped out from behind his waistband and I freed it. There was an amulet tied to it, set at the small of his back. It was wrapped around tightly with black thread, and the package had tiny, indecipherable lettering scrawled over it in white ink. The skin underneath the leather band looked raw and blistered. The moment I touched the charm, Yòmi jerked almost awake, and made guttural sounds from the back of his throat. When I dropped it, his breathing became deep and regular again.

“You know what that is?” I asked her.

She shook her head and shuddered when she looked at it.

I rested on my haunches and tried to figure out my next steps when I noticed Hebegirl palm the bunch of keys and stand up.

“What are you looking for?” She walked back to her desk.

“I should be asking you the same thing, shouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know what you mean.” She’d opened her desk drawer, but when I approached, she shut it, and tried to do the same with her face.

I pulled the drawer open and picked out the keys from beneath some papers. Yòmi groaned, and we both jumped.

“He’ll be awake soon. Would you like me to show him what you were so interested in?” I

dangled the keys in her face.

“Please.” Her mouth worked, but nothing else came out.

“Okay then. Maybe I’ll just hang onto these.” I slipped the keys into my pocket.

“Please. This is my only chance.” Her eyes were large, and her breath came in shallow gasps.

“What did you intend to do with them?” I asked.

“I have some likely copies that I’ve gathered over the years. His key has no number, and I need to compare....”

“Okay, do it quickly.” I handed the bunch over and stood between her and Yòmi.

She removed a false bottom from the drawer and retrieved a small jute bag, which gave up about half a dozen keys. Next, she produced a magnifying glass from the drawer, which she used to scrutinize them, each lined up in turn with Yòmi’s. She let out a satisfied grunt with the third, looked at me, and nodded. I grabbed ring of keys and went to slip them back into his pocket. He regained consciousness just as I was tucking them in, but I pretended I was helping him sit upright and let gravity do the rest.

Hebegirl helped me ease him into the chair and whispered, “I will go fetch him some water.”

“Don’t go anywhere.” His words were faint and he swallowed repeatedly.

Hebegirl froze, and I sat.

“It happened again?” He looked at me.

I nodded, and Hebegirl threw me a truly dirty look.

“Nobody must hear of this.” His eyes regained focus, as he swung his gaze between us.

She nodded.

“Do you have any idea what’s doing this to you?” I rubbed my bare wrist with as innocent a look as I could muster.

He scowled at me, motioned Hebegirl close, and whispered some instructions. She didn’t spare me a glance as she left.

“Can we talk about the thing that is draining you? Isn’t it time you gave it up?” I leaned forward in my seat.

“I would sooner give all this up.” He cupped both hands between his legs.

“That’s very nice. But can I at least take the weight from you for a while? I carried it for years, and I never passed out once.”

“Is that a good thing? At least I woke it up; you used it like jewelry.”

“Well, I hope it’s safe, especially if it means so much....”

“I promise you, when we get to New Ife, I will make a close associate of your mother’s available to you.”

I kept very still.

“Did you hear me?”

“You know where my mother is? What’s her name? Where is she? Why did she ...” I stopped babbling and took a deep breath.

“Our people say, ‘Truth is like pregnancy; you cannot hide it for long.’ Trust me and have patience.”

“I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask. I’ve asked her to take you in. She will be back soon but remember; she’s not as sophisticated as you are.”

“Huh.”

“Oh yes, and one more thing.”

“I’m listening.”

“We have abundant hot running water and bath soap in the camp. For the love of God, make use of both.”

Yòmì and I stayed in Hebegirl’s office while she came and went. He spent much of the time on his walkie-talkie, getting various updates, mostly from Bèkọ. Since she brought my fried plantains, garnished with a spicy egg stew on one of those trips, I was happy enough. Afterward I tried to keep awake but despite the turmoil in my mind, I nodded off, upright in the chair with my backpack clutched in my arms. She woke me when she was ready to head home, and by then, he’d left.

Hebegirl and I walked in silence up CRB Way, past the canopy-covered stage. This time, I felt a much stronger itch and noticed that Hebegirl walked quickly and averted her eyes from the space. She had some errands, so I offered to tag along and followed her to the semi-industrial corner of the CRB Prayer Camp.

We could barely hear each other talk when we walked past the Mechanic’s Village. A pile of used lined the access path, and there was a swarm of carpenters banging out benches and the wooden frames for passenger buses. The smell of burnt air and a rainbow of sparks came from a corner of the yard. An engine block grew out of a partly assembled chassis, and the guys operating the welding machine stopped to wave and chant my name.

Another set of workers painted the completed frames, and I smiled as I noted the portrait

of Pastor Ezra looked less like him with each creation. The words must have been stenciled, they were beautifully written, but the typos were consistent. “GUN TO SOON,” was the most popular, but there was a smattering of “DE WICKET HAS DO DERE WORSE,” and plenty of “MAN OF GOD, MAN OF DE PEEPLE.” The bus that rolled out as we walked past had “THE ALL-FATHER FOR ALL TIME,” on the side closest to us. The portrait that those words surrounded was one of Yòmi. His likeness was perfect.

We passed a tiny, nameless shed where half a dozen men were bowed over their foot-operated bellows while they worked with traditional goldsmith’s tools. A kitchen table was at the centre of the room and it was crowded with random pieces of jewelry. Earrings, bangles, necklaces, rings were transformed into molten, yellow liquid and poured into moulds as we watched. Hebegirl plucked a couple of samples from a rack and showed me the likeness of Pastor Ezra on one side, with the words “Ìṣẹ̀ l’ogùn ìṣẹ̀,” around it. I flipped it over but the other side was blank.

“Un-finished?” I asked her.

“Actually this line of coins will likely be re-cast, with a suitable message of mourning, but the portrait is not yet approved.” She gently peeled my fingers back, removed the coin and put it back on the display. It was like leaving a child.

“But why was everyone so excited to receive dollar bills if the church has its own currency?”

“We use the notes to make change. Yòmi is working on a better supply, so we can expand this workshop. We have the smiths but not enough gold.”

“Aah, okay. Where did these come from?” I pointed at the table.

“India. We have not agreed yet on the terms of sending a team to New Delhi, to secure

them against the Sickness. The All-Father promised them that they will be protected, but Yòmi wants them to show some appreciation. They sent this batch as a gesture of good-will.” She pointed at a pile of un-opened trunks, arrayed against a far wall.

“Huh.”

The Sewing Village was relatively quiet, but the chatter of hundreds of pedal-operated sewing machines still overwhelmed me. It was hard to hurry Hebegirl; she had to respond to tens of queries and as many greetings. I found myself parroting the confusing “It is well” in response to sundry queries, and you never heard seven Alleluia’s repeated as fast as I spat them out. Hebegirl inspected newly designed patches for the 1st Naija Ninja’s Brigade of Guards. I thought of Kojo as I swiped a handful of them. We were at the door when somebody rushed up with a parcel; then we were on our way again.

“Where are the workers from?” I asked.

“Everywhere. Many turn up with university degrees and excellent qualifications but only years of joblessness to show for it. They are a vital part of our nation's eventual rebirth.” Her chin went up.

“So, what’s the pay like, and are there any openings?” I joked.

“Pay?”

“Yeah, salary, benefits, money. You know...?”

“Haba, they are fed, they are housed, they are clothed, they are prayed for. Must we pay them again?”

“It seems not. Any customers from outside the camp?”

“We make uniforms for the police. The mechanic village repairs cars from everywhere.”

“Hmmm.”

We continued, in slightly less companionable silence but soon turned off onto a cul-de-sac called Calvary Close. Her front door was unlocked, and she busied herself setting up Girl's room for me. I tried to claim the living room sofa, but she wouldn't hear of it and pointed me at the bathroom with a bit of urgency.

I think I spent an hour in there and dragged myself out reluctantly, only because Hebegirl knocked on the door to say she was heading back to supervise the school kids' lunch. She left the parcel on the bed; it contained a frock made from CRB-branded àdirè, a head tie of similar material, and a range of bright-colored underwear, all with the CRB logo splashed on them. I was most impressed by the pack of reusable sanitary pads and laughed when I saw she'd placed my washed sneakers out in the garden to dry, with crushed eucalyptus leaves stuffed in them.

I had a moment of panic before I found my pants freshly washed and hanging on a line behind the kitchen. The frock, head-tie, and pillows went onto the floor before I climbed into one of my older sets of underwear, then into the bed. I positioned my backpack as my pillow and tossed and turned into sleep.

Sunday

For the first time in forever, my sleep was deep and dreamless. The smell of ákàrà frying woke me, and I smiled at the splash of water and the singing that filled the tiny house. Somebody was singing Yorùbá gospel songs as they bathed, and I luxuriated in the itchless understanding. The clothes I'd chucked onto the floor were gone, and my pants, mostly clean but at least dry, were at the foot of the bed. I pulled them on and selected one of Bẹkọ's tee shirts from my backpack.

Girl was just stepping out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel as I entered the kitchen. The smile on her face and her bodycheck were worth leaving New York for.

“Kai! Aunty Tani. You have slept, oh. I checked you many times, but you refused to wake up.”

“Hello, sweetheart. It’s so good of you to let me use your room. Sorry, I was too tired. What time is it?”

“Aunt, It’s morning again, oh. You slept through the afternoon, evening, and night since I saw you. I’m going to Sunday school now, but will I see you after?” She hopped from foot to foot, beaming and tugging at my hand.

“I’m not sure, sweetheart, but I’d like to. Let me say hello to your Mom while you get ready.” Her smile was infectious, but I also felt an itch on my back, threatening to join up with that on my chest and arms.

“Okay, Aunt. I will come and see you before I go.” She skipped away, singing,

“Oluroumbi, oh,

Joun joun,

Iroko joun joun.”

I spun around a few times, before I recalled that this folk song would be familiar to all and sundry here.

“See you soon, sweetie,” I called out weakly.

I unrolled one of the bundles I’d made of my clean underwear and inhaled the smell of kalakuta, just for old-time’s sake. The itch disappeared, and then I wandered into the kitchen.

“Welcome back, Aunt Tani.” Hebegirl was immaculately dressed.

“Sorry, Madam. I overslept badly. Why didn’t you wake me?” She didn’t have a drop of

perspiration on her, even as she leaned over the fire to ladle the crispy bean cakes from the frying pan.

“You needed to rest. Will you have ákàrà? The pap is on the table, and I advise we get there before Girl.”

“Thank you. I will go wash my face first.”

“There is a fresh chewing stick in the bathroom.”

“You think of everything.”

The chewing stick refreshed my mouth, and the mundane task freed my mind.

Breakfast was wonderful, mainly because I could barely cope with all the questions from Girl about my wearing trousers, my short hair, sneakers, how I fought the armed robbers, and would I teach her how to. Her mother cut her off when she almost found her way to querying the shape of my head. She inhaled portions of ákàrà and pap as if she'd not eaten for days. Too soon, she had to put her shoes on and head off, but not before giving me a long hug and imploring me to be there when she returned. The itch woke up again.

Hebegirl cleared the table, and I positioned myself at the sink before she could.

“Aunt Tani, you are a visitor, I will do those.” She looked almost panic-stricken.

“What is the key for?”

She looked at me, turned on her heel and left the room.

For a moment, I thought she'd also left the house, but I heard the front door shut and a key turn. She came back and peered out of the kitchen door before shutting and locking that as well. She nudged me out of the way, opened a cupboard underneath the sink and produced a bottle three-quarters full of a clear, treacly liquid. This ended up on the table with a couple of glasses. She sat, poured a finger into each one then looked at me with a single eyebrow raised.

Her forehead was covered with sweat.

I sat and raised the glass to her, but she'd already knocked hers back, and I followed suit. It took five minutes before I could stop hacking, let alone breathe easy. She smiled as she poured another finger and downed hers smoothly. I sipped mine and scrunched up my face as it went down.

"What is this stuff?" I asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Some people call it 'drink-and-twist-face.'" She dealt me some more.

"That sounds about right."

"It's also called 'ògògòrò.' It's distilled palm wine, and I use it to forget."

"Forget what?" Watching tight-assed people unwind is not a spectator sport.

"I told you about my husband, right?"

"Yes, you did." I reached out and held the hand with the bottle in.

"I didn't tell you; all of that happened in New Ifẹ." She had jumped a little when I touched her.

"Oh?"

"When he left me, I was determined to find him. I left my newborn child at the church and roamed all over the town."

"That's not so strange.?" I poured, this time, just a splash into each glass.

"No, but I ended up walking from New Ifẹ to Lagos, searching for him. That is something only mad people do."

"Erm, how far is that?"

"About two hundred kilometers. It took me several years." She took bottle and resumed pouring.

I was silent.

“I slept in the bush, drank from streams, and competed with vultures for the rotting corpses of animals. When Yòmi found me, I had long taken leave of my senses, and I did not have a scrap of clothing on me.” She drank, and she poured.

“Look, Hebegirl; we don’t have to....” I was rigid with her pain.

“No, I must. The ògògòrò will do its work. Until it doesn’t. Then I will do this again.”

“So Yòmi saved you?”

“Yes, he did, but first he....” She raised the bottle to her lips, and her eyes were closed as she drank.

“He what?”

“You know that in this country, we are 50% Christian, 50% Muslim, and 100% animist?”

“That’s funny.”

“It’s not. It’s true. Yòmi’s age-grade guild introduced him to one juju that was supposed to print money for him. The charm did not work, so he was told to sleep with a madwoman as a remedy. I was it.” She tried to lift the bottle, but I stopped her.

“And he did?”

“He kept me in that unclothed state for a year. But the juju never opened its door to him. After his father’s success, the people that helped his father gave him control over the money-printing juju, then he gave me my freedom. That was when I saw the inside of a bathroom and felt clothes on my body again.”

“But how can you stand to be around him after that?” My heart was high in my chest, and my throat felt closed down.

“For a long time, I thought I loved him.”

“You what?”

“I think the madness was still in me. When my eyes cleared, the world had changed. What choices did I have? After she was born, I didn’t see my baby till she could walk. Now, she has a life, and I would suffer more to ensure this.”

“Okay, I get that. But if you’re so happy, what do you need that key for?”

“One day, he smoked some strong weed and let it slip that he has one medicine that can make me go mad again.”

“But why would he need to do that?”

“It’s a kind of insurance in case he ever needs a madwoman to sleep with. He could give me that medicine and make me mad for a few days, weeks, or months. Maybe even years. It is not an easy charm to prepare; it will only work on me. The key that I have found will enable me to find and destroy it and to make sure I never lose my mind again, at least not from his hand.” Her voice remained even, but her breathing had become noisy.

“We can’t let that happen.” I strode back and forth across the tiny kitchen.

“Thank you, Aunty Tani. I am glad of your help.”

“No. Thanks for trusting me.”

We sat and we sipped for a while, then Hebegirl made to get up.

“I’ve been wondering about those pregnant women I saw at the airport. Whose children are they carrying?” I asked.

“Hah! Those women are for the All-Father-that-was.” She smiled bitterly.

“He impregnated all of them?”

“No. In his wisdom, he would only sleep with women that were already pregnant. He called it ’topping up.’ The women are hoping that Yòmi would continue the tradition.”

My mouth and eyes were wide open.

“But there is something else I must tell you.”

“What is it?”

“Those women who counseled Pastor Ezra and convinced Yòmì to release me, they come here sometimes. They told me you were coming but said it as if you were a man. That’s why at first, I doubted you.”

“Ehh? Who are these people?” My skin prickled in anticipation.

“Have you ever heard of the Amavi?”

I’ve had hangovers before. They’d usually hit me for one or two days after over-indulging, and usually, I deserved it. This was different. I’d barely kept up with Hebegirl, drank buckets of water, but I had a pre-hangover headache even before I passed out. I was jerked upright by her singing, and I winced at the splash of every water droplet as it crashed to the bathroom floor.

She appeared in the kitchen and had to coax my head off the table again. Her crisp skirt and muted blue blouse made her look like she’d just rolled out of Bible college. I grumbled in and out of the bathroom, and we emerged well after the sun.

“This isn’t going to work. Are you sure we shouldn’t each have a small shot? You know, just to get us going.” I leaned against the doorframe, and my backpack felt as if a family had moved into it.

“Aunty Tani, you need to get used to our things, oh. Lucky we fast today, and the kitchen is closed but I must show my face at the early service I am already very late, and you will be

expected at church in the evening.” She tried to set a brisk pace.

“I’ll have to survive this hangover first.”

“What is hangover?”

“You’re joking, I hope. Tell me again what you know about the Amavi. And please speak softly.”

“I’ve told everything I know. I’m not from this side, so I don’t know much about them. I heard they are all women, they have been around since before before, and have powerful juju.”

“Do they have any markings on their bodies?”

“What kind? I heard they use one kind of chalk to design their bodies during festivals, but I’ve never seen them.” She looked puzzled at my question.

CRB Way was still crowded, although yesterday’s line of school kids and the early crush of workers was largely absent. She slowed down at the clearing where Yòmì had made his address. Daylight revealed a large glass-covered notice board by the roadside, and she went straight to it. I looked over her shoulder and saw a poster that announced that all of today’s church services would be closed.

We were about to resume our walk, when I noticed a dusty strip of ground on the far side of the clearing, uncovered by the canopy. The thin strip ran the length of the plot of land, and it looked barren and unyielding. My eyes were caught by a small square of green at its center. The air shimmered above it, followed by the almost-expected hum at the base of my skull. I remembered the spliffs, and the solitude of that spot made it a bit more attractive. It didn’t make sense to take another step.

“I think I will stay here for a while.”

“Aunty Tani, that is not wise.”

“Something you’re not telling me?”

“Aunty Tani. Those women that we were talking about, this used to be their meeting place. Before, when this area was deep bush.”

“Okay, that’s a reason for me to stay here, surely?”

“Maybe, but those Yòmi’s age-mates also used this place for some wicked things.”

“What do you mean? Did they used to kill people here?”

“I’m sure they did. The one that I know, the one that I suffered, was that they used to cut people here.” She wouldn’t meet my gaze.

“Cut people?”

“Women. They used to cut women here.”

“They cut you. Yòmi’s people cut you?” I felt sweat pour out from my body, and I dropped my backpack. I closed the distance between us and hugged her close. She was like a warm plank of wood and remained like that. I let her go.

“Please. I must not use ogògòrò again today.” Her motions were jerky, and she had a sheen of sweat on her face and forehead.

“It’s unforgivable.” I stammered.

“I have not forgiven them. But I cannot stay here. Yesterday, during the welcome, I was working in the kitchen.”

“I hear you. But... .”

“No but. Even during the church services or prayers that we have here, nobody steps foot on that patch of ground on the other side.”

“Hebegirl, you are one of the strongest persons....”

“No I am not. I am weak. I am tired. I am late. I must go.”

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Where can I find my friends? The people that I came with yesterday?”

“Aah, they are in a hostel on Paschaffa Close. If you go past my house, it is the third turn. Maybe I will see you there later?” She looked away.

“Funny, I was thinking that with Yòmì at the church, it may be a good time to try that key we found?”

“I, I, I...” She’d stopped moving.

“I can come to your office later, just before the church service. In case you need help. Something of mine, a bracelet with unusual markings, may be secured in the same place. I need it. Urgently.”

“Okay, I will look for it. And I will expect you.” She hurried away.

“Hebegirl!” I recalled something relatively minor that had been nagging at me.

“Kai! We don’t shout like that here, oh. What is it?” She batted the air with palms facing downward.

“What did that poster mean, the church service will be closed?”

“It’s a reminder that only church members that live in the camp will be able to attend. It will be at the new church hall, at the very end of CRB way. It means the expressway outside will be blocked for hours in both directions, and security will be overwhelmed.”

“So, a good day to go hunting?”

“I am late.” She almost cracked a smile.

I waved at her back, then weaved between the rows of chairs until I was at the far edge of the stage. Tiny red twinkling lights appeared on the otherwise bare patch of ground, and I

thought the green square at its centre showed signs of recent disturbance. The itching was not severe, but the cloud that hung above my head was full of dark, barely remembered thoughts. I recalled a dream that featured a couple of people, or it may have been one person digging up a similar patch of ground. The sound of the spade as it sliced into dark brown soil and the scent of the turned-down wick in a kerosene lantern flooded my senses. I shook my head, opened my backpack, and groped for the zipped inner pocket.

When I looked up, she was right there.

She was tall, slender and had grey dreadlocks which stood out against her dark brown skin. She wore a floor-length kaftan in deep indigo. My eyes were drawn to the bracelet she wore high on her right bicep. It was identical to the one I'd given to Yòmi, except the markings were more evident, and the bracelet looked thicker and heavier.

She was close enough to touch, but nothing about her invited such a test. I looked toward CRB way, and it looked small and seemed distant. Everything between the dusty strip of ground and the rest of the world shimmered as if a mirage had swallowed us.

"Who're you?" The spliff in my hand must have given me courage.

"You don't know who you are, but you ask who I am?" Her look was one of utter contempt.

"Eh?"

"Your mother sent me."

I staggered toward her on stiff legs. There was a throb in my right temple that beat like a drum,

and I think I raised my fists. She had a bemused look on her face that made my head even hotter. A shadow danced in lazy figure eights around me — that damn bird. I tried to get a grip by clsoing my eyes and breathing deeply, but this brought me to that house on the hill. It was bathed in shadow this time, and the air surrounding it felt dense.

The large circular hall had shrunk to a tiny room with a single shuttered window on its wall. I reached toward it, and it opened to reveal a mirror. I was shocked by how gaunt I looked. Then I saw the symbols swimming around on my face and chest. Just before I freaked, the mirror dissolved into a bare window frame, and I saw her face, framed with tight dreadlocks as she stared back at me.

The slap was not gentle, and when I opened my eyes, I was flat on my back. I looked up into a sky occasionally crossed by the large bird. The woman remained a few arm-lengths away and watched me as I got up and sat on the edge of the stage. The blunt was still in my hand, so I occupied myself by putting it away. My hangover reminded me it was still there, and I stared at the backs of my arms as the patterns gradually faded.

“Did you have to hit me so hard?” I asked.

“Sometimes novices need a harsh reminder of the physical, so they do not lose themselves inside their own heads.” Her lip remained curled.

“No wonder Tracy thought I had tats; how long have those marks been showing up on me?”

She was silent.

“You’re the drummer. The woman in the photograph.”

“Yes. I was impressed you could reach me through that captured memory, I was impressed. Then you gave away your awurè.”

“That was a mistake.” I looked down.

“You should know I almost gave up on you. But your àsè seems strong enough for you to learn how to channel your power, even without the bracelet. What you tried to do just now, what you did to escape Taiwo in New York, and those Okada drivers yesterday, was not trivial. I would be happy when you get the awurè back, however. It will help your training.”

“Wait, wait, what? Training? And how do you know about ... about all that?”

“You must have seen Bilikisu keeping watch over you?” Her knowing smile and matter-of-fact manner were profoundly irritating.

“Bilikisu is the bird?” I looked up.

“Do.not.call.her.that. You are lucky she deigned to watch over you.”

“She has my gratitude.” I snapped.

“Sheathe your sharp mouth! In case you have not noticed, nobody is in charge anymore. The baby pastor thinks he is, and that will make neutralizing him difficult.” Her expression resumed its default pinched setting.

“Okay, let me start over. You mentioned my mother? Are you the person Yòmì promised to introduce me to?” I clenched my fists but kept them hidden behind me.

“Yòmì has been trying to find me for long; I suspect to dress up his intentions to you. But I must show up at his church service. Time is against us now but after I allow Yòmì to put us together, I will show you what you need to know.”

“You said something about my plans to get the awurè back. Bilikisu could not have known about that. How did you?”

“Hmmm. There may be hope for you yet. Maybe two and a half of us are left with the potential to do it correctly. It’s a charm called jilo, when we steal-to-use somebody’s mind.”

“Wait, what? Charms? Steal minds? Lady, are you high?” I clapped my hands to my mouth, but the laughter leaked out.

“Yes, yes, and no. You just went into your mind and saw me there, did you not? Anyhow, jilo is how I know you’ve had your fists clenched behind you for the past few moments. Jilo is how I know you like that pretty girl, Chi-chi, in the way that men like women. Should I go on?”

“I don’t like Pretty; I mean Chi-chi like that!” But I couldn’t meet her gaze.

“Why did you think you always had that itch response to her? It puzzled me for a while actually, the reaction is mostly expected when an Amavi has been triggered awake, and when you are near other Amavi, or a place of power. Like the Burial Ground. Or the Consulate. But you are a strange one.”

“Unbelievable. Most of my itching was because I was horny?” I muttered.

“I must leave now. I need you to patch things up with Bëko. We will need him.” Her dreadlocks had come loose, and she took a moment to tie them back from her face.

“Bëko? That ass?”

“He’s an ass we need.”

“Can you tell me what I am thinking now?” I narrowed my eyes and frowned.

“Yes. You are very rude.”

“Can’t I stop you or block you or something?”

“Only after an intense period of training.”

“I can’t wait,” I muttered.

“Likewise.”

“What’s your name?” I felt breathless and couldn’t shake off the feeling of a door closing in my face.

“You can call me Iya Arùgbà.” She looked up, past the greenery, and I heard the soft flap of Bilikisu’s wings.

I briefly tracked her flight and wondered how she’d feel about being called Billy. When I looked down, the old woman was gone.

Chapter 9 A kì í mú ìbọ̀n tetere (One does not hold a gun carelessly.)

I didn't think I'd been speaking with Iya Arùgbà for very long, but by the time I walked away from that strange strip of ground, something had pushed the sun way down. CRB way was almost empty, and if I squinted, Billy would occasionally circle within sight. She hung over the far end of CRB Way, the same area where I heard singing, drumming, and prayers coming from.

My gaze swung down Calvary Close as I walked past it, and I saw Girl sitting on their front steps. Her blouse was untucked and the plaits on one side of her head had come undone. She stood; eyes downcast as I approached.

“Aunty Tani, have you seen my Mummy?” Her face was tear-streaked.

“Girl, why are you crying? Sorry, I haven't seen her for a while. I thought you'd be at church.”

“She said I should wait here for her. I always go with my friends, but she wouldn't let me. Please, Aunty Tani, you must help me to talk to her. Something is wrong; I know it!”

“I'm sure your Mom is just being safe. She'll be back soon, but why don't you wait inside?”

“She packed our bags. Why?” Her voice rose into a wail.

“Now we have to go inside; I don't think your Mom would like the street to know her business.”

“She thinks I don't know what happened to her when I was a baby? What if she is running mad again? I can't follow her to be eating from dustbins; I can't....” She collapsed against me and sobbed.

“Crap. Of course you know about that. Hey, sweetheart. Listen, try not to worry. I'm sure that's not it.” I murmured as I steered her indoors.

“So what is it? She looked like she was crying, but she wouldn’t hug me because...”

“Because what?”

“I think I will ask Uncle Yòmi to talk to her.”

“No! You mustn’t do that.” The itching was muted, but it was there. I tried to push her back, but she hugged me tighter.

“Why not? Do you know anything?” She looked up at me.

“Please trust your Mom, Yòmi is too busy right now, so promise me you won’t mention this to him or anyone else?” I felt dizzy and saw drunken, backward facing, and upside-down lettering forming, then fading on her shoulders and the back of her neck. And on my arms.

“Aunty, please relax; you’re spoiling everything.” Her words appeared in my mind.

“Girl, what do you mean? How did you do that?” I pushed away from her, and her skin cleared up.

“What are you doing, Aunty? You and my Mummy want to steal something from Uncle Yòmi? He will drive us away, and we will have nowhere to live.” Her eyes flashed at me.

“Aaah, you are the half Amavi that Iya Arùgbà referred to, then? That’s why your Mom wouldn’t hug you? She didn’t want you to use jilo on her?”

She pouted and looked down.

“Look, I know that old woman must have told you to keep it secret, but you were just in my head; you saw that she was also there?”

“Yes, Aunty. You too, you must not tell anyone.”

I nodded.

“Ok, she helped me to find the place inside my head that controls jilo. It’s like a room in a house. Then I do as if I am going to toilet but not too much; otherwise, I would really go to

toilet and....” The words poured out in a torrent.

“Did she tell you how to block others from going inside your head?”

“Aunty, that’s the first thing she showed me. Its called a mind-lock. I just close the door to the room, and sometimes I lock it.”

“Wait, how do you find that place?”

“She put some kalakuta smoke inside my mouth; after that, she could enter my head and show me.”

“She gave you, a child, weed?”

“Aunty, just because I am small does not mean I am weak. I am trying to be stronger so I can help my Mummy. Iya Arùgbà is showing me how to be strong.”

It was another heels-of-my-palms-to-my-eyes moment.

I tried to follow her excited explanations. It was different; she didn’t have the image of a house on a hill to follow. Instead, her waystation as she called it, was a schoolhouse. She said Iya Arùgbà told her to find the grey classroom, where the light smells like hibiscus flowers. She spoke of a darker, more distant room in her mental waystation, a red room, which smelled like burnt suya and where the air was painful. She was currently practicing, with Iya Arùgbà, trying to access this place; so she could one day do the more offensive gbetugbetu or hypnosis charm. She also said the Amavi did not do the other defensive juju like okigbo or ayeta, but she suspected they do the gbekude, the magic that ceases death.

My mouth was open for long periods.

Afterward, she could barely keep her eyes open. I gave her some water, put her to bed and only left after she’d fallen asleep. I watched over her for a while and wondered how much collateral damage was too much. But first, I had to seek Bẹkọ out while figuring out the trigger

spots in my mind.

There was a good chance that Bëko, Pretty Chi-chi, and the others would be at the church already, but I hoped they'd delayed heading out. Their residence was a two-story building, the first I'd seen in the camp. It had four apartments in a two-up, two-down configuration, and the upper-floor units shared a balcony that overlooked Paschaffa Close.

The lighting was poor, so I heard their murmured conversation before I saw the clump of figures on the balcony and the glow of their cigarettes. The smell of weed hit me shortly afterward. I waved, but they stared at me stonily, and I noticed one or two tried to hide their kaya from sight. The staircase had a switchback, and as I turned onto the second flight, I saw, through the open front door, a shower of sparks landing outside. I sighed. They did not know me at all. I trudged back outside, picked up the two most viable stubs, and walked back in.

One of the leftover smokes was good for two drags before I got to the top of the stairs. I was pulling on the second one when I walked to the balcony through their living room. Trailing a haze of sweet-smelling smoke as I entered probably looked good, but the effect was negated by my having to sit very heavily on the floor before I could say hello.

“Faaaaark! Where did you guys get this stuff?”

“Yeah, it's pretty good, isn't it?” Tall-With-Glasses responded.

I was surprised that his name, Bødunrin, popped into my mind, together with his confusing train of thought. The same happened with Zainab, never again to be called Not-So-Pretty. I took another drag and pushed down the faint feelings of guilt, as I tried to parse usable

information from the stream of their thoughts.

“So, did you guys ever do your under-tongue checks?” I needed to figure out how to use my mind to do that.

They grinned a bit sheepishly.

“Can we find a glass to raise? To Kólá, and to Arike?” I meant it.

They opened the windows into their minds a little more.

“Let me guess, Yòmì sent the weed to you? He wants you to be at the church when he questions someone later tonight. He thinks smoking will help?”

They exchanged glances, then nodded in unison.

“And you all think I’m an asshole and a spy for Yòmì?”

Nobody disagreed.

“Look, I’m just as lost as you all, trying to figure this out. But I need to speak with Bẹkọ and Pre...Chi-chi. I think Bẹkọ left a walkie-talkie with you, Bọdunrin. In case of emergencies, right?” I aimed a smile at him.

He flew into one of the rooms and came back with a handset.

“Thanks. I think the call should come from you. Let him know I am here and enjoying the weed.” A final drag killed the roach.

They were keen to share their feelings and told of the abject fear they lived in while we were at the Consulate. I was viewed not just as a spy for Yòmì but as an inquisitor. This put a damper on our evening until someone, Zainab, I think, found some ògògòrò. We toasted Kólá. Then we toasted Arike. Then we toasted Pastor Ezra. By the time the world intruded, we were flying.

Instead of Bẹkọ coming back to the hostel, he sent Pretty Chi-chi to find out how high or

how drunk, we all were. As for Chi-chi, her crime that night was being so pretty. She materialized on the balcony as we reached our loudest, expounding on various theories of flight. Her skin, dark as it was, had a glow that blazed. I apologized mentally to Iya Arùgbà as I climbed off the balcony and tried to slow my heartbeat.

Zainab sauntered over and tried to take her hand. My heartbeat went crazy again as Pretty Chi-Chi walked past her and grabbed mine.

“Kai! Tani! What are you trying to do?”

“Hey, Pretty. Can’t you see? I’m gonna go first; then we’ll all fly away. Billy is up there, I can hear her, and she’ll show us the way... .” I flapped my arms but had to stop when each downstroke made my head expand.

“Bodunrin, call Bẹkọ and tell him to get here now now! And you, don’t you dare climb back up on that ledge!”

“Who died and made you Queen? You’d make a beautiful Queen, y’now. Come fly with me, Pretty, come fly....” I stumbled and fell in her direction. She caught me.

“Yòmì has asked for you a hundred times, Tani. We must go to the church service, but you need to sober up first.”

“Yòmì, Yòmì, Yòmì. Everywhere I turn, I hear his name. You would think he was king of everything. By the way, is his full name Abayòmì or Oriyòmì? I like ‘Oriyòmì,’ maybe his head can, in truth, save him from his own wickedness...” I chortled.

“Oho, now you are all quiet. After you loosen her mouth, you’re afraid of what is pouring out. Bring her backpack and help me get her into the bathroom; maybe cold water will help. Come back, Zainab. Go find some kolanut for her to chew, quick!”

I allowed her to drag me into the tiny bathroom and muttered, “Pretty Chi-chi, Business

Chi-chi,” until she told me to shut up.

She made me sit on the toilet seat and the first dipper of cold water she threw over me made me laugh, but after a few more, I was sputtering. She emptied half a bucket before it cleared my head a little.

“I’m cold. And I’m wet.” I mumbled.

“Good, better than drunk and high. Oh, and obnoxious.”

“I’m not obnoxo ... obonox ... what you said.”

“Yeah, okay. Get out of that wet shirt; I need to find you something to change into.”

“Shut the door, and please pass me my backpack. I’m not wearing any of your Afro Stepford Mama designs.” I struggled to pull off my tee shirt, but the close quarters didn’t help. She made to step out, but I pulled her back in. With her help, I wriggled out of my top and placed her palms on my breasts, and my breath quickened. Her eyes softened as we leaned into each other.

I never close my eyes when I kiss, but this time I didn’t want to open them. She collapsed into me, and the bruise on my lip received a lot of welcome attention. We’d progressed nicely to the hands-wandering, deep-moaning stage when we heard steps outside.

“It’s okay, Zainab; I’ll get the kolanut later!” I managed to gasp.

“What kolanut? And is Chi-chi in there with you?” Bẹkọ was the last person I needed to hear from, just then.

“Chi-chi? I haven’t seen her. Maybe she’s gone back to the church?” My voice went up an octave.

He yanked the door open and stood there, filling up the doorway.

Chi-chi let out a mewling sound and forced her way behind me. I tried to find my

discarded tee shirt and failed. I dug around in my backpack for a replacement and finally understood the compunction that people have, to say, “It’s not what it looks like....” Bëkọ slammed the door so hard it jumped its frame and wedged us in. By the time we forced it open, he was gone.

I grabbed the Stepford Mama frock from Chi-chi and shrugged it on as I stumbled downstairs. I was a few strides up Paschaffa Close before the stricken look on her face caught up with me. I retraced my steps to the hostel, ran back upstairs, and found her. At first, her hands hung limply, but she eventually hugged me back but just as swiftly pushed me away.

“So why did you run after him like that?” Her legs were planted wide, and she placed her fists on her hips.

“Umm, I had to explain....”

“Explain what? And what did you mean it wasn’t what it looked like? What was it, in that case?”

“Please, Chi-chi. Can we speak about this later? And let me get at my backpack.” I was wringing my hands.

She stalked downstairs as I tried to set my mind straight. I pulled my backpack on and went to give her a hug or something, but I walked into her hand. I sighed as I headed out.

“Tani, wait.” Her arms were distractingly crossed just underneath her chest.

“Yes?”

“I think you should know; Taiwo is awake. He’s not up yet, but he’s been asking for

you.“

“Hmmm.” Depending on what he’d told Yòmi, attending the church service was beginning to look like a bad idea.

“Is that a problem?” She held my hand.

“Maybe. Listen, be careful when you’re at the church service. I must run and catch Bẹkọ now. But believe me when I say it’s because of something serious, but which won’t impact us. That’s not to say we’re not something serious. You know what I...”

“You’re a mess. Just go. I can’t believe we were so scared of you.” I noticed she had one deep dimple when she smiled.

I pulled her to me, and again, my eyes closed involuntarily. We must have clung to each other for a while; the rest of the crew had surrounded us when we came up for air. Even Zainab had a goofy smile as they clapped and whooped. I waved at them and headed out into the dark.

“Unther thong threck!” It was muffled, but sounded like Zainab.

I looked back, and they each had a hand raised to mouth, while they fell about, giggling.

I waved again and laughed as I jogged down the close.

I wasn’t crying.

There were soft wing-strokes overhead, and I sensed that Billy was nearby, but I didn’t look up. My backpack jounced as I ran and hurt my lower back. I was flagging; otherwise, I’d have run into Bẹkọ. He blocked off most of the path, right in front of the canopied clearing. I leaned over with my hands on my knees and tried to catch my breath.

“Bẹkọ, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

“You didn’t mean to what, exactly? My life’s work of expanding the Ifà corpus is a failure. We’re all on the government’s shit list. And you decided to top it all by taking away the

one good thing left in my life?”

“It just happened. I didn’t think you really liked her....”

“Now, you know.”

He walked away, speaking into his walkie-talkie as he left. I moved to follow him, but the wing flaps overhead increased in frequency.

“Sorry, Billy. I need to find Hebegirl. Maybe there’s something I can still retrieve from this shit show.” I had to duck into the bushes when a truckload of black-clad goons sped past me, heading toward Paschaffa Close. I guessed Yòmì wanted everyone at his big moment tonight.

I heard the music long before I saw the lights of the church hall. Afrobeats was apparently acceptable for church; Lady Donli’s “*Never Ending*” played me in. A haze of dust hung over the extended driveway that led to the church, and banked waves of bodies responded to the music and the prayers. Translators were hard at work, and there was a significant delay as words were repeated, watered down or dressed up by megaphone-wielding linguists in separate sections of the crowd. The church building was still under construction, and what looked like a lower-level parking lot was packed with worshippers. Scattered concrete pillars in different stages of completion marked the floor above.

A mesh of tarps had been stretched between the clumps of rebar which reached out into the night sky from the future cornerposts. I tried to pick Yòmì out but couldn’t, though I heard his voice at the top of every translation cycle. Bẹkọ’s broad back was hard to miss, and I tried to keep in touch with him without attracting too much attention.

Bayọ met him, and they pressed through the crowd on the lower level, through to a flight of stairs at the back. Bẹkọ was in almost constant, animated conversation with someone over his walkie-talkie as they progressed. The crowd closed in after them, all seeking to touch or shake

hands with him.

I finally spotted Yòmì up front. A microphone was in one hand, while he gestured with the other, and I breathed a sigh of relief. He seemed to have a problem keeping his trousers up and he stopped speaking a few times to tug at his drawstring. Bẹkọ towered over him and whispered long explanations, between Yòmì's bursts of preaching.

I wrinkled my nose at them both and turned away. There was a row of unfinished toilets in a far corner of the plot and I joined a long line of women, grateful that I wore something over my pants which helped me to blend in. The tiny dose of kalakuta I smoked in there didn't quite get to me anywhere with a hibiscus smell and soft light. However, when I closed my eyes afterward, the mental images that came to me were not dark.

On my way out, I recognized Bayọ when he joined the fast-moving men's line and waited for him to come out. His smile, when he saw me, was wide and almost made me discard him. But he was so welcoming and genuinely glad to see me that I found my way into his window on the wall of my mind with no resistance.

The house on the hill was overcast again, and the air felt thick, and swimmy. My mind was soft, my hands large and clumsy, and it took ages for my limbs to respond to my mental commands. We stared at each other for a while, while I tried to figure out how to make him seek Yòmì out.

I motioned for him to walk in front of me, hoping he had a destination in mind that involved Bẹkọ at least. Billy's cries grated, but I couldn't risk looking up at her. Our progress was slow, but we made our way through the crowd and toward the steps at the back.

I hadn't seen Hebegirl, but she must have seen me. She'd been brought down the steps and they headed toward a gate in the back perimeter wall of the church. I heard her wail

uncharacteristically and turned just in time to see her kick out at one of the guards holding her. He pushed her toward the gate in response to her assault, and then I saw Girl clinging to her mother, crying silently.

Bayo and I followed them through the gate, onto a path that sloped upward into the surrounding bush. The strain of working Bayo's mind was tremendous, and I kept having to stop him from walking off into the undergrowth anytime the path took a sharp turn. After a few minutes, I called a halt and made him wait at the side of the trail. The path was unlit and narrowed with every turn and I sensed Billy flying lower with each pass. I knew something was wrong but did the only thing I knew how to. I pressed on.

They'd stopped at a clearing that hosted a flimsy hut made from wood scraps and topped with corrugated iron sheets. One of the guards looked on, holding onto Hebegirl and Girl with each massive hand. The other unsheathed a machete as I approached and had a bored look on his face. An awful smell and an even worse feeling radiated from the shack, and I knew they did not intend to let us walk away from this place. I never broke stride and didn't need to search for the window into the two thuggish minds or the red-framed window that would let me access my rage.

By the time I was myself again, I was standing over another two corpses. They had hacked each other to death with machetes, and the dirt path was slick with their blood. Again, strange, sweet smells floated off their bodies, and a hint of sparkling red lights bubbled around them.

Hebegirl had her back to the path, and she clutched Girl to her chest. Their shoulders heaved as they sobbed and called out to Jesus repeatedly.

"Hebegirl, I'm sorry you both had to see that." The words came out moments after I

thought them, and my movements were still jerky.

She nodded and held tighter onto Girl.

“How did Yòmi find out what we were planning?”

Girl started sobbing all over again.

“It was you wasn’t it, sweetheart? You told him.” I patted the child’s head and added to the list of mistakes I’d made tonight.

“He told me he didn’t need me anymore and would have given me that juju, if I’d asked.” Hebegirl sounded hoarse.

“I don’t believe that for a moment.”

“I had to go to him when I realized that he had her. He didn’t know I had already taken the bracelet and poured the juju away. Girl only told him I was going to take her away. He said he was going to get another, stronger bracelet from the old woman.”

“Kai! All is lost if he has Iya Arùgbà. We must go, right now!”

“But where?”

“We will have help; no wonder Billy has been so present. I hope we’re not too late.”

“Yes, but ... can we check something first?” Hebegirl sounded uncertain.

“What?”

“I know of this place. You should look inside.” She nodded at the hut.

“I don’t understand.”

“I will take Girl back toward the main road.”

“If you say so. There’s a young man beside the path. Stay with him, and I will come and get you.”

Hebegirl handed me a small cloth-wrapped bundle, and as soon as I touched the bracelet,

my markings woke up and sat back down again. I felt whispers of signs scratching themselves on the walls of my mind, signs I didn't understand but that I felt the weight of.

I forced myself to step forward and look inside, then waited at the door for my eyes to adjust. It looked like a pile of rotted fruit at first, but slowly, the mushy features of a head with bat-like ears jumped out at me from the middle of the heap. A dark torso was wedged in tight, and long thigh bones littered the base. A hand with curled fingers reached out of the top of the pile. I recognized the markings frozen on it. I fought against my every instinct and reached in carefully. It slid out with a squelch, and I saw it had been severed high up at the bicep.

The hurt changed up when I saw what had been thrown onto the top of the pile. Her hair was matted with blood, and her neck ended in a ragged wound. Her eyes and mouth were open, and she looked surprised. Her dark skin was gray, but the deep dimple still showed in the one cheek.

One of the few other things I recall from my time in that room was the crunch of things underfoot while I breathed through my mouth. The intro to Ebo Taylor's "*Love and Death*" played on repeat in my head, and I almost hummed the opening chords out loud. A halo of flies buzzed around me half-heartedly. I batted the thickened air in front of my face and stumbled out. I didn't remember touching or picking anything up, but before the dark swallowed that pile of pain, I saw that Chi-Chi's hair was brushed back, her eyes had been closed, and the fore-arm was nowhere in sight.

My backpack felt infinitely heavier. I wiped the sweat from my forehead, and when I

flicked my wrist, it arced away in thick, red droplets. My throat was hoarse, and the echo of distant screaming made me wonder who else was hurting. A red tint had taken over my vision, as well as all the corners of my mind, and though my eyes were open, they remained unseeing.

The ground beside the two thuggish corpses was so red it had turned into a slimy black. A strong smell like burning grass and coffee dregs filled my head. My teeth tingled in bursts; it felt as if I had a mouthful of radio receivers. I could taste the words resonating through my head, the faint residue of someone chanting “Cheesos” and then “Oluwa mi” repeatedly.

I cocked my head and blinked furiously as the prayers faded and then came back. A stirring in the air overhead felt familiar, and I felt a surge of hope. If Billy was close by, then maybe I wasn’t so alone. Something throbbed at the end of my arm, and I clutched the cloth-wrapped bundle tighter.

My feet felt too heavy to lift; putting one in front of the other took moments of concentration. I wiped my hands on the frock and then covered my eyes, but the lightless patch of forest where I had left Bayo remained in my view.

I was still in his head, and he was in mine.

His supplications to Jesus and to his God continued as Hebegirl and Girl cycled in, then out of my sight. Mother and child were locked in each other’s arms, their eyes looking larger every time they came into my mixed-up vision.

“Aunty Tani, where you dey? Na you dey shout? How I fit see wetin you dey see? Abi I done craze?” Thankfully, he stopped rocking back and forth to query himself.

The weight of his mind slowed everything down. I fell over several times and stumbled off the path at every turn. I still couldn’t see Billy, but I felt warm pressure on my head whenever she circled above me. With her as a guide, I kept in touch with the path and shuffled along with

my arms outstretched.

My sight returned, but in uncoordinated fragments, so I shut my eyes and thought of my Clinton Hill bed-sit. Then of Ms. SdB and my experience at the Consulate, I had to stop moving for a while. My head hurt with the memories of Taiwo's attack and my journey by plane, Okada, and truck. My eyes were wet as I thought of Bẹkọ, Iya Arùgbà, and how I would find my mother without her. I tried not to think of Chi-chi and failed.

Thoughts of Yòmi and the many ways I would skewer him made me smile. I opened my eyes as I came upon Bayọ. I saw what he saw; a blood-streaked scarecrow shambling toward him. I screwed my eyes tightly shut and swayed in place. My backpack felt heavier still. Hebegirl and Girl crouched somewhere in the undergrowth, and I sensed the fear exuding from them. Billy circled impatiently above us.

"Bayọ, I want you to do something for me." I shut my eyes but felt him backing away slowly.

"Wetin, Aunty?"

"First, make you stan' still."

"Okay, Aunty." He kept moving.

"Bayọ!"

"Aunty, as you dey talk to me, my eyes dey hot."

"Yeah, jilo na bitch."

"Wetin, Aunty?"

"I beg, trust me. Draw nearer."

"Our Father, who art in heaven...."

"Okay, make you hear word. I need to commot your head."

“Please, Aunt, you must commot now now!”

“But I no sabi as I go do.”

“Which kind wahala be this oh? We no fit stay here; this place dey Satanic. Hallowed be thy name....”

“Sofly sofly, Bayo. Make we try sometin’.”

“Okay, Aunt. Oya, Tell me. Thy Kingdom come... .”

“Make you slap me one time, well well.” I braced myself, eyes still closed.

“Jesu Kristi, Aunt! I no fit. Pastor Ezra tells us....”

“Bayo! No be now. Do am, or I go vex well well. . .”

“Aunt, I dey sorry. To God who made me, I no dey beat woman. I no fit start today.”

“You leave me no choice.” I tried to figure out which mental muscles to flex.

Our mind became heavier, and everything slowed down. I heard Hebegirl too late, and she’d hit me before I could open my eyes. I lay on the ground and blinked my eyesight back. When I eventually forced myself upright, Hebegirl stood on the path, her frock no longer blue. Her hair remained impeccable. Girl was behind her, eyes blank and shoulders slumped.

Bayo was sweating profusely, and his eyes bulged out when he looked at me. Hebegirl stepped in front of him and pulled him close. He shook and shivered in her grasp, and she reached out to hold Girl by the hand while making soothing sounds into his ear. After a while, he stopped trembling, and she made him sit on the path, then approached me, still holding Girl by the hand.

“You hit me pretty hard.” I touched my jaw.

“I know.”

“Hmmm.”

“She is a child. She did what she did out of fear. If you try and harm her, you will regret it.”

“Don’t worry.”

“You know, of course, it was her that told Yòmì about your attachment to the pretty girl?”

I squeezed my eyes shut and curled my hands into fists.

“How did you know about this place?” I asked quietly.

“I manage the casual workers in the camp, and I know when some go missing from other projects. They would eventually show up, carting masses of recently dug-up earth. Those that frequent these parts spoke of areas in the bush that even the vultures avoid.”

Girl wept openly, and Bayo tried to sing a church song to her. I realized he was repeating the snatches that drifted to us, presumably from the church service, a few hundred steps and as many lifetimes away.

“Praise daaa Lord, o singo singo praise da Lord.” His singing was hesitant.

“Praise His Holy name, o singo singo, praise da Lord,” Hebegirl’s voice was strong, and she could carry a tune.

“Praise daaa Lord....” Girl whispered along.

They held hands and sang a few more verses until Girl and Bayo had both stopped quivering and lost their hunched, fearful look. I swallowed as I watched them. I saw their lips moving as they prayed. Hebegirl and Bayo exchanged glances and ranged themselves across the path, with Girl behind them.

I made a show of unwrapping the bundle and holding the bracelet up, then slipped it on. I marveled at how snugly it gripped my forearm. I didn’t have to look down to feel the ripple on

my skin as the markings rose and fell. Girl clutched her mother's arm, and the marks rippled across her skin in a perverse reflection. Even in the dimness, I saw her smile and heard her release a satisfied "Aaah."

"Bayo, make you no fear me." I tried to catch his eyes.

"Yes, Aunty. I know, Aunty."

"I suppose go find Yòmi. You fit see dat we mus' stop him, abi?"

"But Aunty, but maybe ... him no sabi this place...." His words trailed away.

"Okay. I go ask am when I see am. I fit trust you?"

"Aunty, just tell me wetin you want make I do! After de ting wey I done see today...."

He shuddered.

"You fit find wan moto?"

"No problem for that. My vehicle dey near de church; I fit bring am for you. Where we dey go?"

"Not 'we,' Bayo. I want you all to get away from this place. I will find what is left of my friends, and I hope he tries to get in my way." I looked at Hebegirl.

"Tani. Don't be foolish. We have to stay together." Hebegirl could've been speaking to an errant schoolchild.

"Huh?"

"Listen, I know every corner of this camp and can get us all out of here. With all your strengths, we are completely outnumbered. I can create a distraction, which will allow us to escape."

"Hmmm...."

"Please, Aunty Tani." Girl sounded hoarse.

“What kind of distraction?”

“Girl and I will find some kerosene lanterns and then burn that unholy place to the ground. Yòmi will throw his security at the blaze, supposedly for camp safety but more so that no one can find out what is burning. If you go with Bayo to get the car, we will wait for you both at the Southern Gate. That is the oldest entrance and has always depended on numbers for security, numbers they won’t be able to sustain if there’s a fire to fight. From there, we hit the expressway and can go anywhere we want.”

“You’ve thought this through.”

“Every day, for years.”

“Okay, but Bayo will go with you. Your daughter and I will head to the Southern Gate and will wait for you both there.”

Hebegirl froze, then pulled her daughter closer. Her eyes widened as Girl squirmed out of her grasp and took a half-step toward me.

“Fine. Keep her safe.” Hebegirl turned away and motioned to Bayo.

He took a moment to ‘look for his keys.’ Then it was his ID card that had gone walkabout, and after he found that, he thought they should wait for sunrise before leaving. Hebegirl grabbed him by the belt and push-pulled him up the path while he got stuck into the Our Father.

“We are not going to wait at the Southern Gate, are we?” Girl looked grave.

“No, we’re not.”

“We have to go and save the old woman.”

“Save her? But she’s...”

“She’s alive. I felt her as soon as you put on the bracelet.”

“But do you know where she is?”

“No. But her friend will lead us.” She pointed into the skies.

“You read my mind.”

We hurried past the hut and covered our ears as the smell of death rang out loudly. I noticed a line of soldier ants building up at the entrance as if waiting for permission to enter. The ground sloped upward, and Girl seemed determined to go in a straight line, ignoring Billy’s widening flight path above us. She grommaced and her right arm but shook my hand off when I reached out to comfort her.

We were stopped by a wall, tall enough that I couldn’t see its top edge. Tangles of rusted barbed wire drooped down at intervals and there were no lights fittings on it. She stood with her back to the wall and flexed the fingers on her right hand, as she waited for me.

“So what now?” I panted.

She pointed. I looked. The camp spread out over the bottom of a deep depression in the earth that sloped away from us. It was entangled in a dark green canopy of trees, and one spot to our left, presumably around the church building site was the only one ablaze with lights. I imagined I could hear the tinny sounds of the public address system. Cooking fires had started up but the network of ribbons that connected the matchbox buildings were dark and empty.

The “whump,” when it came, was a comfortingly far distance from us, down the slope. It was followed by a coil of greasy black smoke we could barely see, but that the wind made sure we could smell. Toy vehicles with flashing lights streamed past the canvas-colored expanse that

was the canopy and converged at the church site. After a while, a line of water tankers followed suit. In the middle distance, the hut burned furiously, and bursts of sparks occasionally erupted to be swallowed by the damp earth.

Girl's eyes flickered between the burning hut, the busy church site, and a building on the extreme right side of the camp. Every light in the building had been switched on, and uniformed, helmeted humanity poured into waiting cars. Doors slammed shut silently, and then they all zoomed off. The building was unusual in that it was another two-story one.

Also, Billy was perched on top of it.

"That's where they have her?" I pointed.

She nodded and rubbed her right bicep again.

"Okay, let's go and get Stumpy, then." I closed my eyes, thought the words, and waited for a reaction.

She glared at me with bared teeth. For a heartbeat, I saw Iya Arùgbà's face, rigid with pain. Then her features went blank, and she crumpled to the ground. I spent a few moments patting her wrist, then fanning her face with my open palm. She recovered quickly and sat up, her hands covering her mouth.

"Are you okay?" As if she ever could be.

Her eyes wide, she shook her head.

"Don't worry. She's gone."

She massaged her right arm, and I held her hand. I wiped away the sweat on her forehead and pulled her into my chest. Her breath smelled stale, and I stooped to pat clumps of crusted mud from her calves and picked grass from her hair. She murmured to herself, asking for her mother, and I brushed away my tears.

I bit back the “How are you?” that almost spilled out of me and instead asked her about the fields we found ourselves in. She got stronger and louder as she described the freshly planted cassava that surrounded us, the rows of mounds in the distance that would soon be yams, and the wet, rubbery leaves of banana trees that had slapped at us as we left the wall behind us. She pointed out a new area where broad-leafed plants towered. She didn’t know what they were called, but I knew bud when I saw it.

The swish of Billy’s wings made me release Girl. We stood up, and both squinted into the sky. The house on the hill appeared in my mind like the memory of an old newsreel. I slipped in and floated into the center of the circular room, then put my faith in the old woman. Only one window was open, and I looked in and saw Iya Arùgbà, lying down and bent like a dog’s leg. Her blue gown was spattered with blood and mud in equal measure.

“Okay, sweetheart. I know exactly where she is.” She slipped her hand into mine as we walked.

“Aunty Tani...”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry.”

“No need. We all owe you a huge apology.”

When we got to the house, the soft sunshine and green backdrop made it look normal. All over the ground that we had just traversed; I saw multiple spots where the strange red prickles of light blossomed. Sometimes they lay dormant, but now and then, they floated up and around me like petals carried on the wind. The smell was confusing and suggested a mixture of cooking oil, pepper, and gunpowder. I breathed it in deeply, and my head spun.

There was a back gate in the boundary wall with a small guardroom attached, and a

bicycle leaned against its side. A series of small rubbish dumps lined our side of the wall and we surprised a few vultures on maintenance duty. They hopped a few steps away when we approached but flapped away when Billy's shadow fell across them.

We woke the guard up, and when I went to the room of windows, his surly expression was easy to identify. I brushed the image of Chi-chi's wounds away and told him to let us in, lock the gate behind us, and then go back to sleep. We entered the house through the kitchen, and I asked Girl to find all the brooms she could lay her hands on. I didn't whisper when I called out to Iya Arùgbà and the responding guards, were first surprised, then curious, before they all settled on angry.

The circular wall in my room of windows flickered to red, but I reached for Girl's hand and waited till they went back to grey.

All the windows opened to show the faces of the guards surrounding us.

I suggested to them that the yard was filthy.

I reminded them that Yòmi hated dirt.

I showed them the limited supply of brooms.

I asked them to form an orderly line and take turns sweeping all the dirt from one side of the yard to the other.

Then sweep it back again.

Forever.

In short order, they were hard at work, and one or two had come to blows over the use of a broom. We went up a narrow flight of stairs, straight to the space that held Iya Arùgbà. It was bolted from the outside, and she was as I had seen her.

"You took your time." Her thoughts appeared in my head.

“Please don’t do that. And you’re welcome; we were slightly delayed.” I wasn’t sure if she spoke sarcasm, but I did.

“I couldn’t see you clearly. Did you bring”

I hefted my backpack at her.

“Aunty Tani, we need to go. Those men are all fighting for the last broom.” Girl hovered at the doorway.

“Yes, sweetheart. Go bring that bicycle from the back gate, and I’ll bring her outside.”

Girl ran downstairs, and I tried to quell a grin, as I listened to the flurry of wet blows and grunts that was the backdrop. Iya Arùgbà had managed to ease herself into a sitting position, and while she waved me away, I reached to pull her upright and tried, at the same time, to drape her arm around my neck.

It was a prize-winning mistake.

I keeled over, senseless.

Chapter 10 Àgádágodo ò finu han ara-a wọn (Padlocks do not share secrets with one another.)

Monday

I didn't recognize Flip-flops, cleaned up as he was in a gleaming white three-piece suit. He had somehow retrieved his dented helmet, and the visor was shut but he was given away by his malodorous force field. His similarly-attired colleague showed up, a few seconds behind his hard-on. What I could see of the bicycle spoke sticking out of his right eye socket had been cleaned and polished. He raised his helmet, while Flip-flops lifted a sharpened spoke in a salute, the first line of my honor guard.

Iya Arùgbà and Pastor Ezra were the next pairing, and she lifted her severed limb to touch his Bible. A well-built boy, taller than the Okada drivers and dressed in white, was next. Letters and symbols formed then faded, on his body as well as his clothing. Opposite him was a chubby young man, dressed in a grey outfit. His eyes were hooded, and he had an amulet in his right hand, which trailed a long leather strip. The two young men faced each other and raised no salute.

At the far end of the line, was an old man. He held but did not lift a short broom with cowries clicking from its handle. A woman with a baby in her arms materialized across from him, just before he walked away. She nuzzled her baby, then hesitated for a moment before following him.

I looked down at the motorbike as it appeared between my legs. The throttle opened of its own volition, and I gagged as I was swept beneath the Okada driver's outstretched arms. It gunned some more just as I felt raindrops. Surprised, I looked up. Red droplets dripped onto my face from the darkened tip of the bicycle spoke, Iya Arùgbà's arm, and most disturbingly, from

the Bible. I had almost caught up to the old man, the woman, and her child. when he turned and raised the broom as if to flick it at me.

I opened my eyes and found myself wedged against a door in the back seat of Bayo's speeding truck. I sent a silent prayer of thanks to whoever had stripped my gown off, and dressed me in one of the tee shirts. Girl snored gently, slumped against me. Hebegirl sat in front and had one hand braced on the dashboard as Bayo swung the car from one side of the road to the other. Seated next to Girl, Iya Arùgbà grunted with each bump we encountered. She held onto the seatbelt strapped across her, but let go every so often to nurse her stump.

I leaned forward to pat my backpack, tucked at my feet, and let out a series of coughs. Hebegirl's shoulders tensed, but she didn't turn around.

"Praise God, Auntie Tani. You done re-come-back." Bayo did his head-bob.

"Where we dey?"

"We done ... Mama said ... I don't..."

"Don't.call.me.Mama." Iya Arùgbà didn't open her eyes, but Bayo jerked at each word.

"Yes, Ma ... sorry, Mummy."

"Iya Arùgbà had a good suggestion." Hebegirl didn't turn around.

"It must have been great; we're nowhere near the expressway."

"She felt, and I agree, that we should keep to the back roads and try to reach New Ifẹ. Bayo found extra jerry cans of fuel so it should"

"What?!" The seat belt held me back.

"Calm down. First, we are going to a place where she says a friend will meet us. Then you can all go to New Ifẹ and wait for Yòmì to come to you."

"Friend? Who?" I turned to the old woman.

“I don’t know her, but she says you do.”

“Aah. Yeah. Okay. But... .”

“But what?”

“Why do I feel you’re pissed at me?”

“Pissed?”

“After what I’ve just been through....”

“After what WE have just been through, you mean? Somehow summoned by this woman to find her close to death, you presumed dead and my daughter in a state of shock? I have no words to describe the carnage in that house. You said you would keep her safe, so why should I be, as you say, pissed?” She was almost fully turned around in her seat and frequently glanced at the sleeping child. Though her voice remained calm, her eyes were hot.

“It looked bad, I know, but I had things under control.”

“Yes, you looked totally in control when we found you. Don’t worry, you and the old woman can carry on together, my daughter and I will take our chances elsewhere.”

“I’m sorry, Hebegirl. Really, I am.” I tried to touch her shoulder, but she jerked it away.

I looked across and hoped for a response from Iya Arùgbà, but her eyes remained steadfastly shut.

As we headed further upcountry, we navigated small fallen trees, huge pot-holes, and animals waiting until the last moment to dart across our path. Then there was the constant irritation from heat, humidity and the clouds of insects that routinely spattered across our windshield. The

villages we passed through were all empty. According to Bayo, this was a result of mass migration to the church camps outside Ibadan and to New Ifè.

We came up to a junction, and Iya Arùgbà, without opening her eyes, insisted we turn off toward Alafia. We stopped at the town's outskirts and filled up the petrol tank from our reserves. Hebegirl sent Bayo into town on foot, specifically to Al'ata Grin Street. He returned with balls of rice soaked in a delightfully spicy pale green stew and wrapped in banana leaves, which we fell on, like wolves.

When we left, Iya Arùgbà, with her eyes still shut, continued with her directions. Hebegirl looked at me, but neither of us spoke up. Bayo's prayers were loud as he navigated single lane bridges, switchbacks, and one memorable obstacle made up of anthills taller than any of us. The light was fading when he stood on his brakes as the pebbled road fed us down a sharp incline.

Just before the sun vanished, we saw the first buildings we had encountered since Alafia. We coasted into the yard behind the mill and stopped beside a long, well-built shed. I recognized the debris of a disused sawmill just as darkness descended like a blackout curtain. Bayo flicked his lights on briefly and we saw through a haze of insects, wood shavings that had sprouted life, leftover logs, and empty trestles, all joined by thick cobwebs.

The car emitted rattling sounds, even with the engine switched off. The mechanical noises added to the pop of cooling metal and the thump of dried mud falling off the undercarriage. Only when the vehicle stopped its chatter did I realize the comfort I'd drawn from it. The absolute silence was so heavy it hurt my ears. Soon, leaves rustled, animals coughed, and something crashed through the bush, unnervingly close. We wrestled with the heat and the close smell that came with shut windows, but the whine of mosquitoes took over our lives when we

stepped out of the car.

Then Iya Arùgbà cursed aloud. Her words were thick with sleep, and I sensed her eyes were still closed. There was a dull thump, then a wet squeak and the mosquitoes bothering us fell away. The sound of creatures in the surrounding bush multiplied, then ebbed until there was nothing.

“Where are we?” Her first query was puzzling.

“What do you mean? We’re where you directed us to. Were you dreaming?” I felt sick.

“Of course. Okay. This is perfect. Who can make a fire?” I heard her scrabbling at her seat belt.

I got out, stretched out a cramp, then limped to her side and had reached in before I caught myself. Bayo was almost at the tree line, while Hebegirl and her daughter remained a few steps closer.

“Well?” Iya Arùgbà swung her feet out of the car.

“I’ll try,” I muttered.

Hebegirl had the paraphernalia from her act of arson handy, so her matches gave us enough light to gather damp wood chips and shavings. The hurricane lamps surrendered their kerosene and we started a blaze. The night became less threatening. Bayo dragged several logs close to the fire, and Iya Arùgbà sat on one. Hebegirl took charge of another, and Girl sat on the ground. I crouched close to the flames and fed them. The smoke had a fragrant scent that called to mind the opening moments of dreams that had gotten away. It was difficult to move.

“So, Bayo. Any idea where we can find water?” I’d have killed for a dipper of the stuff.

“Erm, Aunty, it is....That is.... In fact....”

“A stream runs past this mill and joins a larger tributary, about an hour away.” Iya

Arùgbà's eyes were closed again.

"How do we get to this stream?" I eased myself onto the log beside her.

"There's a wooden slide that was used to get the logs into the stream, so that they could be floated to Lagos. You should be able to navigate the path underneath it." Iya Arùgbà answered.

"How do you know the town?" Hebegirl asked.

"You're not afraid of me, are you?" Iya Arùgbà nursed her stump.

"No, I'm not."

"Good. Fear clouds judgment. Thank you for tending my wound."

"I would do it for anybody. But tell me. How do you know this town?"

"The Amavi used to be strong here before Christianity took hold."

Hebegirl jerked her head back and Bayo inched further away. I swear I heard the sweat plop out off him.

"Tani, please help me down. We should all try to get some sleep." Iya Arùgbà continued.

"Enh? But what about..." I hefted my backpack and shook it at her.

"It will keep."

"But you promised ... I have so many questions! I feel no different since I got the bracelet back, and I dreamt I was..."

"Don't worry; the bracelet is the thing that is changing, not you. And in the car, I know what you dreamed of. That can also wait. I need my strength, especially for what comes next."

"That's another thing that must stop. No way am I letting you into my head or am I going anywhere near yours! Tell me the old-fashioned way, or I will throw this ... this thing into the fire." I found myself standing over her, and the circular walls of that house on the hill turned

pink.

“Do whatever you want, Tani. By the way, the fire must not die out completely.”

“Or?”

“Or the bugs, and maybe worse will come back.”

“Ah, I see.” My anger left me, and I felt vaguely foolish.

“And tell that young man he should draw closer. If he is further away from the fire than I am, visitors may view him as a threat. Or as food.”

After arranging a shift system to keep the fire alive, I fell asleep to the sound of Bayo’s prayer beginning, “Baba wa ti’mbe ni orun... .” It wasn’t very soothing because he’d frequently leap to his feet and rail against some unseen threat, and then start all over again.

Anyhow, I knew the Yorùbá version of Lord’s Prayer by heart before daybreak.

Tuesday

Bayo’s snores woke me. He slept curled up like an insecure question mark, with one arm under his head and the other tucked between his legs. Hebegirl and Girl were nowhere in sight, but I didn’t think they’d abscond without him. Iya Arùgbà was awake and upright, leaning against the log with her eyes closed but her lips moving. I left her well alone.

The fire burned steadily. I hadn’t been woken up to tend it, but its smell was as strong as it had been last night. The memory of my dreams faded, and I was left with the shadow of Chi-Chi’s dimpled smile in my mind. It hurt.

There was some damage from the damp, but the shed looked newer and more solid than it had any right to be. As I approached it, I felt a tingling on my arms and chest. There was no

itching, and I heard no humming but it felt as if those familiar effects waited for me inside the shed. The panels of the large single-leaf door were swollen, and slick to the touch. I shoved at its hinged edge until it gave up and the door creaked inwards. One set of hinges, too far up for me to reach, held on stubbornly, so I had to push the door pane inward and then squeeze past.

I wiped my hands on my shirt and peered in. Light trickled in through gaps in the wood slats. There were piles of firewood, covered with tarps and arranged neatly in clumps of varying size, all the way to the far end. The air was thick and dark, painful to breath and my eyes were drawn to the barely visible brooms, hung up at each corner of the shed. Each had a strip of furry animal hide wrapped around its handle and the broom bristles were painted with red camwood. They rotated first one way, then the other, despite the lack of a breeze.

The wave of itching went away and the humming was barely noticeable this time. I smelled the hand of the Amavi as I approached the pile closest to me and tugged its tarp off. My eyes adjusted, and I saw it wasn't firewood at all. I tried to pick up one piece, couldn't, and satisfied myself by rubbing my fingers at the 999.99 declaration imprinted into its centre. There was no dust, no cobwebs, and no damp sullyng this or any of the countless other gold bars laid out in front of me.

I tried to compute the market value of the treasure in front of me, and arrived at a low grade headache very quickly. There was no way of knowing how many caches like this existed, or which countries or entities had paid the CRB in this currency. Or what they had been promised in exchange. I did know that the stakes had been considerably heightened by my discovery. I managed to tug the door closed, and should have been excited, even thrilled at what this meant for New Ife's long-term prospects. All I felt was dread.

I spared a thought for Bayo's expression when he woke up to find himself alone with Iya Arùgbà. It kept me smiling as I navigated the mostly overgrown path into the bush, until the trail dipped suddenly. Waist-high weeds clung to me, and I looked upward at the underside of a half-moon-shaped wooden channel supported by malnourished bamboo scaffolding.

In the shadow of the wooden chute, the ground was a slurry of mud, and piles of greying feces sprouted brave plant life on both sides of the path. The ground leveled out after a while, just in time for me to see an inviting looking stream as it burred past.

I had stooped to wash my hands and face in the fast-moving water when something white and oddly shaped bumped against my arm. I recoiled when I recognized it as a fish floating belly-up. There were dozens more caught in the weeds on both sides of the water, and the sunshine suddenly dimmed.

Backing away, I slipped on something rubbery and fell hard. A bloody red stripe caught under my heel, and the rest of the lizard's remains were ground into the soil. Suddenly, I registered the dead birds, bats, squirrels, and other assorted wildlife tangled in the undergrowth or caught up in tree branches above me. I pushed myself upright carefully and picked my way back to the path.

Hebegirl and Girl were moving quietly, almost stealthily, so I didn't hear them until they were almost on top of me. Girl held up the hem of her skirt in a makeshift basket that held about a dozen freshly-washed mangoes. Both of them had clean, frizzy, tied-back hair and their clothes hugged their damp bodies. Hebegirl spoke in whispers and frequently looked over her shoulder.

"Aunty Tani, did you see what I saw?" She continually straightened her skirt.

I nodded.

“This is that old woman’s work. Can we trust her?”

“What choice do we have?”

“To escape. To leave her here. Surely you can see how dangerous she is?”

“The same could be said of me.”

It was her turn to be silent.

“Did you find clean water?” I gestured at their damp hair.

“Yes, we walked for some time before we found a shaded area underneath some mangrove trees. The water there is fresh.”

“Okay, that sounds good. Hebegirl, listen. I am sorry for my behavior yesterday. Truthfully, I was reckless with myself but also with your daughter. You must know I mean her no harm.” I looked at Girl as I spoke, and she smiled shyly back.

“I know. But don't let this battle consume you, as it has consumed others.”

I nodded.

“You will meet us up there.” Hebegirl placed her hand on her daughter’s shoulder.

“Okay but remember. She can hear what you are thinking.”

“That will be a good thing.” She glared up hill.

I gave Girl a wave and headed upstream.

The stream horse-shoed a few times, making progress arduous and slow. At first, I ignored the hum in my head, especially as I had reached a spot where the water frothed cleanly. I splashed some water on my face but felt light-headed and had to raise up again. I twirled the bracelet and felt it thicken and warm up in my grasp. I gave up studying it when a familiar voice called my name. My confusion was complete. I froze and waited with my eyes closed for

whatever would come next.

“Hey. I did warn you about that weed, right?” Bëkọ’s drawl appeared in the middle of my mind.

I opened my eyes and they landed on him. He sat on a high root, steps away from me in the shade of a mangrove. I dropped my bag, kicked off my sneakers, then stripped off my socks, pants, and tee shirt. The water made me feel like a new woman.

“So, not scared, then?” Bëkọ dropped a whitened seed onto a small pile at his feet and started on another mango.

“I’m too tired.”

“You should be.” He chewed noisily.

After a few refreshing moments, I splashed out of the water, then rummaged in my backpack for fresh clothing.

“You’re Amavi.” I let my underpants fall and kept my eyes on his as I changed.

He nodded.

My discarded items looked beyond rescue, so I flung them into the bush behind him. He dumped another mango seed, belched, and then got up, stripping off his tee shirt as he did. Over his whydah bird tatoo, a pattern rose on his skin. At first it resembled a wave of fish scales, then it became rows of ears of corn. Another set danced across his chest, approximating a row of hourglasses. He pulled his shirt back on just as the marks all devolved into random spirals, stick figures of small lizards, and more funny-shaped birds. I felt almost envious.

“What do they mean?” I resisted reaching out to touch them.

“I have no idea.”

“How long have you known?”

“Since I was a child. You know she came to me first? The old woman, I mean. She trekked to my hamlet of a hometown, far from New Ifè. If not for my father’s macho bullshit, I could have had all that you have. He was so proud to have a son at last; there was no way he would consider an all-female guild for me. Short-sighted fucker.” He pressed his lips together.

I kept very still. Had that dreadlocked old cow recruited everyone in the world before me, I wondered?

“Can you read my thoughts?” It was a stupid question, but I had to ask.

“I’ve had no training, so I can’t do shit. I can just about project my own, but more practically, I can block my mind from being read.”

“Really? Just out of curiosity, how do you do that?”

He looked at me and laughed.

“Okay, don’t tell me, then.” I felt my face tighten.

“No wahala. I’ll help you out. Once you figure out the place where your mental waystation is, you simply lock it down. For some reason, I start my mind travels from a memory of the International House of Ifà. But then, that’s where I was brought up. It’s an old baroque building on a hill, and it has a huge circular room in the basement, where I used to play for hours as a child. I haven’t allowed my mind to go there for a lifetime. The last time I did, I did a mind-lock of the front door with a key, hid it close by, and have had no problem since. My head is my own.”

“Huh.” I kept my face straight, save for a twitch that developed in my temple. “You have this power and won’t use it?”

“It’s not like that. I found a more reliable source of magic.” He tapped his pocket, and the bulge of his tablet PC.

“Yeah, but you could have helped me out sooner. Do you know how lost I’ve felt?”

“I told you what I could and sent you that herb, didn’t I? But you’re right, I could have done more. Bẹkọ bad, Tani good. Can we move on?” His shoulders tensed.

“Why don’t you say what you’ve come to say?”

“That you should stop running and come over to the dark side? Consider it said.” He grinned mirthlessly.

“How’d you find me?”

“The god with sixteen, or in my case, thirty-two eyes.” He brought his fingertips together in a Bond villain steeple.

“Eh?”

“My Ifà app works perfectly when you’re not around. You remember how everything I cast pointed to Oyeku, Mother of the Spirit of Death?”

“Um, yeah?”

“It doesn’t do that anymore, so I could predict Bayọ’s movements and those of that kitchen manager easily. I still couldn’t figure your plans out, though.” His brow knitted.

“Yay.”

“It’s not funny, Tani. Yòmi noticed, and he’s even more desperate to get hold of you. Taiwo and a bunch of his black shirts are searching for disused sawmills nearby. I managed to feed them the wrong coordinates, but it’s a matter of time before they sweep this way. You know Taiwo’s not a fan of yours, right?”

“I know I might go the way of Ariķẹ, and Kólá, maybe Bọdunrin, Zainab. And Chi-Chi. Remember them?” My eyes flashed.

“Yeah, I remember them. I know we’re depleted, but Bọdunrin and Zainab are fine. I

know Chi-chi is with you. I've decided to try the if-you-love-her, let-her-go thing. Maybe she'll come to her senses, but there's a nation to save first!" He sputtered.

"You don't know?" I stared at him.

"Know what?"

"Yòmi's goons killed Chi-chi. I'm convinced he did it to hurt me once he discovered we were ... close." I promised myself I wouldn't shed any tears.

He stared at me for a few beats, then slapped his thighs and burst out laughing.

"If you want to open your mind, I can show you how I found her." I said quietly.

He stopped.

"Well?" I leaned toward him, but he pulled back.

"You can forget that shit! He couldn't have ... he wouldn't have" He stuttered.

"Why would I lie? I don't know how things will end, but we all know where. You'll see soon enough that she's not with us."

"Maybe she got out of this madness. Maybe you guys quarreled? Maybe..."

"Maybe I'm telling the truth."

"No matter. We are mission-critical, and we must press on." He whispered.

"Uh-huh. No surprises there. Okay then, I need to ask you a couple of things."

"You can ask"

"What's a nuralast, and what does it have to do with your Tokunboh project?"

This time, he laughed for a long time, and only stopped to select another mango.

"Okay, so scratch that. Perhaps you can explain slowly how to block your mind from unwanted readings."

So he explained, almost enthusiastically. For a few moments, he seemed like the pain-in-

the-ass, too-big-for-his-britches, oversexed Bẹkọ I'd met a lifetime ago and known for a few days. Afterward, he smiled at me and offered a fist bump, which I ignored. He headed off through the muddy shoreline, still laughing.

On a hunch, I turned my mind inward and found the house on the hill. The door was wide open as I'd left it, and I drifted in and found myself in front of that wall. The room was tinged bluish-grey, and the windows spun around me long before they settled in place. It was almost effortless. The oversized window jumped out at me, particularly given the many whydah bird-inspired decorations on its frame. It opened as soon as I approached it, and a familiar smell filled my head when I leaned in. I drifted into the corridor of mostly locked cabinets of Bẹkọ's memories. Typically, he hadn't told me about that second level of security. Afterward I locked the front door to my mind and left the key under the mat.

Iya Arùgbà was still perched on her log, and I heard something blundering about in the bush. My alarm faded when I saw Bayọ was missing from our makeshift camp. I sat on another stump and selected a mango. My eyes closed as I bit into its plump flesh, and I swiped at the dribble of juice that escaped down my chin. After a while, Iya Arùgbà gave up on her chants and tried to glare me into silence. It didn't work.

"Would you like a mango?" I picked one out.

"No. I am still processing what I consumed last night."

"Huh? I didn't see you eat anything."

"You have so much to learn. What do you think happened to the àṣẹ of all the cousins

that I extinguished?”

I gaped, my mouth full of half-chewed mango.

“You didn’t know you could do that, did you?”

“I suspected you were, but hoped I was wrong.”

“There is so much I can teach you if you would let me.”

“There’s so much I need to know, but I’m not letting you into my thoughts again.” I spat out a whitened stone and sucked at strands of fiber stuck between my teeth.

“There are limits to what I can explain. Most Amavi teachings are passed from mind to mind.” She leaned toward me.

“I don’t believe you. You just want to control me.”

“Think. Remember how much you could do after you performed jilo with the other child?”

I thought. I remembered. I nodded.

“You are exceptional. But you need”

“Tell me about...” I hesitated.

“Your mother?” She exhaled.

I nodded.

“Your mother was the strongest Amavi initiate I’d ever taught until”

“Until what?”

“Until I met you.” She looked at me, and her skin crawled with drunken lettering.

“Don’t.”

“*Don’t what?*” Her lips didn’t move.

“Don’t do jilo, don’t enter my mind. Don’t control me; just talk! Like normal people do.”

“We’re not normal people.” She gestured at the fire, and it burned a little higher.

“That much is clear. But I need to trust you. Talk, or I walk.”

“Okay, but you need to work on your temper. It’s a real impediment.”

I held my head in my hands.

“Your mother’s strength was in how she could establish a random patch of land as Ilé-ilè.”

“Home-ground? What’s that?” The heat and smell of the fire made me feel comfortable, almost sleepy.

“Ilé-ilè is the real name for the spots that Yòmi has been searching for. Though we told him they occur naturally, he did not believe this for long. He clearly figured out that it can be found in places where our forbear’s blood has been spilled indiscriminately.”

“Huh, what?”

“Was I not clear?”

“You mean all those places that Yòmi had us check in New York; Seneca Village, the African Burial Ground, Washington Square Park?”

“Yes, those places possess immense power. Luckily for us, he did not know the signs and could not guide your searches.”

“Tell me again how my mother comes into this. She can create places like this?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“And you can’t?”

“Very few of us can. These places represent spots where the àṣẹ from the deceased is unable or is not allowed to go back to Olódùmarè. That accumulation of àṣẹ, in the form of dormant life force, can be accessed, but only by the strongest practitioners.”

“I wonder, how did Yò̀mì find out so much about ilé-ilẹ̀?”

“You are right; we erred in bringing him, through his father, into our confidence. But I am determined to correct this.” She looked down..

“Go on.”

“Well-trained or experienced Amavi can also extract àṣẹ from specific situations. Unlike your Mother, we do it only after some form of sacrifice.”

“You mean?” I drew my finger across my throat.

“As you saw, I extracted enough to sustain me last night from small animals. This time, we need more. But we’re not bloodthirsty, this time a limb will suffice.” She looked pointedly at my backpack.

“Eeew, you mean your...? I thought you wanted to bury it, so a tree of knowledge would grow from the spot or something...” My speech trailed away.

“I had meant to commend you on your instincts for bringing it along from that foul place. Now, I realize it was more from luck than good judgement. The limb of an Amavi High Priestess, burned in the proper way, can allow us to perform jilo or even gbekude spells. Most importantly, and for our current needs, it will enable ègbẹ̀.”

“Hmm. Commend me? That would be nice.” I said dryly.

She sniffed.

“I know the jilo charm, but raising the dead? And ègbẹ̀? You mean that, that disappear-over-here, appear-over-there trick? I thought it was a myth?”

“Stop talking, child.”

“Gosh, I’m sorry then.”

“Kai, your flippancy is annoying. As I was explaining, instead of having to go through

what I must, your mother could draw the àṣẹ she needed from the soil or from whatever. Her power was unrivaled, but this was only revealed late in her life after we had ... after we..."

"After you what?"

"After we gave her to Pastor Ezra as an adviser."

In my mind, I leaped to my feet and strode forcefully to scream in her face. It took me a tremendous effort to stand, and I shuffled toward her, barely able to see through a haze of smoke.

"You added something to the fire, didn't you?" I sank to my knees.

"I thought you'd like it. Its one of the reasons we came to this spot. My favorite blend of kalakuta grows nearby; it is not for play."

"Hmpgthghthft." I turned my face to the side as the earth rushed to meet it.

She was stronger than she looked and pulled my face out of the soil by tugging at my backpack, then she propped me up against the log.

She kept up a stream of incantations, and my bracelet expanded and contracted as she chanted, then went cold. I tried to find my way into that house on the hill and willed my bracelet to wake up again or my skin to tingle. I remained as unmarked as a newborn calf and the bracelet remained decorative.

I closed my eyes when she reached under her wrapper and winced as she pulled out grey tufts and sprinkled them into the fire. Her satisfied grin was untranslatable, and the flames blazed as high as her head. Her stump jerked pitifully as the memory of the limb carried out sweeping gestures toward the skies.

A steady stream of rain replaced the flames, and it joined the heavens above to the patch of ground where the fire had burned moments before. Pretty soon, it looked as solid as a column; after a few more rotations of the chanting old woman, it took the form of a braided pillar of

water, mobile but firm.

She smoothed it as best as she could with one hand, but it coiled in weird ways and had a few kinks where her stump would not allow her to massage it straight. Something had changed since she opened this channel. Her incantations became frenzied, and while I'd seen her in pain, even humbled, I'd never seen Iya Arùgbà looking as unsure of herself. She crouched on her knees, and glanced upward repeatedly but never stopped her chanting.

My weight had shifted and I watched her figure turn through a right angle until the side of my face hit the ground again. My ringside view was now a worm's eye view, and I'd never felt so helpless.

A worn hunter's bag hit the ground first. Then I heard a low-pitched whistle as somebody slid down the water pipe. His feet hit the ground, and after the dust settled, I saw his toenails were black as pitch. He picked up the bag and slung it across his chest. He only wielded the short broom with the cowrie shells, which he waved at Iya Arùgbà. Walking with that prancing gait, he receded from view, and then from earshot.

Iya Arùgbà never raised her head from the ground, but I heard her gasp. I didn't see anyone else descend, but the sturdy hips that filled my view could only have belonged to Ms. SdB.

Ms. SdB guided Iya Arùgbà to her feet, revealing a patch of dust on the old woman's forehead. She was dressed in a white wrapper that she tucked over her breasts and had several coils of thick red coral beads around her neck. Her skin glistened, and she wore simple brown sandals.

“How is the nameless one performing?” Ms. SdB’s query appeared in my head, and I couldn’t help crossing my fingers as Iya Arùgbà mulled her response.

“She’s trying.” Iya Arùgbà whispered.

“Yes, I am sure she is,” she looked at me and nodded, “she can hear us.”

“Yes, but she refuses to communicate this way.”

“Don’t worry. She will when the time is right. You must leave this place. She has already spoken with Bẹkọ, and Taiwo is nearby.”

The old man was nowhere in sight. It took Iya Arùgbà ages to move from her prone position, and her steps were shaky as she stumbled to the water rope. She waved her stump at it, and it slowly separated into rain and then steam. When she turned to me, the fire was burning again, lower than I remembered but still fiercely.

Her face was grey, and she shook as if fevered.

“We have failed.” She looked at Ms. SdB.

“No. We are back at the beginning, and it is not the same thing.” Ms. SdB’s tone was calming.

“Sònpòna is still loose on the world. He made use of a door that I opened, just to prove a point. He is back and he is angry. I think we are worse off.” Iya Arùgbà’s shoulders drooped even more.

“Iya Arùgbà, you are partly right. I fear he caused the change in the Sickness, when he learned I was also unbound, and working to stop him. It is a pity if that is true, because he has only made me even more determined to halt his carelessness with human lives. Have faith. In me, and in those I place my own faith in.” I felt both sets of eyes hit me.

“This one?” Iya Arùgbà guffawed.

“Yes. She is changing.” Sandaled feet approached my head.

She helped me up, and my muscles tingled back into life at her touch. I sat up and looked down at the depressions of her footprints. They filled with water, and the indentations were thick with bright green grass and flowers before I could stand.

“Who are you?” I whispered.

She smiled.

“Is he ...? Was that ...?” I pointed in the direction the old man had gone, with shaking hands and a voice to match.

“See? She knows nothing,” Iya Arùgbà sniffed.

“Then teach her. She clearly has potential. She’s already learned the mind-lock.” Ms. SdB said quietly.

Iya Arùgbà grimaced.

“Tani. I must leave now. The two of you will press on. You have information to share; she has knowledge to give. You must work together.” Ms. SdB scanned the undergrowth.

“Wait. How will you leave? Is there another pillar of rain in there?” I looked up.

“No. I’m trying to get your friends to come out without harming them. Bayọ will be critical if we are to find a way to contain Şònpòna. Perhaps you could summon him ?” She looked at me.

“Of course.” I looked confidently toward the path that led down to the stream.

”Bayọ ! Hebegirl! Girl! Please come out.”

A rustle came from the opposite direction, behind me.

Hebegirl gripped her daughter’s shoulder, and Bayọ dragged his feet behind them.

“Aah. The half-Amavi and her mother. Perhaps they can go with....” Ms. SdB turned to

me.

“You will find him more effective if they are with you,” I said.

She studied the three of them briefly, then glanced at Iya Arùgbà, who nodded.

Girl burst into tears and, between sobs, said she would be coming with me. Hebegirl was silent, but her grip on Girl tightened, and she swore she wasn’t going anywhere with anybody other than Bayo. Bayo looked as if he would bolt or shit himself — or both.

I raised my hand and waited for their protests to die out.

“Ordinarily, I’d ask if I would find my mother behind the next bout of madness I’m about to plunge into. The truth is I’m keener on her being proud of me if we meet.” I exhaled loudly.

Ms. SdB nodded, but Iya Arùgbà turned up her nose.

“But I think you should all know what I learned from Bẹkọ. Yes, Hebegirl, he tracked me to the stream, and no, he didn’t rat us out. I think he allowed me to probe his mind.” I continued.

“You think?” Ms. SdB asked.

“Well, it was not difficult, and I still couldn’t read some areas.”

“Hmm. Perhaps for the benefit of all, you should say out loud what you found.”

“Well, it’s like this. Apparently, it’s customary even with Afro descendants, to keep the leftover bit of a baby’s umbilical cord after childbirth. It seems Yòmi’s had millions of them donated under the guise of a stem cell research project for Black and brown folk. Or he’s simply taken them. Yòmi believes that these fragments, if buried under certain conditions, will help him carry out a variant of the ègbè charm. No stranger to irony, he calls his plan Tokunbọh, and he and Bẹkọ plan to do it during Pastor Ezra’s funeral.” My mouth felt dry.

“That’s crazy. He thinks he can use òkùn remainders to magically draw their owners across the Atlantic to New Ifẹ ?” Hebegirl laughed out loud.

“I think he had proposed some sort of orderly migration of the Black US population to New Ife, but they didn’t like him or trust him. Or both. So he intends to move them here, against their will to satisfy his human resource needs. The irony is stunning.” I thumped my own head.

Girl grabbed my hand.

“But after all I’ve seen, I can’t discount the possibility of an ègbè charm actually working. However, and present company can correct me, but I don’t think he has access to the juice needed for his plan to work.”

Eyes turned to Iya Arùgbà, and Ms. SdB. They both nodded.

“What if he has the help of a skilled and very powerful Amavi priestess?” Hebegirl asked.

“Even so, it would probably kill her, and she wouldn’t agree to help him in the first place.” I looked at the floor; the flowers in Ms. SdB’s footprints were attracting insects.

“What if he had this priestess and her daughter?” Hebegirl spoke softly.

“Ten of us, a hundred of us, couldn’t make a difference,” I said.

“Are you sure? Do you trust Bẹkọ? It seems risky. I never really liked him, he would always call me ‘kitchen manager,’ if we met, and not as a compliment. You could be walking yourself into a trap, then become a key part of their scheme.” Hebegirl made sense.

“You’re right. On the plane, he let slip something about a nuralast or something, and I think it’s a key part of this mad idea. Until we learn more about that detail, we must concentrate on stopping Yòmì. There’s also Sònpòna to worry about.”

“Leave Sònpòna to me.” Ms. SdB said.

I looked at her and nodded.

“One more thing?” I looked at Hebegirl.

She raised an eyebrow.

“There was a distinct smell of kalakuta when I probed Bẹkọ’s mind — way too much to have been from his personal habit. I think I saw a small grow-farm in the camp, near that hellish house. Do you think the church could be growing weed commercially?” I felt daft asking this.

“No doubt.” Hebegirl.

“For sure.” Iya Arùgbà.

“Aunty, of course, now.” Girl.

Bayọ shrugged.

I shook my head. Again.

“We have to leave now, Bayọ.” Ms. SdB walked to the car, trailing bright green footprints.

“I’d feel much better if you also told us where we are going and what we will try to do.” Hebegirl glared at Ms. SdB.

“Fair enough. The ship bringing the footballers and dignitaries will be docking soon. It will also deliver the majority of the umbilical cord fragments that Yòmì will depend on.” Ms. SdB said.

“No way. It would take a moon, at least.” Hebegirl scoffed.

“I made representations to Òlòkùn. I am sure they were received favorably.” Ms. SdB replied.

“Okay, but even if that’s so, how do you intend to destroy the fragments?” Hebegirl’s resistance to any power outside of her church’s was showing.

I glared at her, which only seemed to fire her up more.

“I doubt we will need to or should destroy such relics. My target is something else on the

ship. While Tani and Iya Arùgbà tackle the Tokunboh problem, my task is to bind Şonpona. Let us leave if you are coming; else, I will go with Bayo alone.” Ms. SdB spoke quietly but firmly.

Bayo’s eyes bugged out, and he turned a beseeching glance to Hebegirl.

They gathered the last mangoes for their journey, then Bayo checked under the hood and on his remaining jerrycans. Girl kept glancing at me, and I wordlessly told her to trust Ms. SdB, to get her mother to do the same, and to keep her mind closed. She hiccupped quietly as she entered the truck’s back seats with Hebegirl.

“Wait!” I dug into my backpack. And pulled out Ms. SdB’s crumpled jeans and underpants.

“You might attract less attention in these,” I added the last of Bẹko’s plain white tees.

She accepted them, and as casually as if she was in her bedroom, dropped her wrapper, stepped into the underwear, then the jeans, and pulled on the tee shirt. I thought Bayo would have an aneurysm.

He started the car, backed it up out of the shelter and they roared off. Our stretch of the forest was still tranquil, and it became deafeningly so after the engine noise died away.

“Okay, you heard what she said? You need to share information.” I picked up Ms. SdB’s discarded wrapper, rolled it tight, and squeezed it into my backpack.

Iya Arùgbà gave me one of her venomous looks.

“What did she mean about representations to Òlòkùn ?” I asked.

“Child. You know less than nothing, still.” Iya Arùgbà shook her head.

“Um, that’s why I need information,” I said, and smiled sweetly.

“She’s Òlòkùn’s sister.”

“Òlòkùn is Ms. SdB’s sister?”

She nodded. A few times.

“The òrìṣa of the sea is her sister?”

She nodded again.

“You mean she’s ...” I stuttered.

“Yes, you’ve been consorting with Ọṣùn, the honey of life. The only female orìṣa among the first seventeen sent to aiye by Olódùmarè. The òrìṣà that saved the newly formed world from the neglect of her hot-headed brethren. And, she’s doing it again.”

Chapter 11 Bí ojú aládeḱun ò dá igi, kì gùn ún. (If a monkey is not certain about a tree, it should not climb it.)

Wednesday / Thursday / Friday / Saturday / Sunday / Monday / Tuesday / Wednesday / Thursday / Friday / Saturday

I barely resisted when she limped over to me, and awkwardly tugged my backpack open. She plucked her disembodied forearm out, and my backpack felt so light, I almost tipped over. When I turned around, it was to view Iya Arùgbà as she held onto her disembodied limb in a grotesque handshake.

“So no burial rites for that thing, then?” I croaked.

“Taiwo is close. You must do what I tell you when I tell you, and we may yet live to continue our struggle.” She whispered at the fire, and it blazed high and bright again.

“Erm, shouldn’t we be heading for the road ? Maybe we can get a lift?” My body exploded with dancing marks, and I didn’t like it.

She gestured at me, and my mind felt thick and soupy. When I looked inward, and entered the weatherbeaten house that was my waystation, the only access I had from there was to an expanse of forest that looked familiar but not in a good way.

“No! No way are we doing that!” I saw spots in the periphery of my vision.

“This is not the time to fight me. If we are to use egbè, we must trust each other. We have to start our journey from one mind, yours or mine. I am better prepared to take us where we have to go.” She spoke slowly as if to an idiot child.

“I get it. But if it’s all so harmless, why don’t we start from my waystation?”

“Don’t be stupid. You barely know what you’re doing; it could take forever.”

“It didn’t take forever when you let me in the last time. Remember? When you were trapped and in pain, and I had to rescue you?”

“I sense that is not the last time you will bring this incident up. But it is different now, and I am strong enough to”

“Are you worried about what else I will see in there?”

“It’s because we need to make haste. Taiwo is close. I can feel him.”

“Okay, game over then.”

“You are stubborn, just like your mother. Alright, I will hold you, and I will enter your mind. It will hurt. Whatever you see, we will discuss. Later. There are also things you will not see, which we will speak about. Later.”

“Works for me.”

She used her toe to draw a shaky line around us and the fire, then pulled me close.

“Wait, I’m not ready ...” I shouted as she threw the limb into the fire.

It exploded in a soundless ball of darkness. She clutched me so tightly; she was a layer of paint if paint could mutter incantations into my shoulder. I staggered under her weight, and the waves of pain threatened to overcome me. Every muscle twitch, every roll of my eyeballs, every breath came with a feeling of glass shards poking through my skin. From the inside. My eyelids fluttered with the sound of tombstones moving. Even my eyelashes hurt.

But I could still see. I saw colors, sounds, and feelings. I saw Iya Arùgbà’s perspiration as it was dragged out of her pores and dried out by her incantations. I saw the blood dripping off her stump, falling in a series of swirls and swoops until it was sucked back into her body. I saw her pain radiating off her in deep red screams. Then I felt it.

It thundered through me like a waterfall. It had a well-worn feel to it, as if experienced by others, destined for many more, but for the moment dedicated to me. I knew I deserved every droplet. How else could I account for the lives that I had taken since I had started this journey?

How else could I pay for the brightly lit patterns that moved across my skin? How else would I understand that the marks added up to the permutations offered by countless positions, angles of orientation, shapes, sizes, and colors of the palm nuts on a sacred opèlè. I did not need the signals from a divining chain when, for all intents and purposes, I was a divining chain. The math bubbled through my blood and released 32 X 32 pairs of triacontadigrams, and I saw Bẹkọ's app laid bare.

In one heartbeat, we had hitched a ride on a mosquito. It made a noise like a jumbo jet. In the next, we looked down, through patchy cloud cover, at the browning fingerprint that was the clearing in the middle of the CRB complex. We rotated with the earth and drifted toward the sliver that her waystation, the opening into her mind's eye. She grunted, and we materialized above a patch of ground, hidden among rolling hills and surrounded by rows and rows of green-leaved shrubs. The grass was trimmed and well cared for, and a system of walkways had been carved out of the soil, spreading out star-like from the centre. The paths all had a layer of dark grey gravel chips lined with round, white stones.

I made out five stone obelisks arranged in a rough circle at the center of the space. Then her breathing became short and shallow, and she released her grip on me. We were returned into nothingness and spun inside a tornado at the heart of a mote of dust. She sagged against me, limp and insensible. I looked inward, found a way to seek out the entrance to the house on the hill and fumbled the key from beneath the doormat. The windows lined up for me again, and I recognized the green-tinged one and drifted over to it.

I felt relief when I looked through this portal and found a residual image of Iya Arùgbà holding up a kerosene lamp. Her back was straight, her skin glowed with health, and her dreadlocks were jet black. And she had two hands.

The floor glittered with bright red flowers, and the darkness surrounding her was absolute. I hurried to the next one as I looked for a window that would lead me to anything close to the patch of green she had wanted to take us to.

She mumbled herself awake and squeezed me tight again, then continued with her chanting. My eyesight dimmed, and when I shook my head clear, our consciousnesses floated in front of a random window that represented the way to her desired destination. Her heartbeat was erratic and sounded louder in my ears than my own heart did. My eyes widened as I recalled the image I had just seen through the green-tinged window. I had to go back.

We were still in my house, but I struggled to move back to the last window. The old woman was gasping the words out now, and her one arm pinned both of mine to my body. I felt not anger but irritation, and it was ridiculously easy to free my arms and clamp one hand across her mouth. Then she bit me. I pushed her away, and we spun to the ground. My eyesight was still blurred, and I sat up and felt cold, wet grass beneath me.

Everything was a mass of popping, crackling, and fizzing sensations, and my limbs felt stretched, and every joint burned like crazy. I tried to stand, but the ground sucked at me harder than usual, and I fell onto my side. I'm not sure how long we lay there for, but when I could make sense of what I saw, clouds scudded overhead and blocked a red-tinged moon from view. My bracelet felt cold and weighed my arm down. Flat on my back, I had a bad attack of vertigo. I heard a grunt, and after a lifetime of trying, I dragged myself over to her prone form and nudged her awake.

"Where are we? What happened?" My tongue felt a size too big.

"What happened was that you ruined my ẹgbẹ charm." She didn't open her eyes.

"I needed to see that memory."

“What memory?”

“That of you in the grove.”

“We have more important things to do than for you to scratch your every mental itch!”

She raised her voice with her every word until she was shouting.

“I’m sorry.” I’d never heard her shout.

“So am I.”

“What’s wrong with me?”

“You are stubborn, impulsive and refuse to take instructions. Your head is also strangely formed. You have...”

“Okay, okay. I meant with my body? Nothing works.”

“Hmmpfft. After ègbè, it takes some time for your asẹ̀ to settle back into your body.”

“How long?”

“It depends. Some people never regain the control of their limbs. Some lose their minds. We are working with powerful charms, and there are always risks.”

“But I can hear you, so things must be okay? We’ll just wait for our strength to return, right?”

“Our minds could have melded into the same calabash, so that we echo each other’s folly forever.”

“Oh.”

“And have you noticed something?”

“What now?” I looked around wildly.

“We have been talking inside our heads. The correct way.”

“Huh.” I tried to think of a single reason to stop but couldn’t.

“Well? Do I have your trust? Things will be easier if you do not resist.”

“Trust? After what we’ve been through, for sure.”

“How gracious of you.”

“I’ll let that slide. So how do we know...how do we figure...”

“Tell me what you see.”

“Not much, it’s dark, and I can’t see too well. I thought we were back at the camp, but the weather is wrong, and the smells are strange.”

“What else?”

“When I saw you in that dream, you were at the camp. But it was different.”

“You know where you were but did not know when you were.”

“More riddles! How about you open your eyes .”

“No, child. I want to hear what you see before I look. It could help me clarify if we are two minds, capable of independent thought or melded into one, seeing and feeling the same things.”

“Oh.”

“The next test is if anyone or anything can see us.”

“Okay, that makes sense, but where are we?”

“Again.My.Eyes.Are.Closed.”

“Aah. Okay. We’re on a roadside and close to a large gate. I hear snoring from the other side.”

“Large black gate? Carved figures in it?” She breathed out a long gust of air.

“I think so..”

“That is good.”

“Where are we?”

“My eyesight is also limited, but I see a bus parked on the roadside a little way off. I can also smell some people sleeping in it. Some monkeys sleep on the gate, and there is a stream nearby. Plenty of prayers are being offered there. We are at the Òṣùn sacred grove in Òṣògbò.”

“You could have led with that” I muttered.

“Yes, but I had to find my way there. This is good. Our allies will surely find us here.”

“Okay, but why did you try to go to that place first? That field with the five stone penises?”

“Show some respect! The fallow field could be our last hope!” She was up on her one elbow, eyes flashing.

“Fallow field? What’s that?”

“It is the site where the seven Oriṣàs were initially bound. It is a difficult thing to find, especially as it moves, together with those obelisks, from place to place. It’s a site of great power and where I hoped to recover.” She leaned back.

“I’m just checking; Taiwo wouldn’t dare come here, right? This place being where Òṣùn draws her strength from?” I spoke out loud this time.

“Yes.” So did she.

“In that case, I think we’re in the right place for you to start your recovery.”

Sunday

I woke to find the moon trapped behind clouds. Iya Arùgbà was awake but still flat on her back and in pest control mode. The ground around us was littered with tiny corpses, and she breathed a little easier. I staggered away from her and coaxed a colony of bats from a nearby fruit tree. I enjoyed the soft fuzzy feel of their collective mind as they fluttered around me effortlessly. Satisfied, that I had been seen by some other entities, I had just released them when Iya Arùgbà's gesture halted them in mid-flight. They plummeted to the ground in a series of soft plops. Her eyes gleamed, her posture improved, and she got up on one knee.

I swallowed my objection and went to help her up. She leaned on me, and I didn't feel my skin's usual tingling or prickling, but she was so heavy I staggered and almost fell. She shot me a look, and right at that moment, I'd have killed for a "Thank you, Tani."

"A kì í dá ọwọ́ lé ohun tí a ò lè gbé." I felt the frown on her face, as she planted this gem in my head.

"I never laid my hands on this load; it was thrust at me. Why should I not complain about not being able to lift it?" My voice rose as I sputtered at her.

"No, use your head."

"I've wondered how you can do so much without your bracelet. Don't you need it?"

"Aah. You noticed. It's more critical that you, an initiate, no matter how talented, always have your áwùrè on you. Your bracelet drinks asè through you, and is like a regulator, it keeps you from taking too much on board. You might never need to use the power it stores for you, but somehow I doubt that."

"But Yòmi? Does that mean he's drinking, you know, stuff from your bracelet as well?"

"He will, and he's only a man with no training. I doubt he will be able to cope with it." I felt her grimace.

“You know he killed his father don’t you? And I think it may be partly your fault. You gave them too much. All that power, all that gold...”

“It is possible we overestimated Ezra. It made sense at the time, to have him in charge of rebuilding of the economy, and the country. But we also underestimated Yòmi.”

“Wait.” I had a thought that chilled me, and I spoke out loud.

She ignored me.

“How long would it take for the transport to get here from the camp?” I asked her wordlessly.

“A few days. They would have traveled in a convoy. Why?”

“I can see the bus you mentioned. The darkness doesn’t help, but it looks like one of those from the camp. There could be a couple more parked a bit further back.”

“Maybe they had been sent here a while ago.”

“Okay, how long between the Hunter’s Moon occurrences in these parts?”

“Is there a Hunter’s Moon?” Her pulse quickened, and she searched the sky.

I nodded.

“It depends, it could be decades.”

“DECADES? AS IN, TENS OF YEARS?” A cloud of birds took off from a nearby clump of trees.

“Maybe not. The one that welcomed you was on the first day of the month of April, I believe?”

“How does that help?” I tried to rest her on the ground.

“Use your head. April is the only month that delivers two Hunter’s moons; one on the first day and one on the last.”

“We were inside the ègbè charm for thirty days?” I think I defined the term “wild-eyed” at that moment.

“If we didn’t overshoot the second one in April, to a much later occurrence. Either way, and before you say it; Yes, we are in shit.”

I supported Iya Arùgbà and pushed the gate open. It creaked mightily, but the snoring continued. Just inside, the smoke from mosquito coils hung over a row of bodies, wrapped up and stretched out on sleeping mats. We continued down a wide boulevard. After we’d gone a few lengths, the gate creaked open again and we turned to see a line of figures tiptoe past the sleeping guards.

They walked with the coiled energy of athletes, and from their tee shirts, I figured they were the Brazilian-Nigerian footballers, come to give thanks to or ask favor from Ọ̀ṣùṇ. We continued our slow progress, past carvings that depicted masquerades, drummers, hunters, birds and sundry animals. Iya Arùgbà flagged, and her footprints deepened with every step.

“Get me to the water.” She put into my head.

“Mfghttrff.” I grunted, while we weaved all over the road.

I was fit to collapse, when a pair of hands stopped us and carefully uncoiled Iya Arùgbà’s arm from around my neck. Another set of arms lifted me. I opened my eyes and smiled at the sight of Iya Arùgbà, cuddled like an infant, in the embrace of one of the footballers.

We were in the grove proper now, and everywhere I looked, there was a carved figure at the sides of the path. Some were clothed, and some towered over us. There were plenty of stylized carvings of animals. All were beautiful.

I struggled to hear anything over the sound of singing.

“Oluroumbi, oh,
Joun joun,
Iroko joun joun.”

I smiled and tapped my transport on the arm. He stopped and let me down gently.

“Obrigada,” I said, my only Portuguese word.

His smile lit up the path, then he rattled off more Portuguese while he gesticulated at the surrounding trees and water with awe in his eyes.

“I am Tani.” I pointed to myself and spoke slowly.

“Eu sei. Meu nome é Rodrigo.” He responded.

We were close to a narrow iron suspension bridge, and the other fellow carrying Iya Arùgbà was already walking down a convenient slope, adjacent to the bridge. I scrambled after them but stopped to wave and bow my thanks to Rodrigo. He and the rest of his team-mates were at the highpoint, where they disrobed, and then wrapped themselves in white waist-cloths. They waved me on and then stood in a group to pray. Meanwhile, Rodrigo distributed fruit, kola-nuts, and a few bottles of white liquor onto nearby boulders.

I had a thought and went back to him. With sign language, I asked if they had a bolt of white cloth they could spare. They turned out one extra one, but it was cut for young men and would barely cover me. I pulled out the one from my backpack, and it unfolded almost to the size of a sail. He found an extra bottle of rum to give me and some kola-nuts.

I bowed my thanks again and ran to catch up with Iya Arùgbà and got to the bridge just

as her erstwhile porter came back up the slope. We high-fived in passing. She was knee-deep in the water when I stopped her and offered her one of the pieces of white cloth.

“Thank you, Tani.” She leaned on my arm.

I was speechless.

“Sorry, I gave you the wrong one.” I took the smaller one back. We changed on the shore, and I left our clothes, weighed down by my backpack, on a handy patch of grass. In a few moments, I’d wrapped her round several times and then pulled up the trailing end behind her. I felt like a reluctant bridesmaid. I was barely covered by Rodrigo’s spare cloth, but it didn’t matter when the water welcomed us.

It was good to see what Iya Arùgbà looked like when she smiled. The bandage on her stump washed away, and she splashed in the water like a child. Silent shapes swam below the surface, nudging my legs as they slithered past, and I felt no fear, only respect and sisterhood with every creature in the river. I could have stayed there forever.

The footballers came to the edge and treated us to a rousing chorus of “Qmọ Tani? Qmọ wa ni!” and then they left.

“How does it feel?” I thought at Iya Arùgbà.

“It doesn’t hurt. For the first time, it doesn’t hurt.” She waved her stump; if she knew how, she’d probably have whooped.

“Tani, kùşẹ.” The soft tone brought comfort, all the way down to the particles that constituted me.

We stayed as still as we could.

“You may have surprised yourself, but I know you can do more.” The words from the river continued.

“We are close. But danger is closer.” Now her words chilled me.

“Iya Arùgbà is stronger, but you will need to be stronger still. Everything in the grove is at your disposal; remember that.” Then she was gone.

I looked at Iya Arùgbà, but I felt she was looking to me. I nudged her out slowly, and we changed from the white wrappers in silence. Luckily her limb had inflicted more aroma than bodily fluids onto the items in my backpack, and I extracted a clean pair of underpants and a couple of tees. Iya Arùgbà used one to dry herself but refused to wear anything with a CRB logo. I changed into a brown, blue, and yellow tee shirt, rolled the wet pieces of white cloth in a bundle, and tucked it under one arm.

“What do you think it is?” I asked aloud.

“We’ll find out soon enough. There is a festival soon, so it will be crowded. It may be prudent to wait for the crowds before stepping outside?” She responded.

“Or better to face whatever the danger is now so that nobody else is at risk?” I countered.

She gave me a long look, then nodded.

She searched the sky as we walked, and I was conscious that we hadn’t seen Billy since we exited the ègbè charm.

Iya Arùgbà eyed the rum, but I kept the bottle under my arm. We walked on and found ourselves in front of the shrine of Ogun, the òrìṣà of war and iron. There was a tall iron sculpture, dressed in red, and though faceless, it looked me deep in the eye and into my heart.

I didn’t intend to, but I popped open the bottle, spilled some rum at Ogun’s feet, and then took a swig. I offered Iya Arùgbà the bottle, and she also took a deep draught. We left the remaining rum on a rock beside Ogun and found our way to the entrance.

The guards awoke as we approached and rubbed sleep out of their eyes. One came at us

with a torch, signaling he needed to do under-tongue checks. A scowl from Iya Arùgbà sent him packing. The bundle of wet cloth was becoming a nuisance, and I considered throwing it into the bush.

“Well, what do you think?” I asked as we looked both ways down the empty road.

“No need to think. Look.”

Taiwo walked out of the bush opposite us. He was dressed in combat fatigues and had a long gun hanging off one shoulder. A Rambo-sized knife and a pistol hung from opposite sides of his belt. He’d tied a CRB-branded black bandana around his forehead, and his cheeks were decorated with boot polish, which made the red glow of his facial scars stand out more.

Monday

Almost immediately, I needed a fresh pair of underpants. Iya Arùgbà hissed long and loud and started to chant.

“That shit won’t work. Do you think I’d come at you without some protection?” He raised his left wrist to show off a strip of leopard skin, beaded with brown cowries, and black feathers that were streaked with blood.

“I’m sure you recognize it. It will slow you down long enough for me to show you why I am the Bullet of God.” Taiwo lifted the business end of his rifle and pointed it at me.

I closed my eyes and found the hill, but the house was a distant grey dot. I trudged upward and the incline behaved as if I was walking up a down escalator. When I gave up, I found myself on my knees, back on the road in front of the sacred grove, panting. Taiwo’s voice

as usual made my sphincter muscles contract extra tight. Still, warm stuff trickled steadily down the back of one leg.

“Boy, do you know where you are? If you pull that trigger, even in the after-life, you will be cursed.” Iya Arùgbà spat at him.

“More cursed, you mean?” He giggled, but the gun did not waver.

“What do you want? To talk us to death? You’re alone and can’t be doing this with Yòmi’s or Bẹkọ’s approval.” I got to my feet and took a few steps away from Iya Arùgbà.

“I missed you at the sawmill, but I smelled you on the clothes you threw aside after you met with Bẹkọ. I know you corrupted him so I no longer look to him for guidance. Keep still, you witch, I warn you ...” His knuckle whitened on the trigger.

“Irò gba! Me and Bẹkọ? Kill me now.” But I stopped moving.

“Drop that bundle. And the backpack.” He gestured with the tip of the gun barrel.

I did.

“Now, take off your bracelet.”

I tried, but the bracelet wouldn’t budge.

Unfortunately, it also wouldn’t do anything else.

“I know you witches were too stupid to go for that ayeta bullets-to-water thing, so I have the advantage over you. I’m going to take you in. I can, but I’m not keen on carrying both of you till I can commandeer a vehicle, so if either of you gives me grief, they will end their active service here.” He reached behind his belt for two pairs of zip-tie cuffs.

“What do you mean, ‘carry’?” I asked.

“You don’t think I’m going to let you stay awake through our trip, do you? I will enjoy beating you both unconscious.” He looked as if he would.

“I am closer to him, so...” She put into my head.

“And if I see a hint of a shadow of a tattoo raising up on either of you, the same result.”

He kicked the cuffs closer to me.

“Remember what she just told us.” I sent to Iya Arùgbà.

“What? I was semi-conscious through most of that back there.”

“Everything we need, is here at our disposal.” I stooped to pick up a pair of cuffs and started to slip them on.

“No! Behind you!” He barked.

I complied and sent him industrial-level stink-eye as I worked the cuffs on.

“Turn around; let me see what you’re doing.” He snarled.

As I did, I went deep into my mind and looked up at the house without trying to walk up the hill. I sensed Iya Arùgbà beside me.

“Help me suppress my ilà.” I sent out.

Instantly, she showed up more clearly in my mind. She was beside me at the bottom of that hill, leaning against the signpost. She smoked a joint so big, I wondered how she lit it, her arms were way too short. My marks had threatened to show, but they vanished.

She looked to the heavens and breathed out a column of smoke. The fumes cleared to reveal the sculpture we just walked past, with the emptied bottle of rum at his feet. Iya Arùgbà and I fell to our knees, placed our heads on the ground, and stayed that way. We got up when we felt the statue nod and watched it dissolve into the smoke.

“Okay, that’s fine! As you were! Now it’s your turn.” Taiwo yelled, then jerked his rifle toward Iya Arùgbà.

I raised my handcuffed hands, pointed at his gun with my right hand, and then made a

fist. The gun folded over. I opened my hand again and made another fist. This time, it crumpled into a spiky metallic ball, trapping Taiwo's gun hand in its heart. He howled, and gouts of blood spurted everywhere.

He sank to his knees and grabbed at his wrist, whimpering. The blood pumping out of him slowed to a trickle, but resumed its gushing when when he reached across his body to grab at the pistol on his belt. I flicked a finger, and watched it spin out of his hand and land on the ground between us. Next, he tried to unclip the knife. Another flick sent this spinning onto the roadside. He tried to get up off his knees and failed. He bared his teeth while he raised his right arm slowly, and pointed the deformity at the end of his hand at me, until the blood flow became an intermittent dribble.

I smiled when a vulture with a massive wingspan dropped out of the sky and landed across the road from us. He moaned, fell over onto his side, and grunted as he soiled himself. I stooped to pick up his gun, but Iya Arùgbà beat me to it.

"Do you remember what you said when you did this?" She waved her stump in his face.

"Iya Arùgbà, don't..." I started toward her.

"Your mother. She'll never see you ag..." He grated at me.

The noise from the gunshot was horrendous. The vulture took off from a standing start, leading countless other birds as they flapped away from neighboring treetops.

"Bí ojú aládẹkun ò dá igi, kì gùn ún." She muttered and threw the gun into the bush.

The red oozing out of him spread away from his body and bubbled up to my toes. I stepped back, but the thick brown mud turned into tiny pinpricks, which floated up like pollen. I gasped as a smell like burning shit filled my head, and I sank to my knees.

"Wake up!" Iya Arùgbà kicked me, none too gently.

I woke up.

I felt rested, energized, and nodded my thanks to Iya Arùgbà for retrieving the knife and cutting off my cuffs.

“Sorry. Still not used to the sight of blood.” I scrambled to my feet.

I slipped my backpack on and tucked the bundle of cloth under my right arm. I had a thought and leaned over Taiwo, ripped off his bandana and stuffed it into my pocket, then we walked away. We hadn’t gone a hundred steps before the vulture came back in for a smooth landing. Soon, another joined. Then another. The guards screwed up the courage to peep out of the gates, but we disregarded them. We kept walking, and I wondered how far away we were from running water.

We both heard the rattle-pop of Bayo’s truck before we saw it. It was thick with dust, and its windscreen, outside of the wiper’s arcs, was layered with the bodies of dead bugs and one unfortunate frog. The radiator had a hedgehog stuck in it, and one of its tires was as bald as a village football field. Unnecessarily, we waved it down, and it pulled over onto the tiny road shoulder, the doors bursting open before it came to a halt.

Girl came thundering out and almost knocked me over. She squealed like a, well, young girl and jumped up and down while hugging me. Her mother walked toward us sedately. She gave Iya Arùgbà a tentative handshake, then patted me on the shoulders. Her hair was a mess. Bayo tugged at the straps holding down a long-ass crate that extended out of his cargo bed and hung back, shuffling from foot to foot. He stuttered and stammered greetings and froze with

shock, when I freed myself from Girl and hugged him.

I looked beyond him to the truck as a large figure squeezed out of the front passenger seat.

“What’s he doing here?” I asked Hebegirl.

We all stared at Kẹhinde, but Girl rushed past me and clung to his hand. He wore grimy cargo trousers, boots, and a filthy tee shirt. It was decorated with the CRB logo underneath a flattering artist’s sketch of Yòmi. Above it all, a scroll-like banner displayed the words “The All-Father for All Time.”

“Without Kẹhinde, we would not have escaped the port,” Hebegirl said.

“Huh.” I imagined I could hear the vultures, wild dogs, and other bush animals hard at work a short way behind us.

“Yes, Aunty. He came there with the bad men from the camp, and they caught us. Uncle Yòmi used the radio to tell him to kill us, but instead, Uncle Kẹhinde started crying. They thought he was crying for himself, but he said it was because he knew he had to kill all of them. It was terrible, but they would have done the same to us. Then we found the box, and we ran away.” Girl finally drew breath and looked at Kẹhinde with shining eyes.

He remained stooped, and he looked as if it was her hand in his that stopped him from toppling over.

“*How do we tell him?*” I looked at Iya Arùgbà.

“*First things first?*” She nodded toward the truck, “*And by the way, how are you feeling?*”

I overlooked her attempt at humor, stepped to the vehicle, and was only mildly surprised to find it empty.

“Where is she?” I asked Bayo.

Startled, he bent into the cabin and even searched underneath the front seats.

“Aunty, the other Aunty has gone, oh.” His mouth was an ‘O.’

“Did she say anything?” I asked Hebegirl.

“A short while ago, she got very agitated. She said there was a disturbance at the grove, and that we should hurry, as she had to go and perform a cleansing. The last thing she said was that we would see her at the football match.” She didn’t touch her hair once.

I caught Iya Arùgbà staring at me, but she turned away when I looked at her.

“The funeral is today?” I asked Girl.

“Pastor Ezra has already been buried, Aunty. He was buried last Saturday. But the ariyá to remember him has not stopped. Look, we are all wearing the new shirts. There will be a lecture tomorrow, Tuesday and a big party. Then there will be a football match on Wednesday and a big party, then” She ran out of breath.

Underneath different shades of dirt, their tee shirts all displayed the same picture, and the same message.

“I see. But have you guys just arrived from the port? You took a long time, eh?”

“Kai, Aunty, what about you? We have been hoping and praying. The other Aunty said that today was the last day we could afford to wait for you.” She flitted between Kẹhinde and me.

”Okay, Hebegirl. What was the plan?” I nodded at the crate.

“It was a minor miracle, but we found the obelisk that used to bind Sònpòna. She explained about something called the fallow field, and if we hadn’t met you here, we’d have tried to locate it to restore the obelisk and entrap Sònpòna again.” She smiled an awful lot.

“En hen?! Hebegirl, you dey do like believer oh? ” Eyes wide, I drifted over to the cargo bed and touched the crate.

“Aunty Tani, many ting we no understand.” There was a gleam in her eye I didn’t remember ever seeing.

“Aunty, it was difficult, oh, but my Mummy was amazing.”

“The other Aunty gave me strength.” Hebegirl smiled again.

That was twice in one day. Kai!

“Maybe your other Aunty called in more favors from her brethren and sisteren?” I looked reverently at the crate, then at Iya Arùgbà, but she remained silent.

“Okay, we were also going to the House of Ifà to try and confirm the location of this field. We should press on together.” I nodded at Hebegirl.

“Aunty, I need to find some water for the car. I will come back now now.” Bayo said.

“Make I follow you.” Hebegirl said, very quickly, I thought.

The two of them headed off, holding onto the handle of a small plastic pail Bayo pulled out from a space behind the back seats.

My eyebrows shot up, and Girl giggled behind her hands as she led Kẹhinde back to the car to sit.

“Hey!” I called out.

Hebegirl stopped.

“Did you drive all this way just to check if we were here?” I asked.

“No, we saw your friend, and that’s why we were sure you had surfaced.” She responded.

“Huh? Which friend?”

She pointed upward at the dot hovering above us.

I smiled with relief and pointed Billy out to Iya Arùgbà.

“I see her. She confirms the child’s account.” She sent to me.

I walked toward the car and pulled Girl into a hug.

My skin didn’t react, and neither did hers.

“Why don’t you go cheer Iya Arùgbà up? I need to chat with Uncle Kẹhinde.” I said.

Her face fell, but she skipped away.

“Kẹhinde, we need to talk.” I started.

I went to pick up the previously white bundles of cloth and dropped them in the cargo bed.

Kẹhinde raised his head slowly, and his eyes met mine. His face was utterly blank, his eyes empty and lifeless.

“Taiwo showed up here a little while ago. He was in full combat gear and tried to kidnap us.”

His head jerked backward, then his eyes closed.

“Is he...” He didn’t open his eyes.

At first, I nodded, then I cleared my throat and said, “Yes.”

He reached out to grab my forearm so fast that I feared the worst.

But he clasped it in both hands, pulled my hand to his forehead, and sobbed like a child.

“I’m so sorry; I know you loved each other.” I soothed him and squeezed Taiwo’s bandana into his hand.

After a while, his sobs changed to sniffles, then he wiped his eyes and blew his nose on his sleeve.

“Where is he?” He asked.

I pointed and stepped out of his way.

He heaved himself out of the truck and walked off. Girl ran after him and hugged him quickly, then returned to me. I looked at Iya Arùgbà.

“We have to go.” She planted in my head.

I shook my head vigorously.

Hebegirl and Bayo came back, still carrying the tiny bucket between them. Half its contents had sloshed out before they got to the truck, and the thirsty car gobbled up all they had and wanted more. They both looked at me apologetically. I sighed and waved them away.

“I beg, let only Bayo carry the bucket this time, oh,” I called out after them.

They had to return to the stream several times, but at least they’d return with a full bucket each trip. I found a remnant of a chewing stick in my backpack and finished it off while I joined them on one excursion. At the tiny stream, I threw away my multi-colored underwear, changed into a fresh pair, then scrubbed away the worst of the stains on my inside pants leg. Despite the way we parted, I made a mental note to add Tinuke into my will while I scrubbed at the white cloths.

By the time Kẹhinde showed up, Bayo had dedicated the last bucket of water to his windshield, my pants had almost dried on me and we were ready to leave. Kẹhinde’s steps were more purposeful, and muddy as he was, he walked with his shoulders back. He’d wrapped Taiwo’s bandana around his fingers and clenched his fist around it.

“What do you think?” I sent to Iya Arùgbà.

“I have looked and only found relief at his brother’s demise. He lived in fear of his sibling and worried that they would both contribute to Yòmi’s madness. He resents you but had imagined worse ends for Taiwo; he is grateful that he found enough to bury.” She sent back.

“Yeah. Of course, you read him.” I muttered.

We tied the wet, now off-white cloths over the crate and piled into the truck.

All of us, except Kẹhinde.

“What’s up?” I asked.

He stared at me, and his eyes skated over Iya Arùgbà before he looked at Girl.

“I can’t go with you.” His voice broke.

Girl wailed and hopped out of the car to hug him again. Hebegirl followed closely, and Bayo joined them.

“Why? I mean, where will you go?” I asked.

He shrugged and pointed vaguely South toward New Ifẹ.

“*Is this wise?*” I looked at Iya Arùgbà.

“*I don’t think keeping him with us would be.*”

“Will we see you again?” Girl looked miserable.

“I’m sure you will. Listen to your mother and your Uncle Bayo. And thanks for letting me help.” Kẹhinde patted the child on her shoulder and then turned to me.

“Tomorrow is also Oja Oba and may be the last chance to make up to the many spirits I let loose.” He sounded firm.

“The King’s Market? What’s that?”

“As was customary, there is a festival in New Ifẹ every single day. Oja Oba is one of the oldest; it allows the newly deceased and the unsettled spirits to congregate within the city walls, to try and fulfill old obligations.” Iya Arùgbà said.

“What?!” I practically shouted.

“Yes. People who lost their lives and don’t know why. Or those that feel a sense of

injustice at their killer walking free, can come to New Ife on this day. Sometimes they receive justice, but they often leave unsatisfied and return on the next King;s Market.” Kẹhinde spoke in a monotone and barely raised his head.

“That’s intense. You sure you want to be there?” I put out my hand.

“Yes.” He touched my hand briefly, snapped off a salute, did an about-face, and then strode off.

We watched him get smaller, and Girl waved madly for a while.

He didn’t wave back, so we got back into the car, and Bayo cranked the engine. We didn’t say anything for ages.

“He was afraid of Taiwo finding out what he did to help us.” Hebegirl dashed tears away.

“He looks like somebody who wants to die.” Girl sniffled, with her head in my lap.

Bayo nodded.

“Aunty, where have you and Iya Arùgbà gone since all these days?” Girl asked.

“I wish I knew, child; I wish I knew.” I sighed deeply.

“Don’t worry, Aunty, maybe you will go there again. You must take me with you..” Her hand slipped into mine.

Bayo leaned over the steering wheel and peered through the spreading mess as another bird-sized bug distributed itself over the windshield.

The sharp smell of Kẹhinde’s perspiration lingered, and Girl cried when it started to fade. Girl learned a lot of swear words when we lost a tire just after Pongila Hill. We had no spare, so Bayo

jacked the truck up and rolled the damaged tire down the road with Girl, and Hebegirl for company.

Iya Arùgbà and I sat in the back of the truck and swatted at each other's bugs. She leaned out occasionally and looked up into the sky.

"What do you think we will find when we get to ...?" I asked her aloud.

"I should tell you about what you saw in that vision. What I buried." She cut me off.

I froze.

"Um, okay," I responded.

"We never knew your mother's origins; as a child, she was rescued from raiders. They erred in attacking our village. We gained horses, camel-loads of salt and freed dozens of children, women, and men after we repelled them. Because she was rescued, your mother had the choice of clan, but she chose to bind herself to the Amavi. She was a weeper during funerals, then she took over from me as drummer and dancer in festivals or celebrations. After some time, she would gather herbs, dig for red ochre, mix dyes and do other little tasks for me." She stopped and touched her stump.

"Are you okay? Do you want to speak into my head instead?"

"No, this is fine. Anyway, your mother progressed in the guild and soon surpassed almost all of us. It was fruitless, as she would never truly be a member. Through no fault of hers, she had not been assigned a temporary name at birth. Hence we had no starting point from which to divine her guild name. With no name, she did not exist."

"Eh? Guild name?"

"Yes. This is why, she made sure that she had you named Tani by ritual ceremony and with more than enough sacrifice. Your guild name should have been revealed to you and her

together by Ifà. But because you were sent away, it was not done.”

“What’s your guild name?”

“It is not considered polite to ask.” She snapped.

“Huh.”

“Your mother grew into a beautiful young woman and was married off as soon as she was of age.”

“Eh? To whom? My father?” I perked up.

“Definitely not. Her husband was a brute. A famous hunter and farmer, he was wealthy and influential. But he beat her and he used her carelessly. All his previous children had died in their infancy, and many wives had petitioned to leave him. He wanted a boy and consumed countless charms to ensure he had a male heir with her.”

“Then I came along.”

“It wasn’t just that. From the shape of your skull, no one from our village could have fathered you.” She glanced at my head.

“How is that?” I placed both hands on it.

“It’s just different. Even after molding, it went back to, well, what we have here.” She pointed.

“All those nicknames. All that teasing. When will it end?” I muttered as I pressed down on the back of my head.

“Things got worse when he claimed that one of the òrìṣas appeared in his dreams, laying with your mother. He insisted that this unnamed òrìṣa was the true owner of her pregnancy.”

“Um, sounds like he liked his palm wine?”

“He did. But the night you were born, a flash flood washed his hut away.”

“So?”

“It was built on a small hill while his wives’ huts were all in the valley below. Some huts suffered minor damage, but your mothers did not even get wet.”

“Oh.”

“He raged for many moons and petitioned the village council to put both of you out of his compound. Then, the council was strong, and though the Amavi faced challenges, we were still a force to be reckoned with. We argued that this would offend whichever òrìṣa was responsible and they ultimately refused his request.”

“What did he do?”

“Well, he kept you both. But he made your mother’s life miserable. She suffered all this because he held back a detail she craved from him.”

“The identity of the orìṣa that supposedly fathered me?”

“Supposedly? You don’t believe it is true?”

“What do you think? If it was, wouldn’t she have known?”

“My child, the òrìṣas behave just like mortal men. Sometimes they steal affections. Your mother may have been charmed and unable to resist or even know what was being taken from her.”

“Then why am I not strong like her? You said she could draw àṣẹ from the earth! I can barely control jilo, and yet this child is an expert in it.” I waved down the road.

“And yet, I have never seen you replenish yourself, as I must, constantly. Even the child regularly draws strength from our small cousins.”

I was quiet.

“If I have your trust, I can help you to manage what is happening to you. I saw something

with Taiwo's body that reminded me of what your mother could do. You are not ... a monster. But please tell me what happened there, so I can help you."

"I ... I ... we can talk about that later. I'd rather learn about my mother for now, and maybe that will help." The hair on the nape of my neck tingled, and I pushed down the memories of those moments beside Taiwo's body and all the other ones when the sparkling red flowers had entered me.

"As you wish. To continue, your mother withstood a lot. Until her husband came up with a fresh horror."

"Uh huh?"

"He said that in his dream when she was in congress with the òrìṣà that fathered you, she was enjoying herself too much. He insisted he had to subject her to ritual cutting."

I sat up, my eyes round, and crossed my arms across my belly.

"He what?" I growled.

"As I said, he was a brute. He took his petition directly to the Kabiyesi. And then he added your name to it."

I crossed my legs.

"The petition dragged on, and while it did, the influence of the Amavi waned. Political power was shifting to the adherents of the Christian church, and when her husband converted loudly and brought his entire clan along, your mother decided, with my help, to get you away."

"Wow! How?"

"Our most prominent priestesses had left for Benin, Togo, and other countries, where their insights and powers were appreciated. Like the Caribbean and the United States."

"Aah."

“Before she put you on the bus that would take you away, she determined to try one last time to find out who your father was.”

“How could she do that?”

“The fallow field.”

“Eh?”

“The fallow field, bearing the seven obelisks, shows up from time to time. But it moves within certain limitations and frequently manifests at our most holy places. The Amavi can see it, and your mother and I managed to predict the next site it would manifest in.”

“Wait, how did the guy who found Şonpõna’s obelisk come across it? Was the fallow field on the Occidental campus at that time?”

“Yes, although he referred to them as the Seven Staves. Unschooled eyes can also see the fallow field. They would need to use certain herbs or stimulants first, though.”

“Aah, Seven Staves...” I muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing, Kẹhinde got that name spectacularly wrong, is all. But what stimulants?”

“The holy herb you refer to as kalakuta is the most efficient way for ordinary people to see the field if it manifests near them.”

“An unfortunate choice, then. A college campus, I mean. Somebody would always be stoned, at sometime.”

“That is true.”

“And us? Would we need to be um, stoned as well?”

“I don’t like that term, and no.”

I chuckled, and she smiled.

“Your mother’s eyes were opened, so she put you on her back and went in search of the field. We thought it would manifest, with all seven obelisks on view, on a hill, near a town called Òkèmaalù.”

“Well, did she find him? What did she say?”

“It seems she found something different. She came down from that hill with the bracelet you now wear on your arm.”

My hand flashed to my forearm.

“She eventually admitted to me that she got it the same way I got mine. She would say no more about that hill, the field, or your father. I accompanied her to Lagos soon afterward, and we put you on a night bus to Porto Novo, where trusted sisters lived.”

“What did she mean, she got it as you got yours?” I sighed.

“In the Amavi, if a child shows talent, these bracelets are usually passed from mother to daughter.”

I froze.

“You know what that means, don’t you?”

“I’m terrified to say it out loud. Maybe you can?”

“There was only one female member among the seven Orìṣàs, bound to the fallow field. You have met her.”

“You are suggesting that Òṣùn is my maternal grandmother?”

She nodded.

“Can you continue?” I noticed how tired she looked.

“Are you afraid of what else you will hear?”

“Yes. But carry on.”

“The night bus was not for the faint-hearted, but you adjusted quickly.”

“I did? Please remind me.”

“Well, it was a service which grew to meet the needs of migrant workers’ families. If the workers passed away in Nigeria, it could be an expensive venture to repatriate their remains through official channels to neighboring countries. A cheaper and quicker option was to drive them through the borders, strapped upright as if they were regular travelers. Some live passengers helped sell the illusion and you were placed in the lap of an elderly Togolese lady who had passed away after working in Nigeria for decades. It was your playing with her breasts that convinced the border officers that all was well, and we traveled without incident.”

“You did what?!”

“This is not the time to be dramatic. I was on the bus too.” She snapped at me.

“My heart breaks for you. But what does all this have to do with what you buried?” I snapped back.

“Before I left with you on the bus, your mother and I buried the dried-up stub of your umbilical cord, your òkùn in a random patch of land on the outskirts of Lagos. She prayed that this would eventually draw you back home, and she said she would rather you were pulled to Lagos, a place far from where she’d experienced so much pain.”

“Cheesos! You’ve been trafficking bits of my body? Where is it?”

“It’s safe, and I will ensure it gets to you.”

“You’d better. Okay, but why didn’t she escape with me?”

“She couldn’t. Remember, she had no family name and was seeking to build one. Taking you away from a ritual that her husband demanded was one thing, but running away was a step too far.”

“So what happened to her?” I wiped my eyes.

“She suffered at his hands for years, but he died after an unfortunate accident, and we sent her to counsel then-Ezra Fawole. She helped Fawole to build several successful businesses, but the church was their crowning glory. He was supposed to help us uplift the Amavi in return, but we didn’t account for his son.”

“Unfortunate accident? What happened?” I leaned forward.

“He aquired a new dane gun, and it misfired the first time he tested it. The backburn removed his penis and testicles. He bled to death, screaming.”

I sat back with my face upturned and smiling as if I’d just found some insecticide.

“I remember her standing beside her husband’s body, drinking in his àsè before it could stain the earth. She said it was how she perceived ilé-ilè and it became something she consumed through her nose, but that was the most she ever told me about how she replenished herself. Does this sound familiar?”

I stared at her and reflected on all those moments when I had seen the red prickles of light, the odd smells that always accompanied those red flashes, and how I’d feel afterward.

“So I was left in Benin? How did I get to the US? By boat? You know I never had a birth certificate or entry papers? It was hell to build up an identity and....” I knew I was babbling, but it filled the moments, so she could not speak.

“You didn’t go by boat.”

“Eh?”

“I took you to Benin because the only person I knew who could perform the ègbè charm at that time was in Porto Novo.”

I know my mouth slackened, and I felt a scream building up from my toes.

Just then Girl, Bayo, and Hebegirl appeared, out of breath from rolling the tire uphill.

Chapter 12 Igba imọlẹ̀ kò lè pa ẹni tí kò bá ẹ̀. (Two hundred and one gods cannot kill someone who has not offended them.)

Iya Arùgbà knocked on the door of my mind for three towns, fourteen villages and two stops to pee, before I figured out how to make her halt.

“I will leave the car and return to the Ọ̀ṣùn sacred grove. Look into my mind. You know I mean it. Leave me be.” I relished putting those words in her head.

Afterward, my head was quiet. But not for long.

“Bayo. I bin wan’ ask you since, una sabi wetin be de meaning of ‘nuralast’ ? Una fit done hear Bẹkọ or Yòmì tok am?” I nneded to figure out what we were up against, fast.

“You mean Neural Lace.” Iya Arùgbà said, before Bayo could respond.

“Eh? Neural Lace? Wgat’s that?”

“I couldn’t control him, because of the charms he armed himself with, but I could search Taiwo’s mind. I did so, before I ended him. It appears to be something that allows the brain’s signals to enter that International Network that you people talk about.” She shut her mouth afterward with an almost audible snap.

“What madman unleashed this? Hebegirl? Does this sound familiar?”

“I’ve not heard that name, but I know Bẹkọ often lamented not being able to do what Sònpọ̀na did on that video clip.” Hebegirl offered.

“Surely, you can now see how he plans to execute his Tokunbọh?” Iya Arùgbà asked.

“All I see is that it means she’s alive.” I said through gritted teeth.

“It means she has agreed to perform a monstrous task. The person I know would never do that. She may be alive, but I doubt she is of free will.” Iya Arùgbà replied.

I glared at her.

“What task? What person?” Hebegirl twisted in her seat.

“She means that Bẹkọ wants to use someone strong, with this lace thing, to power his Tokunbọh charm. We don’t know if that someone is my mother, but....”

“Child. We know. And we know something else.” Iya Arùgbà looked at me.

“What is it?”

“This neural lace will extend your mother’s abilities across the ocean and enable her to perform the egbè charm at an almost impossible scale. But she still requires a continuous stream of àsẹ to make it work.” She continued.

“And where does he plan to find this?”

“They will convert what’s left of the white population in that country to ilé-ilè.” Iya Arùgbà’s face was grim.

“You mean ... they will steal the life force from millions, so he can transport all Black and brown folk to New Ifẹ?” It sounded much, much worse when I repeated it.

She nodded.

I looked at Hebegirl. She looked at Bayọ. He pressed down on the accelerator.

Tuesday

Yòmi’s black shirts manned the check-points en route Òkèmaalù, where the International House of Ifá is located. The crate attracted plenty of attention, but Iya Arùgbà was in fine form and easily ensured our safe passage by flexing her jilo muscles. However, the closer we got, the more the crate creaked, rattled, and even smoked.

From the outskirts of Ọkọta, the security personnel were of the Naija Ninjas 1st Brigade of Guards. Thorough and professional as they were, between the patches I’d borrowed from the Sewing Village and Iya Arùgbà doing her thing, they were convinced to offer us an escort.

We sped onward, with the guards' lights flasing and horn blaring ahead of us. We made great time and as we got near Òkèmaalù, the oncoming lane becoming increasingly filled with traffic. The transports approaching us were packed with colorfully dressed, singing, drumming, and even dancing faithful. Vehicles, farm animals, telephone poles, bicycles, palm-wine bars, and bushmeat joints were lit up in the CRB colors and Yòmì's image was everywhere.

Every one of them had at least one lead-acid battery as part of their luggage. The women blanced them on their heads, and the men hefted them on their shoulders. Older children made use of little wheeled carts, and the younger ones ran along, trying to get on board.

"Na tithe." Bayo had sensed my puzzlement.

"Tithe?"

"Yes oh. Oga Bẹkọ done make one system for New Ifẹ. Everybody dey bring wan wan battery every day, wey dem done charge for house. Na so, the church dey get plenty electricity to do dem work."

"But how do they charge the bateries?" I recalled the blind faith and exertion of the CRB volunteers had shown during our exit from New York. It seemed pitiful, in comparison

"Some dey use one kin' bicycle wey Oga Bẹkọ put everywhere. The bicycle no dey go anywhere oh, na just to charge battery. Even for de ilé isẹ sector, dey get sometin' wey dey use the power of de women, anytime dey get customer, to charge dere battery." He fidgeted in his seat, and Hebegirl patted his arm.

I put my head in my hands.

The turn-off into Òkèmaalù was jammed, and from that point, we made very slow progress. The town was aptly named, with roughly five head of cattle for every human being waving weakly at the clouds of flies. The smell of distributed cowshit hung over the town,

and it was difficult to think, over the buzzing of insects.

Our biggest problem was the increasing reaction from the container on our cargo bed. It emitted a growling noise once we entered the town proper, and the engine was beginning to show signs of strain.

“Aunty, we suppose stop, oh.” Bayo said.

“In fact, Bayo. Dis ting no be small wahala again.” I responded.

The hood of the car tilted upward, and a glance revealed the crate might slide off the cargo bed at any moment.

Bayo pulled over, and we poured out of the car. The rear tires were squashed almost flat, and the crate had started to emit a white glow. Our escort stopped and started backing up toward us, until they saw my raised hand.

“Iya Arùgbà, please keep them away.” I looked at the old woman.

She nodded.

“Aunty, I’m afraid!” Girl clutched my arm.

“Don’t be, sweetheart. You, your Mom, and Uncle Bayo will head back out of town.”

“Is that thing safe?” Hebegirl asked.

“Not if we take it any further.” I replied.

“Okay, what do we do?”

“Drive out of town till it calms down. With your permission, your daughter could persuade the next guardsmen you meet to help unload the crate and safeguard it until our return. That way, if we need you to come and fetch us, it will not be an issue.”

“You want me to allow my daughter to manipulate minds?”

I nodded.

“What if something goes wrong?”

“Eyes will be on you.” I pointed upward.

Billy rocked from side to side, far above us.

“Okay. Please take care.” Hebegirl reached out to me.

Surprised, I allowed her to pull me into a hug, and my heart melted when Girl forced herself between us.

“Listen to your Mom, sweetheart.” I said.

“Yes, Aunty.” She responded.

“Don’t try and do jilo unless your Mom says.” I continued.

“Okay, Aunty. Please be careful.”

“See you all soon.” I waved at Bayo and watched them drive away.

“Are you okay?” I asked Iya Arùgbà.

“Not really. Bilikisu is confused, as am I. That crate should have had some effect from a place it had been before, but not like that. As expected, Bilikisu can see the heat pouring out from the House of Ifá. But she can also see another location close by, that glows brighter and stronger. We will need to investigate them both.” She chewed her lip.

“Should we split up, and cover both locations?” I beckoned the escort car.

“Bad idea. I doubt either of us would prevail alone.” She tugged at an ear.

“Okay, you pick. But let’s go.”

The escort car pulled up, and the two Guardsmen opened both doors, threw salutes around, and jumped back in after us. We screeched off.

Billy hovered over us when we got out at a two-story building across the road from the police station. A telecoms tower rose above it, and there were two bright orange generators in a corner of the small car park. The town was deserted, even the cows voted with their hooves and flicked their tails at us from the hillside. When we waved the escort car off, it was the only vehicle on the street. Iya Arùgbà cleared her throat, then coughed.

“Before we go in there, I must give you something.” She said.

“What is it?”

She leaned forward, fished around under her dress, and winced slightly as she tugged something from underneath her right breast. Her hand shook as she produced a small leather amulet. It was attached to a long leather strip and bound tightly in a web of black thread. It had white ink markings, written all over it and was stained dark by moisture.

“Hmmm. Yòmi had something like this tied around his waist. What is it?” I looked up at her.

“It’s what’s left of your umbilical cord.” She wouldn’t meet my gaze.

“Kai! You’ve had it with you all this time?”

“I wanted to give it back to the person who asked me to secure it, your mother. But I realized that it should be yours to deal with. To wear around your waist, burn it, bury it, or to do anything you wish with it. You’re no longer a child. You get to decide where home is and if you want to keep a connection to it.”

“Wow...” Words failed me.

I reached out but hesitated.

“The one Yòmi had around his waist had a strange effect on him when I touched it. Is there anything I should expect with this one?” I asked.

“Strange? Like how?”

“He was unconscious, but if I touched it, it hurt him.”

“Sounds like something else. This sort of relic has been used to perform the gbetugbetu charm, which is like a long-term jilo. It needs a lot of skill though. Skill that is not out there any more. Are you sure?” She frowned.

“He was struggling under the weight of the bracelet at that time, so maybe it was that. But this one is okay to handle?”

“Yes, and to do with as you wish.”

I took it from her, unrolled the cord that came with it, and secured it around my waist. It felt like nothing, but I was glad it was there. Then I caught a whiff of it.

“Iya Arùgbà, how long were you hiding this under your tit? It smells ripe.” I laughed.

She grimaced and skirted a large pile of cow dung as she limped over to the front door of the building.

“I think I know what this place is,” I said.

“You do?” Her surprised tone of voice was annoying.

“Yeah, it could be the Network Operations Center that Bẹkọ used to gas about. I just recalled he boasted to somebody about his easy access to cows. This must be his hometown and could be where they will try to broadcast their ègbè signal from.”

“Okay, Bilikisu will go to check on the crate.” She looked up into the sky.

“And on our friends,” I added.

She nodded, then we went in.

The door was unlocked. We took care as we stepped up onto a raised floor, and into harsh lighting. It was freezing and the walls were white and bare. One wall was lined with desks, and each had by a monitor, and a printer on it. The floor was a mess of power cords. There must have been a dozen desks, but the room held a couple of working airconditioner units and two chairs. Only one was occupied.

Her back was to us, and she had a thin blanket, with a vaguely familiar pattern on it, draped over her shoulders. She sat hunched over, with a translucent shower-cap on her head, and a pair of oversized sunglasses covered half her face. The cap glowed from a mesh of internal lights and beeped quietly as the lights flickered on and off. It was connected to a

black box beside the computer terminal in front of her through a bundle of thick, multi-colored strands. I looked over her shoulder at her monitor screen. It was dedicated to a page of Bẹkọ's Òdú Ifà 1024 app. There was no keyboard, and she sat with her hands balled into fists and tucked in her lap.

I looked at Iya Arùgbà. She looked at me.

"Mom?" I quavered.

The woman in the chair didn't react. The screen filled with fresh computations based not just on the position but also on the angles of orientation of the eyes on the palm nut from the horizontal, then from the vertical. A dizzying number of variables were encoded and translated as we watched, and fresh scenarios were written in new verses as I watched, horrified, and entranced at the same time. A reading that should have corresponded to Ìkà, the Controller was pulled apart and reassembled as I stared.

"Doesn't Ìkà prediction refer to the gathering of aṣẹ?" I whispered.

The digital opèlè was cast again once, twice three times, and I didn't hear Iya Arùgbà till she hissed, "Over here!"

I tiptoed to the terminal on the next table and looked. The screen had a Google Maps-type view and showed little white lights winking all over the show. The lights blinked thick and fast in the cities like Boston, Stockholm, and Copenhagen, and the Lake District was lit up like Times Square used to be. She pointed to the next monitor, where similar geospatial data was displayed for Europe and Asia.

"Yòmi's Tokunboh charm is looking for juice everywhere," I whispered.

"Yes." She was back in front of the terminal that showed the continental United States. Here the major urban centers were lit up with a solid sheet of blinking white lights overlaid on the rural and heartland areas. She pulled me to another terminal dedicated to the Caribbean, Central, and South America, but I'd had enough.

“How do we shut this down?” I asked.

There wasn’t a keyboard in sight.

“What if we switch the power off?” I looked around.

“I am unsure if she is dependent the machines. WE may yet have to do that, but I fear she would be forever lost.” Iya Arùgbà asked.

I went to the back of the monitor and felt for a power cable.

“Wait,” Iya Arùgbà said, then pointed, “they were expecting someone else?”

There was another cap on the second chair.

It had a familiar shape and was connected to another device parked on the table beside her.

“Aaah, I overheard Yòmì and Bẹkọ speaking about a second subject, and they let it leak it was for their Tokunboh project. I had the feeling they were speaking about me.” I stuck out my hand.

“Oh, really?” She clapped the cap on and pulled it down over her ears with some difficulty.

She immediately went into a spasm so intense that her eyes rolled back, and it made me twitch all over.

Fortunately, the chair caught her.

“*Olódùmarè, help me.*” She whispered into my head.

“What did you do? This could be the only way for me to communicate with her.” I shouted.

“*Use your head.*” Her voice was shaky.

“Fuck that! Look at her! She’s gone, and you’re taking away my access to her!” I grabbed at the cap.

It had molded itself to her skull, but I managed to peel one earflap back.

She slid off the chair with a quiet whimper. The cap stayed on her and almost dragged me down as she twitched on the floor. The woman in the chair made a sound for the first time since we came in. It was awful. A high-pitched moan that gave me an instant headache, let go of everything, then roll around on the floor with both hands over my ears.

After a period where I lay curled over and wished I was dead, things started to feel less shitty. I pulled myself up with the chair. Iya Arùgbà lay on the floor, with the cap firmly gripping her skull and its lights flashing in earnest. I sank into the chair and put my face in my hands.

“She asks what you look like.” Iya Arùgbà sounded happy, even giddy.

“What?!” I sat back up and looked at the woman in the chair.

“Use your head. It’s much easier for me to taste words that way.”

“She’s awake? She’s okay?”

“Yes, and I doubt it. I told her you have your father’s head.” Iya Arùgbà sent back.

“Thanks. Any chance she can tell me who the worthy gentleman is?”

“She says she is sorry, but his identity is not hers to reveal. But she has something for you”

“Uh-huh.” I braced myself.

“Oníkálukú jẹ̀jẹ̀ ewúré,

Ewúré, ewúré,

Oníkálukú jẹ̀jẹ̀ àgùtàn,

Agùtàn bòlòjò

Olúrómbí jẹ̀jẹ̀ omo re

Omo re a pón bíi epo

Olúrómbí ò

Joun joun

Ìrókò

Joun joun.” Iya Arùgbà’s singing filled that soulless room with all the pain and love that this song had come to mean to me.

I went to pieces.

“She says she used to sing that song to you as a baby, because she knew she was destined to sacrifice her child as Oluroumbi did. She asks your forgiveness.” Iya Arùgbà’s eyes remained closed.

“Wait, why did she ask you to describe me? Can’t she see me? I’m right here!” I wailed.

“She says a young white soldier, speaking fluent Yorùbá, visited her. He said he was on his way to ensure she never saw you again, but he came here to take precautions.” Iya Arùgbà continued.

“Taiwo? Taiwo was here? Wait, what did he do?”

“Look.” She said this out loud.

The woman in the chair opened her clenched fists and offered her palms to me. The dried out optic nerves dangled between her fingers, and her eyeballs, yellowed and shrunken, looked at me accusingly from her palms.

I tried to cry, but I couldn’t. All I could see was red. The house on the hill was red. The air was red. The walls were red. I gave myself over to rage and waited for a window. After an age, when all the windows kept whizzing past, I realized Taiwo was beyond my anger.

“Remember your friend’s warning. Take care not to let this battle consume you, as it has consumed others.” Iya Arùgbà’s measured tone kept me angry.

“So you were listening to my thoughts, even then?”

“I had already failed your mother. I did not want to fail you. If it meant listening to every inane thought that bounced around in your head, I would have done so.”

And just like that, my rage left me.

“Thank you, Iya Arùgbà.” I knelt beside her and touched her arm. She was hot to the touch, and it felt as if millions of insects crawled around under her skin.

“Are you alright?” I jerked away.

The lights embedded in her cap were no longer flashing but spent long moments when they were a solid white.

I stood, to examine the terminal her cap was attached to. It was blank. The computer screen that the woman in the chair was connected jittered between the Òdú Ifà 1024 app and multiple geospatial views.

“What are you doing?”

“I am trying to remind your mother that I was once her mentor, teacher, and friend.”

“I’d forgotten that. So you’re still the stronger?”

“Do not be foolish, child. In this scenario, I am an ant, and she is the universe. She is the reason we could not bring the obelisk here, her àṣẹ is that strong. I hope to remind her how she felt the day we tracked the fallow field.” She’d never lost that testy tone; she just parked it for a while.

“Why is that important?”

“Because it was the day she surpassed me. In truth, we did not track the field together; she did it on her own. I only joined her in meditation afterward. But she knew then, how proud I was and promised never to misuse the training I had given her.” Iya Arùgbà grunted, then spasmed so hard she raised up off the floor.

“Iya Arùgbà. Please stop. She might kill you.” I ripped off a seat cushion to place

under her head.

“Of that, I have no doubt, but I must stay in this union. I will convince her of a greater feat we will accomplish together.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask. What’s that?”

“We will not only track the fallow field, but we will move it.”

“Eh?”

“I need you to go and join your friends, and hurry to the Sports Complex on the Occidental African University campus. Today’s event in Pastor Ezra’s funeral program will be held soon, in the form of a football match. It is during this match that Yòmì intends to initiate his Tokunboh version of ègbè. They need your mother’s power for this to work. I will stop her, or I will die trying.”

“But you want to move the fallow field? Where? Why?” I cradled her head and wiped away the slick of blood that oozed out of her ear.

“I can no longer go to the House of Ifà to try and track it, but your mother’s skills bring another option into play.. Go to the stadium. Have the crate with you, so we can nullify the other threat, Şònpòna. By day’s end, we will have cause to sing Òşùn’s name, to thank Ogun and to praise Olódùmarè.”

“You think you can manage all that?”

“Not me. Your mother. Bilikisu is on her way back. She will guide you out of here. Now go.” Her eyes fluttered but remained closed.

I put my arm across her body and pressed myself to her for as long as I could bear the heat, then I got up.

“Can you tell her I’m sorry I didn’t heed the call of my umbilical cord sooner? I might have met and gotten to know her before ... before all this.” The woman in the chair remained frozen.

“Go!” Iya Arùgbà sent, “*And take care.*”

I nodded and fled.

I was at the door before the thought hit me that I might never have the chance to touch, feel, or hold my mother again. I stepped back, wrapped my arms around her, then buried my face in her neck and inhaled. In the instant before her body exploded with symbols and mine mirrored hers, I remembered the sweet, salty smell of her back.

I remembered the feel of my face mushed against it.

I remembered the rocking motion as we climbed.

I remembered my legs poking out from underneath the wrapper she would tie me to her back with, and how my feet would rest on her broad hips.

She was skin and bone underneath that blanket, but her smallest twitch threw me across the room.

I returned to hug her again, and I knew the exact moment she remembered.

Her body lost its rigidity, and she leaned into me.

Her skin emptied, as did the monitor she was connected to.

But one mark remained, a fresh tatoo on her shoulderblade, visible because the blanket had shifted, and all other inscriptions had faded from her skin. It was a tatoo of a whydah bird. I moved the blanket back to cover her spare frame, and her back blossomed with zeroes and ones again.

They were indications that I associated with the running record of the number of eyes on the palm nuts and their positions, after a divining. Only these were populating her skin so fast, that it was impossible to follow their logic and figure out what new verse she was composing or old one she was refining.

Unless you were connected to a computer screen.

I watched in horror as the screen showed first a bunch of zeros and ones, then

streams of numbers that looked, to my untrained eye as hexadecimal, and then after a series of false starts, the geospatial map showed up again and the lights went back to twinkling.

“She’s the server, Iya Arùgbà.” I said quietly.

“Yes, we are all servants, Tani. Now, please go!”

“No, you don’t understand. This room has no CPUs, no servers, no computers, only screens and those black boxes. She’s the server. She’s the CPU, she’s the computer.”

Tears ran down my face.

Iya Arùgbà was quiet for a few moments, and her eyeballs swivelled madly underneath her closed eyelids.

“I see what you mean. Are these similar to the symbols you saw on your own body, when we were inside the ègbè?”

“Yes.” I replied in a small voice.

“Aah. This explains why Bẹkọ pursued you so assiduously. Don’t worry about not telling me about your marks. I was pleased and proud that you didn’t say anything. It’s good practice, keeping some thoughts private, but sharing ègbè is not a good way to do that. I know how to stop the Tokunboh charm.” She muttered some words under her breath.

“You won’t hurt her, will you?”

“I couldn’t if I wanted to. The system is taking from her, not giving. It seems those power cables are indeed a point of failure. They were constructed by Bẹkọ and cannot easily be replaced. Unplug the black boxes, remove the cables, take them with you. This will stop the Tokunboh charm but will not harm her, and I will redirect her energies to moving the fallow field. Remember that today is Ọja Ọba. Look for allies everywhere.” She continued her mumbled words.

I went back to brush her dreads away from her forehead, then unplugged the two black boxes and pushed the power cords into my backpack.

“You know what to do with my bracelet, don’t you?” She sent just as I was leaving.

I nodded and ran, without knowing where. I searched the skies for Billy and pushed away the creeping conviction that I would never see either of them again.

The sky was clear, and even the buzz of flies had diminished. I searched for a landmark that would give me my bearings. Then I saw a familiar roofline through a gap in the canopy of brown roofing sheets that covered this part of town. I broke into a run and found a narrow street that sloped upward. After following that to its end, I climbed over a short fence, navigated a convenient culvert which accepted both power cables, and kept climbing upward.

The sound of drumming drew me across a tilted scrub field that was inexplicably lined for soccer and had goalposts at either end. I nodded at the logic of having the downhill goal as tiny as it was, compared to the uphill one. I skipped over the mounds of cow-shit and followed the drums to a small alleyway, which brought me out into a singing, dancing, drumming crowd of worshippers. Many of them were clothed in white, some were naked from the waist up, and most had chalk markings on their bodies.

The whydah bird design was everywhere I looked. I joined the crowd and followed them up the last stretch of the hill climb. Looking up, meant I caught the gaze of the house as it looked down on me. It was as I recalled it from my visions, except that the roofline had crumbled more, the paint job was a mere memory, and the shutters on the outside windows were missing or askew.

The music of my traveling companions fell away, and I heard the silence of that round room as it waited for me. Despite Iya Arùgbà’s instructions, it made sense to head in there and figure out how to locate the fallow field as a back-up plan. I told myself my curiosity had

nothing to do with figuring out my mother's connection with this town. Even I didn't believe me.

I two-stepped with the dancers until we got to the front of the house, and they broke out the kola-nut, the gin, the white chickens, the palm oil, and the salt. Prayers were prayed and libations were sprayed, then I heard a screech that sounded like a freight train. If the freight train was dive-bombing the crowd with talons bared and wings spread. This was the closest I'd ever seen Billy, and she put on a show. She flew back and forth at head height and had folk running, falling, sprawling in the dust, and screaming their heads off.

I put a silent "*Thanks, Billy*" out into the world and darted to the front door. It swung open at my touch, and just before it slammed shut after me, I heard Iya Arùgbà.

"Nooooo! Bilikisu was trying to stop...." Then her mind was cut off.

The silence was absolute. I jiggled the doorknob, but it didn't move. There was a rumble of laughter but the room was dark grey and empty. The walls curved away in both directions, and the distant edges were dark. By the time I turned back and groped for the doorknob again, the entire doorframe was gone.

"Iya Arùgbà, are you there?" I asked.

"She can't hear you. Nobody can hear you." The voice was familiar, and I felt my stomach drop.

"Bẹkọ? Where are you?" It took a supreme effort to stay calm.

"Where I should be, at the football match." He chuckled again.

"Okay, but why are you in my mind?" The amulet at my waist felt alternately light and heavy. When I touched the leather cord, it burned me so badly that I yelped.

"I see you've found my little gift." His persistent good humor was getting irritating.

"But, how? What..."

"Kai! You still don't get it, do you? Didn't anyone ever warn you that you should

never enter the physical manifestation of your mind's waystation? There, I am told, lies the road to madness."

"Crap. NOW I get your name."

"Heh heh heh."

"It was you, in that grove. In my dream. You dug up my cord and used it against me. But how did you know where to find it? Did you do the same to Yòmi?"

"Ask your mother how I knew. Oh, you can't. And Yòmi was a test run." He went off into peals of thigh-slapping laughter.

"Aah, Iya Arùgbà mentioned some dangers with other charms. And come to think of it; she only spoke about herself coming here to track the ... um ..." I hesitated.

"Give it up, girl. I know you turned Kẹhinde. I know you found the obelisk that can bind Sònpòna. I know you think you came here to track the fallow field, but really to find clues about your mother and her connection to ... us. I know you've somehow kicked me out of my setup for Tokunboh, but my most rabid dogs are on their way to sort that out." He could barely contain himself; he sounded so pleased.

"Show yourself. If you dare...."

"Certainly." He was still laughing as his window slid along the wall until it stopped before me.

He was revealed from the waist up, dressed in a plain brown aṣọ-oke búbà and an abetí ajá cap. He filled the screen so much I couldn't see what was in his background until he stepped away and allowed me to see Bọdunrin and Zainab, with a couple of black shirts glowering behind them.

"What do you want with them?" I cursed the quaver.

"Aah, you'll have to come to the game to find out. I may let you see the extent of my empire before you become history. Pity, you'd have been a great brand ambassador."

“Huh. So you’re the one behind the weed farms ? And if I don’t?”

“I can’t understand how you’ve survived this long, you’re so stupid. Who says you have a choice? Nobody goes into physical manifestations of their mental waystation because, sometimes, unscrupulous people figure out their mind-locks. Like a key under the mat. I guessed you’d use the House of Ifá because of your Mom’s connection to it, but your stupid ass confirmed it. Anyway, now your mind is mine; your next task is to deliver the obelisk to me.” His smile was gone.

“Bẹkọ, don’t do this? What do you want? I’ll do anything.” I babbled, *“Wait, what did you mean my Mom’s connection to you all?”*

“I’ll let you figure that tidbit out. But as to what I want? Yòmi is a buffoon and doesn’t take out his dick to piss unless I let him. It hurts me physically to have to appear subservient to him. You and your cronies will be involved in his assassination, during the match. Goodbye, Yòmi. Of course, I will allow my technology to confirm afterwards that he’s one of the White Hairs, so it’ll also be a case of good riddance. You’d have brought me the obelisk so I’ll be able to control the Sickness. It will be cool if Tokunboh works, so we cripple the US properly. If it doesn’t, my gold reserves will still make the most powerful”

“You used to fuck the baby cows, didn’t you?” I had to stop his verbal diarrhoeaa.

“Just for that, after I reluctantly take up the reins of the church, my first order will be to have you and your gang, executed. I’m thinking by firing squad. Because our God is a mighty God, a jealous God, and a vengeful God. Or something like that...”

“But why? I thought you were one of the good guys.”

“Maybe I was, But you stole Chi-chi from me, and then drove me to kill her. That does things to a man.”

“It was you that killed her?”

“Now you’re playing for time. That pesky bird has fetched your friends, so off you

go.” The window faded, and the front door appeared in my peripheral vision.

Once I stepped outside, my free will was history.

The first thing I saw was Girl running up the hill. I found myself opening my arms to her, hugging her, and urging her back into the truck. I heard and saw myself answering all their queries, telling them Iya Arùgbà was worried for nothing and that I was okay. I listened to the apologies tumble out of my mouth for not finding any details of the fallow field and hoped that Iya Arùgbà could bring it to us as planned. I prayed with them that Iya Arùgbà would prevail and agreed she sounded weak when she last sent anything.

Above everything, I felt a throbbing, red-hot band of pain around my waist. It was always there, but it kicked into an extra gear if I opened my mouth to utter a warning.

I opened my mouth a lot.

Wednesday

There was something undeniably old about New Ifè. The campus creaked with people, and the black shirts at the gate performed random checks on visitors’ under-tongue status. One side of the thoroughfare was filled with people who had failed the test. They sat with legs stretched out in front and hands tied behind them. Their battery donations littered the ground beside them and I wondered why they had bothered. We were waved through.

The drive to the campus had been torture. If I so much as touched the amulet, I felt fire around my waist. The one time I pushed through the pain and tried to tug it loose, I passed out and woke up as we passed the campus gates. I tried to put words in Iya Arùgbà’s mind, but to no avail. I was locked in my mind, sealed in that house on the hill, and Bẹkọ had the key.

The faculty buildings had been co-opted into living quarters, and solar panels glinted

from the tops of the rusty corrugated iron roofs of the shops and single story buildings jammed between them. There was a steady stream of humanity and a lot of the women had trays of food on their heads, which they balanced easily as they swayed along. The smell of fresh àkàrà should have set me to salivating, but it barely registered.

The men carried Bibles; some waved posters, and every single one had a variation of Yòmi's portrait on their clothing. Separately, I saw a new version of my Black Jesus print on countless tee shirts. This Jesus was Black, had round cheeks, an oily sheen to His skin and His eyes were hooded. He was bald, wore grey bùbá and sòkòtò and stood astride a stylized image of the globe, with one foot on Africa, and the other on the Americas.

A lucky few elderly folk and some infants were pushed along in wheelbarrows, sitting on strips of cardboard layered over rows of batteries.

I pushed myself upright and adjusted Girl's sleeping position.

"What's the plan?" I heard myself ask Hebegirl.

"We thought you would check in with Iya Arùgbà first. Then we would know when to take the crate to the football field." She looked at Bayo, then at me.

"Good idea, but why don't we head there, find a place to park, and wait? We might be able to tell when we are close by." My mouth said.

"Erm, if we did that, we won't know for how long we'd be exposed. Is it not better to get a confirmation that things are on course, and then proceed?" Hebegirl looked at me.

"Stop arguing! You're an ordinary kitchen manager, and you should do as you are told!" My words came out deep and harsh.

Even Girl woke up.

"Bayo, please find somewhere to park," Hebegirl said softly.

"Aunty, what's the matter?" Girl asked.

"Nothing, dear. I'm just a little tired."

“Why didn’t you call me sweetheart? You always call me sweetheart. My mummy calls me ‘dear’ now.” She folded her arms across her chest and stuck out her lower lip.

“Aah, but she called you ‘my dear,’ that day in the bush, behind the church. Remember?” Hebegirl smiled at Bayo.

He bobbed his head.

I whispered the names of the stations on the Q line, from 96th to South Ferry, and filled the part of mind Bẹkọ allowed me control of, with attempts to reach Iya Arùgbà.

The amulet tightened at my waist, and it got warmer and warmer.

We’d been stuck in traffic along the main drag into the campus, and it was even worse as we approached the turnoff to the sports complex. Hebegirl directed Bayo to turn onto Chapel Road on the right. We passed church building after church building, all sparkling in fresh coats of the CRB colors.

“Iya Arùgbà, can you hear me? 63rd St at Lex. Iya Arùgbà, can you hear me? 57th Street. Iya Arùgbà...” The amulet felt as if it would scar me for life. A field of glittering red lights showed up after we passed the last brown, blue, and yellow building, and I registered the sign for the campus cemetery.

I yanked open the door and did a drop, tuck and roll that Foxy Brown would have been proud of. Bayo slammed the brakes on, and the truck skidded away from me. I staggered across the street and took only a few steps when my legs locked.

“You’re lucky I’ve been distracted here; Yòmì is mid-speech.” Bẹkọ’s anger grated in my mind.

“You sound flustered. No news from your NOC?” I huffed and puffed, but my limbs wouldn’t respond.

Instead, I felt myself turned around and away from the cemetery gate. Hebegirl and Bayo approached me cautiously.

“Careful, oh, Bayo. I think that Bẹkọ is inside her head.” Hebegirl held on to Girl, a few steps behind him.

“You will suffer for anything you or your hag of a mother did. If Tokunboh is dead because of you...”

“Hags. Plural. Your elaborate egbè charm is dead. And I will see your insides.”

Fighting talk for someone who I couldn’t even control her pinky.

“I don’t have time for this. I can sell your conspiracy story using your surrogates alone.”

“Cow-fucker. You forget one thing.”

“I doubt it.” The tone of his voice betrayed him.

“Today is Oja Oba and there is no need for me to go to the cemetery. It will come to me.”

I didn’t have to touch my bracelet to wake it. It glowed on my arm, and its inscriptions were clear and sharp. Bayo and Hebegirl drew back, but Girl moved forward with a smile. She reached me in a few steps and wrapped her arms around me.

The sparkling red lights were everywhere, and they bathed the two of us in a glittery cloud. She put one hand on my bracelet, the other on the amulet, and it crumbled to dust in her hand.

Every where I could see, I felt the effects of ilé-ilẹ̀, and I heard the voices of those that gave me their àṣẹ.

“... took my wife and poisoned me....”

“... I refused to sell. Killed in my sleep....”

“... threatened to reveal our affair. Car accident...”

“... I was the church accountant”

“... rival drug dealer. Killed by police on church orders....”

“...I was the replacement church accountant.... “

“...killed me for an obelisk...”

It was endless.

I felt their bitterness and anger, but mostly I felt relief that their àsè would finally contribute some meaning to their foreshortened lives. The smells were different; salty, like burnt electrical cabling, like wet earth; one frustrated housewife smelled like pounded yam and vegetable stew. My eyes felt brighter, and the joint pain, back-ache, and headaches that had been a part of my existence were gone.

“Hey, sweetheart, how are you?” I knelt beside her and looked into her eyes.

“I’m fine, Aunt. But what was that, and who are those people?” She pointed.

I followed her fingertip to the cloud of shadows that drifted over us. Those that had not sacrificed their leftover asè to me yet, were all colors, shapes, and sizes. Many still showed the long-term damage from the Seeping Sickness. Pustules that would drip forever battled with hardening boils for space on their faces and their bodies.

“Don’t be afraid, sweetheart. They will do us no harm.”

“I’m not afraid, Aunt. Not when you’re here.” She held my hand and smiled up at me.

“Did you feel anything?”

“No, but I saw you getting younger.” She hugged me again.

“Leave her alone, you demon!” Hebegirl and Bayo screwed up their courage and were in my face.

“No, it’s alright. He is no longer in my....” I walked into a roundhouse slap from Bayo.

It hurt him more than it hurt me, but I loved him for trying to help.

After he picked himself up off the floor, it took several attempts but he finally agreed

to a hug. Hebegirl and Girl piled in, and we stayed locked in each other's arms as the wave of wraiths broke around us.

“Kai! We do not smell good!” I said.

“Yes, oh. But you just noticed?” Hebegirl responded.

“I’ve not been myself.” I rummaged in my backpack.

I found some tee shirts, only slightly soiled and enough for everybody. I also found the coiled bicycle spoke that I’d taken off Flip-flops’ bike, my last spliffs, and my lighter.

More of the shadows appeared. They were drawn toward us and came from all corners of the campus, the city, and parts beyond. They were silent, unsmiling, and there was clear daylight between them and the ground. As they swarmed, I started to recognize a few, and from those faces came the beginning of a plan.

“Aunty Tani, any news from Iya Arùgbà?” Hebegirl looked odd in a tee shirt.

“Nothing,” I’d called out to the old woman in vain and kept scanning empty skies.

“So, what next?” She looked around us.

“We press on. Bayo, petrol dey for dat jerry-can?” I asked.

“Yes, Aunty. Dat time when you dey sleep, na im we buy some.” He nursed his right hand in his armpit.

“Okay, kule. Yòmi too blow about de place him plant him igbò. You go find am, help me burn am.” I handed him my lighter.

“But, Aunty, why? Dat ting no dey good for anybody oh.” He sputtered.

“I sabi trust me. E go good today. Hebegirl, I hope you don’t mind if Girl goes with him?”

“No, in fact, I will be happy. Girl will be safe, but why?”

“As soon as I can contact her, Billy will help us search for the weed crop. I can relay messages to Bayo if Girl is with him.”

Hebegirl nodded, and Girl beamed.

Bayo flapped his right hand and unstrapped the jerry can from the truck cargo bed with his left.

“But what of the crate?” Hebegirl asked.

“Don’t worry; I will get it to the Sports Center. I’m just waiting for a signal, anything from Iya Arùgbà and my mother.” My eyes drifted up.

“Yes, but how will the two of us alone lift it?”

“We won’t. I need you to get to the football field and prepare a speech. I will have some help getting the crate there and will be close behind you.”

“Speech kẹ?”

“Actually a sermon. The crowd there will need some convincing that there is good to be found in the church, and also in the Amavi. Especially after we expose all our ills. I think you are the best person to do this.”

She looked at Bayo and Girl.

They both nodded at her, and she patted her hair back, then smoothed her shirt around her hips.

“Aunty, how did Bẹkọ do jilo on you? Are you sure he can’t do it again?” Girl asked.

“Yeah, great point. He hacked my head way too easily. I need to change my mental security, but I’m not sure how.” My hands clenched briefly.

“Will you be alright here, with your ... helpers?” Hebegirl asked.

“Yes. One of them is anxious to see you all, I think.” I smiled.

“Eh?” Hebegirl looked around.

“You can come out now!” I called out

Girl’s shriek must have scared the shit out of the Oja Oba visitors, as Kẹhinde marched out, the bandana still wrapped around his wrist. He was gaunt, had sprouted a salt-and-pepper beard but walked with long, purposeful strides. Bayo and Hebegirl ran toward him and brought him back to me, each holding on to a hand, while Girl patted dust off his clothing.

“So, did you find some peace in there?” I asked.

Kẹhinde shook his head

“What did you do?” I asked

“Looked for the names of the soldiers whose aṣẹ saved my brother’s and my lives. Tended their graves. Prayed.” His shoulders were pulled back.

“These people here, whom I trust above all others, see a lot of good in you. As do I. Can you help us today? Make that prophecy right?” I asked.

He nodded.

We laughed way too much, and then Girl gave me one last hug before she and Bayo departed, with the Kẹhinde carrying the jerrycan and Bayo trying to wrestle it from him.. Hebegirl walked with them until they were swallowed by the bushpath, and then she headed to the main road to join the throng heading to the Sports complex. Her tee shirt, the last “Black Jesus” one of my own design, made her stand out from the ones with Yòmi’s face on it.

I took a moment to look at the faces of the dead as they stretched out in front of me. Flip-flops and his buddy, as well as a few of the sundry black shirted thugs I’d helped off this earth all hung back in a small circle, separate from the overwhelming numbers of the wraiths of their former victims. The remainer of the fright of spirits milled aimlessly, hands clasped underneath their chins, sometimes on their knees, but always with their red, weepy eyes

trained on me.

A glow radiated off each of them in a monochrome red rainbow, suffusing me with a constant thrum of smells, sounds, feelings and colors. I struggled to keep my body from lifting off the ground, and the all over body itch was inside as well as outside me.

“So this is ilé-ilé.” I breathed.

I looked at the backs of my arms, and recognized the repeated results of computations I could not fathom, numbers of verses that defied logic and I wondered about the stories behind every one of them. I unzipped the inner pocket of my backpack and the fatty jumped into my hand. Just the sight of it brought my skin under control, and a deep sniff calmed my mind again. I placed it in my pocket and looked up at my new companions.

“*You. Can we talk?*” I pointed.

“*Me?*” The crowd of spirits parted like a murky river, and Pastor, Chief Ezra Ikùjènyò Fawole, B.A., MSc., PhD (HC) looked up at me, then pointed at himself.

I nodded.

“*Yes?*” He shuffled slowly toward me tried to puff out his chest.

“*Your middle name hasn’t really worked out for you, has it?*”

He scowled, then shook his head.

“*Do you know how you died?*”

He nodded, and his eyes darted to Flip-flops.

“*Yes, but who sent them?*”

“*My son.*” He raised one arm and gestured with the other.

“*No, old man, no speech.*” I held up my hand.

“*You died by your own hand. You created Yomi, and made him a monster. He did what monsters do.*” My lip curled, and I struggled to keep out of that red room.

Our audience drifted away from me collectively, toward the safety of the cemetery.

“Well, you don’t deserve it, but I’ll give you a chance to make up for your misbegotten existence when you were on Earth. Maybe you can earn some relief from the half-life you are living.” I waved them back toward me.

“How?” He asked.

“The fallow field will shortly manifest at the football pitch, and that is when this crate must be delivered, and not a moment before. It is from your world, so you should have no problem. Think you can do that?” I asked.

A wave of murmurs swept through them, and they surged forward.

“Hold up. There’s one more thing. The kalakuta crop will burn and eyes will be opened as a result. You will disperse the vapours from the burning, to ensure that nothing else is touched by the flames. Thus, you would have brought meaning to your after-lives, and this should earn you the right to move on.” I waited for their response.

The wind that swept through the cemetery did not leave an unbroken branch or an undisturbed dust mote. When the dust had cleared, the crate was gone. I sat in the truck and fondled the spliff. Billy was still missing in action, there was no response from Iya Arùgbà, and I hesitated to venture into that house on the hill in my mind.

I fiddled with the mirror shard, then straightened out the bicycle spoke and imagined the soft spots on Bẹkọ’s and Yòmi’s bodies that would welcome its point. My smile came back when I saw and pushed in the dashboard lighter. Before I could raise it to the cigarette, I heard Iya Arùgbà.

“Tani. You don’t need that anymore.” She had found a softer tone from somewhere, one she never used with me.

“Iya Arùgbà. You’re okay?” I gasped and plugged the lighter back.

“In a manner of speaking.” She said.

She appeared beside the truck door, and I didn’t need to look down to know her feet

were not touching the earth. Billy's shadow crisscrossed over us in that familiar figure-eight, and my heart went down to my sneakers.

"What happened?"

"We did it. The fallow field is on its way, and I am proud of how you have ranged your troops. All that remains is for you to be at the field, to see that obelisk be planted, and for Sònpòna to be bound again." She smiled at me.

"But without you? How will I, how will we cope?" I wailed.

"Look around. You've done better than I could have. You may not know, Arùgbà means 'bearer of the calabash.' I was meant to carry you like a message, and I consider it delivered.."

"I didn't know... ."

"As for your mother; she is holding the fort. Bẹkọ sent some of his thugs, but she is going through them at such an alarming rate; I am sure you this will be the most populated Oja Oba in recent years."

"I wanted to ask her... there was no time..."

"About your guild name? She'd have said the same thing I will tell you now."

"Which is?"

"Naming is the father's preogative. You need to find him."

"Of course. Why would it be easy?" I snorted.

"You have overcome bigger obstacles."

"That reminds me, I need to sort Bẹkọ out. He entrapped me and turned my mind against us. I will..."

"You will not do anything. The mistake was mine with not seeing what he did with your òkùn. Remember what was said to you about not letting the battle consume you? You have proved the adage 'Igba imọlẹ̀ kò lẹ̀ pa ẹni tí kò bá sẹ̀.' Conversely, those that do offend

the gods, will ultimately have no recourse.”

“How will I ... when will I see you?”

“Just like this. I am sitting in that house on the hill for you, as an extra safeguard against gbetugbetu. I have plenty to teach and plenty to tell, starting with the locations and the keys to the treasures we secured for the church. The country will need it, not so much, the church. I don’t know for how long I can stay, but I will, until I can stay there no more.”

“Okay, Iya Arùgbà. Thank you, Iya Arùgbà. Goodbye Iya Arùgbà.”

“Goodbye Tani. Take care of Billy.” Then she was gone.

I didn’t cry.

Billy showed me the marijuana fields were close by and I sent the image into Girl’s mind. But after waiting for a bit, I did change into my last shirt, so I arrived at the Sports Complex replendent in a moderately white tee with the Black Jesus on my chest. My backpack was close to empty and it hung low on my tail-bone, just the way I liked it. I had pulled out the coiled bicycle spoke, intending to throw it away. But my mind was filled with red. I distracted myself by checking my undertongue status and was not surprised to see Chichi smiling back at me from the tiny shard of mirrored glass.

“I waited for you.” I smiled.

“I know. My hair was a mess.” She laughed.

“Will I see you again?”

“Thanks to you, you won’t see many of us again. And yes, that’s a good thing.” Her dimple looked deeper.

“I’ll miss you.”

“And me, you.” Then she was gone. And so was the bicycle spoke.

I still didn’t cry.

My sneakers were held together by dirt, and I’d smelled better, but nothing in my life

beat the roar I received when I showed up pitchside. The Brazilian-Nigerian players started the chorus with “Ọmọ Tani?” and the crowd responded, “Ọmọ wa ni!”

“Whose child? Our child!” Kẹhinde’s booming voice provided subtitles.

I spent the rest of the event with a goofy smile, surrounded by friends, close to family and high, this time, on life. That’s probably why I felt as if I watched from a great height as Bẹkọ, speaking through Yọmi, tried to have me escorted to the VIP Box by his black shirts.

A small riot broke out in the VIP Box, with Kẹhinde at its heart.

The resultant smoke from the fire mellowed everyone out. A disorderly line formed, as everyone wanted to “hear the smell,” for themselves. The Royal Fathers and Mothers of the day led the surge, closely followed by the British royal family contingent, suitably tanned and decked out in CRB-branded aṣò-òkẹ. Someone had taught them how to dance kpalongo. The smoke helped.

The Ọja Ọba visitors did their wind thing, and the smoke did not hang about for long. Just long enough for everyone to marvel at the site of five obelisks floating down onto the soccer pitch on a shimmering tray of dusty brown grass. A sixth column, short, curvy and covered in dew showed up last.

A network of seven pathways formed as they touched down, and the lush green grass browned out under our gaze. The paths filled with gravel chips and their edges were demarcated by a series of equally spaced white, head-sized rocks, all of which bore vaguely human features.

A seventh obelisk floated out of the surrounding bush, and if you looked closely, you would see it was guided into place by dozens of barely visible figures. The wraiths gradually faded from sight, and the last to disappear were those of Pastor Ezra, Flip-flops, and friend. Those three were last seen each pointing the sharpened ends of wobbly bicycle spokes in the direction of the VIP box.

The crowd murmured at that gesture, prompting Bẹkọ to grab the microphone and loudly denounce Yòmì. A bunch of black shirts held the All-Father-no-more to the floor and inserted Bẹkọ's latest invention into his mouth. The portable under-tongue tester showed the mass of hairs that waved like cillia, underneath his tongue. Kẹhinde got to them both, just as the grotesque image was broadcast onto the scoreboard. Kẹhinde insisted afterward that he did not realize that the tester was still clamped to Yòmì's tongue when he wrenched it free. Thankfully, he had a black bandana in his hand. It was none-too-clean but it worked to stanch the bleeding, wrap the detached organ and and muffle Yòmì's cries.

Kẹhinde then assured his place in New Ifẹ's history, by tackling Bẹkọ to the ground and forestalling his escape attempt. An epic battle followed in the middle of the fallow field. The result was never in doubt, as Kẹhinde beat several shades of shit out of Bẹkọ. Yòmì and Bẹkọ ended up handcuffed, and were taken into custody with the aid of a suddenly shirtless group of young men..

Fortunately, Hebegirl was on hand to grab the microphone and restore some order. She gave an impassioned sermon and ended by inviting church members to a special service the next day. The service would be truly inter-denominational and for the first time, animists would be welcomed. Eating of aṣẹ as well as the eating of the blood and body of any deity would henceforth be banned as the very first point of order.

The crowd dispersed, possessed by an unexplainable hunger, and descended on the food market, where record amounts of akara was fried, then consumed late into the night.

My feet finally touched the ground just before midnight, in the company of Bọdunrin, Zainab, Bayọ, Hebegirl and Girl. Billy floated above us and did a few belly rolls through the dissipating clouds of smoke. The seven of us had gathered on the fallow field to mourn the missing, bring gifts to Ọṣùn, to Ogun, and to observe the field's closure.

On the stroke of midnight, a fresh clean three-quarter moon glinted off a shiny grey

suit as it appeared on the edge of the field. His now-familiar mincing steps took him closer to the ring of obelisks and as he reached the center circle, we saw the short stubby broom in his hand, and heard the whistled tune on his lips.

The seventh obelisk had been laid flat on the ground, on one of the lined gravel paths. As Sònpòna approached, it shook and shivered like a virgin. He touched it and a bright flash blinded us, which faded to a dull glow. After our eyes adjusted, we saw he was clothed in his greasy tunic, with the hunter's bag draped across his chest. He touched the obelisk again, and it rose like a Viagra commercial. Just before the field started to dissolve from view, so did Sònpòna.

"Who's up for a trip to Oşogbo? I think I need to go and say 'Thank you' properly to Ms. SdB, I mean my Grandma and her friends." I sighed and I reached out to hug somebody, anybody.

"Aunty, did you see that?" Girl asked.

"What?" I looked around me.

"Just before the stones vanished there was a man in the middle. His skin was very very black, and he had knock-knees. His head looked just like yours." She pointed.

I broke into a run and the others followed. We got onto the center circle just as wisps of brown grass and the shadows of the Seven Staves dispersed from view, leaving lush green grass and questions in their wake.

THE END

Epilog

The cache of umbilical cord traces had been buried in the centre circle as part of Bẹkọ's plans. However, in another win for free will, the transformation of the pitch to the fallow field turned them into unsentient clumps of gristle, releasing their owners from any call now or later.

Yòmi's custodial intake inspection revealed a bracelet that had reacted badly with his skin and was stuck so tightly to his upper arm, that it had to be removed with an oxyacetylene torch. Strangely, the bracelet suffered no damage during this operation, though the same could not be said for Yòmi. It vanished from the campus security office soon afterward, and a reward has been announced for its safe return. I don't think Girl will be giving it up anytime soon, though.

There's already talk of a democratic approach to finding new church leadership for the CRB, and Hebegirl is considering standing for election as the next Church leader. She has already indicated Bayọ and Kẹhinde, would be part of her leadership team. In an aside, Kẹhinde's appearance has changed so drastically, he's being considered for the nickname of "Yellow." I like their chances and I don't think the term "All-Father" will be fashionable much longer.

Bẹkọ's new tech was used to confirm that he was indeed he King of the White Hairs, but that was not the last surprise. Shortly after the test, unknown and unseen accomplices broke him out of detention. He disappeared from a locked prison cell, leaving behind only the pungent aroma of hubris, a threadbare blanket that was distinguished by a pattern of stylized images of the whydah bird, and a large pair of lady's dark glasses.

ÌPÀRÌ ÌTÀN¹²

¹ Chapters 1 – 11 headers - Owomoyela, O. *Yoruba Proverbs*, Nebraska Press, 2008.

² Chapter 12 header - Olupona, Jacob K., *City of 201 Gods*. (p.2) University of California Press, 2011.

REFLECTIVE ESSAY: LANGUAGE IN LITERATURE AND IN LIFE

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“Ohun tówá lọ sí Sókoto, wà nínú àpò-o sòkòtò.” (That thing you went to the ends of the earth in search of exists in your trouser pocket.) – Yorùbá Proverb¹

INTRODUCTION:

Stories have provided me with decades of therapy. From childhood, I would lose myself in any writing that resonated with my imagination. More recently, I have benefited from the task of trying to create narratives. Specifically, narratives capable of capturing readers imaginations, while enlightening and informing them.

The pieces I initially wrote were not much more than humorous journal entries inspired by work and life events. I would accentuate the humor in everyday occurrences and turn the most challenging ones into funny anecdotes. With time, I relied more on my imagination as a driver, making the stories more complex and, I believe, more enjoyable.

To quote the writer and poet Ben Okri:

When you can imagine, you begin to create. When you begin to create, you realize that you can create a world that you prefer to live in, rather than a world that you're suffering in.²

His words echoed with me but also had a jarring effect. I recognized that my writing was, up to that moment, escapist in nature and only meant to entertain. This realization influenced my subsequent stories' themes, plotlines, and character sets. Common threads developed, with my protagonists tending to confront and sometimes overcome power imbalances in their work and their lives.

¹ Owomoyela, O. *Yorùbá Proverbs*. (location 153) University of Nebraska Press, 2008.

² Interview with Nima Elbagir. <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/06/28/ben.okri.nigeria/index.html>. June 28, 2011. Accessed Oct 28th 2022.

At about this time, my first short story was published. This, in combination with my reaction to the Ben Okri quote, made me even more deliberate in creating my reading lists, and how I read.

Another quotation I came across, by Wole Soyinka, is:

Books, and all forms of writing are terror to those who wish to suppress the truth.³

Soyinka's words reminded me that, depending on the platform(s) available, good writing should strive to illuminate, inspire, and entertain.

The literary work I have developed for my thesis project is called "*Tani?*" — a Yorùbá word meaning "Who?" I have expanded it from a short story called "*What I wish I said,*" written in October 2020 to satisfy a word prompt from my online writing.

This project is not my first effort at writing a novel. My prior attempt was called "*The Pantheon,*" and like "*Tani?*" was partly inspired by elements of Yorùbá cosmology. That experience was advantageous in my preparation for the MA, as it presented several challenges I found particular novel-writing.

I believe the storyline of "*The Pantheon*" was strong, the characters memorable, and the dialogue was crisp and meaningful for many stretches. However, as I progressed, the writing became stodgy and uninspiring. I had to write myself out of several literary cul-de-sacs, and the message I intended to convey (that of the propensity of power to corrupt) became lost.

³Soyinka, W. *The Sixth Annual Annual Arthur Miller Freedom to Write Lecture*. <https://pen.org/multimedia/the-sixth-annual-arthur-miller-freedom-to-write-lecture-wole-soyinka/>. Apr 24th, 2007. Accessed Mar 14th 2023.

Compared with short-story telling, longer-form writing brought me a host of fresh requirements. These included:

The need for deeper thought about what genre or mash-up of genres I was writing in and how to signal the rules of my world-build.

I was also keenly aware that years of writing project plans, operations manuals, and marketing documents might have become habit-forming. In other words, I started the MA program expecting to unlearn old habits while developing a writing style, finding my narrative voice, and developing new technical guidelines.

Writing short stories, in my experience, did not always necessitate the development of a story outline. I had become used to writing by “the seat of my pants,” from time to time. I quickly found the outline critical to my efficiency in producing long-form writing.

Some of the elements of my plot for “*Tani?*” can be considered controversial, and I was keen not to have my satirical intentions misunderstood. Finding an efficient way to refine my output presented difficulties, and the revision period was more protracted than expected.

Finally, and perhaps most consequentially, the influence of language loomed large. Many instances arose where words or phrases conceived in Yorùbá did not fully translate when written in English. On the positive side, my research and reading took me back to an almost-forgotten stage of my learning. This however, brought me close to a rich, diverse source of inspiration for genre writing, and I am grateful for that.

In the process, I was compelled to think through my relationship with Yorùbá, and I arrived at some critical realizations about the influence of the language over my imagination and my writing.

I felt this last impact most profoundly and will reflect on it first.

LANGUAGE IN LITERATURE AND IN LIFE:

During my primary and secondary school years in Lagos, Nigeria, we would routinely be flogged for speaking “vernacular” in class. The only exception was during secondary school's once or twice-weekly vernacular language classes. (We did not have such classes in my primary school.) Both schools are in the South-West of Nigeria, so our vernacular tuition was in Yorùbá. It would have been Igbo in the South-East and the North, mainly Hausa.

The revered Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, an avowed proponent of having African literature written in African languages, holds forth on this topic in his essay “Decolonizing the Mind.” He describes language as a “carrier of the culture” and asks:

“How did we, as African writers, come to be so feeble towards the claims of our languages on us and so aggressive in our claims on other languages, particularly the languages of our colonization?⁴”

Ngũgĩ’s larger involvements, some described in the above referenced essay, prove that my experience was not unusual and was doubtless repeated in several, if not all the British colonies. The motives were plain, as the education policy in Nigeria at the time confirms:

“The school system was geared towards producing the desired manpower for the civil service, thus the recipients of western education ultimately became

⁴ wa Thiong’o, N., *Decolonising the mind – The Politics of Language in African Literature*. (p. 9) James Currey, 1986.

misfits in their own local rural setup and were suited for blue collar or white collar jobs in the cities.⁵”

Hidden slightly behind this issue is the decidedly more thorny one of why so many of the recipients (my examples are drawn from my parent’s generation) also chose to ban the speaking of vernacular in their homes. While researching, I came across the term “Third Culture Kids.” Defined as:

“...a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture.⁶”

Exploration of this term helped me to see the challenges of life and work in our parents’ peer group in a different light. Those trials included first-hand exposure to colonial rule and subsequent wholesale lifestyle changes compared with their parents’. In large numbers, they also spent long periods abroad for education or work and would have suffered a certain amount of internal conflict, possibly centered around language.

With subsequent generations, I would suggest that the cultural shifts that have resulted from rural-to-urban movements, international mass migrations, and recent globalization have become prominent. Hence, for ostensibly more benign reasons, we have witnessed a cementing of the pattern resulting in, “...misfits in their own local rural setup ... suited for blue collar or white collar jobs in the cities.”

For the record, I am also guilty of not working hard enough to propagate the language. I understand spoken Yorùbá with ease and am a proficient, if not fluent speaker,

⁵ Imam, H. *Educational Policy in Nigeria from the Colonial Era to the post-Independence period*. (p. 187) Italian Journal of Sociology of Education, 1, 2012

⁶ Pollock, D.C. and Van Reken, R.E. *“Third Culture Kids – The experience of growing up among worlds.”* (p.19) Nicholas Brealy Publishing, 1999.

but I read and write at an intermediate level. I hark back to my secondary school lessons when I need to break down a compound word or when inserting the all-important vowel tonal marks. Unfortunately, I no longer do either instinctively and found both exercises time-consuming and initially, fraught with error.

Recalling Ngūgĩ's words, if Yorùbá is indeed the "carrier of my culture," my understanding of said culture can only be as firm as my hold on Yorùbá, that thing that carries it.

The research involved with building the world of "*Tani?*" was interesting and, overall, extremely fulfilling. It also highlighted how much I had forgotten. Therefore, I consciously tried to jog my thinking in the vernacular. This included prefacing my chapters with selected Yorùbá proverbs, an activity that had attendant issues.

My copy of Oyekan Owomoyela's "*Yoruba Proverbs*" proved invaluable for this step. This collection of sayings provides brief translation notes, helpful in affirming or correcting my understanding.

Gabriel Okara's words offered some inspiration:

In order to capture the vivid images of African speech, I had to eschew the habit of expressing my thoughts first in English. It was difficult at first, but I had to learn, I had to study each Ijaw expression I used and discover the probable situation in which it was used in order to bring out the nearest meaning in English. I found it a fascinating exercise.⁷

For various reasons, time management being one of them, Okara's methodology was beyond me until I took it as a loose guideline. With practice came improvement, and I was

⁷ Okara, G. *Transition*, No. 10. September 1963

able to find the correct phrases in pidgin English, select the most appropriate Yorùbá words or phrases, and even include practical examples from Yorùbá folk songs.

To be clear, expressing myself in Yorùbá for the benefit of my writing was not always difficult and was often quite fruitful. I believe I was able to make several valuable contributions to the story by calling on my existing vocabulary, as well as my knowledge of Yorùbá history and customs.

For instance, bringing the issue of corruption into the story in a distinctive fashion was always going to be difficult, considering the ubiquity of that theme. To do this, I chose to resurrect a form of abuse I remember both my grandmothers using when I was a child. The phrase “Àwọn oni’rùn fùn fùn l’abé àhán” (“Those with white hair underneath their tongues”) was used to call out liars, thieves, untrustworthy people, and frequently, politicians. I have not found it in everyday use recently, but the graphic images that the words planted in my young mind helped me, decades later, to create a disturbing signature for a part of the world of “*Tani?*”

In another example, I had initially assigned the more commonly known and respectful name, “Iya Agba,” to one of the characters in the story. This means “elder mother” and can imply age, wealth, or status. However, I came across a much more evocative name, “Iya Arùgbà,⁸” which I decided to use instead.

The word “arùgbà” is a contraction of the phrase “a l’arùgbà” which translates literally as “Elder (or Mother) who bears the calabash.” The description takes on a different meaning among the Owe people of Kabba in Kogi State in Nigeria. Within this community, it implies a form of spirit possession, whereby the “calabash” is considered a receptacle for the

⁸ Lewu, M. A. Y. & Shuaib, S.O. *The History and Theatricality of Aruta Spirit Possession among Owe People in Kabba, Kogi State, Nigeria*. (p. 5) Journal of Studies in Humanities, Tai Solarin University of Education, Vol. 3 Dec 2011

spirit. By extension, the person named “a l’arùgbà” or “arùgbà” is believed to be a spirit messenger, carrying out tasks on behalf of another.

Another apt illustration can be found in the word “òkùn,” accepted as a translation for “umbilical cord.” The word literally means “rope” and provides a dual meaning in the story. The umbilical cord is considered a physical rope connecting the fetus with its mother during pregnancy. In “*Tani?*” (as with many Nigerian cultures,) after successful delivery and cutting of the cord, the remnants of the umbilicus were used to suggest an otherworldly connection between the child it was once a part of and a specific physical location. In other words, it behaved like a “spiritual rope.”

Considering the parts played by Iya Arùgbà and òkùn in the story, I would be hard-pressed to find a word or phrase in English that so effectively embodies both roles.

The Zimbabwean writer, Dambudzo Marechera’s relationship with English, was of a notoriously adversarial nature, and his words also feel pertinent:

“For a black writer, the language is very racist; you have to have harrowing fights and hair-raising panga duels with the language before you can make it do all that you want it to do. It is so for the feminists. English is very male. Hence feminist writers adopt the same tactics. This may mean discarding grammar, throwing syntax out, subverting images from within, beating the drum and cymbals of rhythm, developing torture chambers of irony and sarcasm, gas ovens of limitless black resonance. For me this is the impossible, the exciting, the voluptuous blackening image that commits me totally to writing.⁹”

⁹ Marechera, D. *The House of Hunger*. (p. 7) Heinemann 2009.

This quote and the reference to “torture chambers of irony and sarcasm” in particular, carried much weight with me. My main character, Tani, possesses a ready wit, and her acerbic responses in pressure situations proved a helpful outlet. Her habitual use of nicknames and her thinly veiled disdain for other people’s given names were useful devices to illuminate the things she valued the most.

Marechera’s method of fighting back feels quite logical, as does Okara’s, and their words helped to ease any guilt that I might feel about my language choices so far. However, if we were to favor these two arguments over the purist intentions of Ngugi, what then happens to culture clutched in the shaky grasp that is applied to language? Must it not change as well? This is rhetorical, as culture is not and cannot be static. The American anthropologist Leslie White, in his seminal 1959 essay on culture, reminds us that:

“A people’s behavior is a response to, a function of their culture. A culture is the independent, the behavior the dependent variable; as the culture varies, so will the behavior.¹⁰”

I considered inserting some commentary about this topic into “*Tani?*” via a “Tower of Babel”-like scenario. In the second part of the story, Tani would have discovered a crowd made up of different African nationalities as she arrives at a prayer camp. In a long-term plan to get around the attendant communication issues, the camp would have installed a Swahili instruction center. This would complement a mandate for all church members to learn this language as a second one.

This tongue-in-cheek suggestion, however, represents one of the threads I chose to drop from “*Tani?*” primarily so as not to overwhelm the reader. However, the Swahili-as-a-

¹⁰ White, L.A. *The Concept of Vulture*. (p. 241) University of Michigan, 1959.

second-language solution is one that I believe would make sense in real life, not just in Tani's world. The language already has an impressive number of existing global speakers (200 Million¹¹) and is reputed to be easy to learn. It is also one of the two African languages in which there are ongoing efforts to build a computer programming language. (The other is Yorùbá.)

This discussion would not feel complete without looking at the economics of global publishing and the advantage that writing in English brings. According to the online language tool, Babbel, English is the most widely spoken language in the world, with over 1.4 Billion speakers in 2022¹². Small wonder, then, that publishing trends follow suit. I have found verifiable open-source statistics scanty, but as of 1999, books published in English were about 22% of global totals, followed by books published in Chinese, which contributed 11%¹³.

I am aware that bringing purely economic reasoning into this debate could make it more contentious, but Chinua Achebe's words, reflecting his evolved position on the topic, bring relevant support:

There are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication. Therefore those African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart alecks with an eye for the main chance — outside their own countries. They are by-products of the same process that made the new nation-states of Africa.¹⁴

¹¹ UNESCO UNESDOC Digital Library. *General Conference, 41st Session, Paris 2021. Item 5.17 of provisional agenda.* <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379702>. Accessed March 10th 2023.

¹² Association for Language Learning. <https://www.all-languages.org.uk/news/what-is-the-most-spoken-language-in-the-world-2022/> Accessed March 11th 2023.

¹³ Lobachev, S. *Top languages in global information production.* (p. 2) CLA Conference, Vancouver. 2008

¹⁴ Achebe, C., *Essays: Morning Yet on Creation Day.* (p.77) Anchor Books, 1976

This is welcome input, especially when I consider that the lingua franca in Nigeria, English, would sorely be missed if we were to replace it with any of the Nigerian languages at this moment.

With a contribution that adds a further twist, I would reflect on the many books I have enjoyed in translation. Alain Mabanckou is a French citizen born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a genuinely inspiring writer, and one whose voice I greatly admire. He writes in French. In an interview with Ariane Poissonnier, a French journalist, he indicates an acceptance of a “French African” identity. His argument appears pragmatic but is also very different from the eternal debate of Achebe, Marechera, Ngũgĩ, Okara, et al. Mabanckou states:

“Take the example of African civilizations. They have used Western thought to establish African thought. The Negritude movement was born in Europe, in the minds of the Black and Caribbean students who came to study in France. One of them, the Senegalese (poet and statesman) Léopold Sédar Senghor, entered the Académie Française. And who would question the universality of *Return To My Native Land* by Martinique’s Aimé Césaire? Who can doubt the power of analyses of another Martinican, Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*? These writers have attacked the colonial system and its corollaries from within – and have attacked it using the tools that the system provided them.¹⁵”

¹⁵Online interview by Ariane Poissonnier. *The Mobile Africas of Alain Mabanckou* <https://en.unesco.org/courier/2019-2/mobile-africas-alain-mabanckou>. The UNESCO Courier - Volume 2019, Issue 2, 2019. Accessed March 10th 2023.

I disagree strongly with part of his sentiment and would suggest that the example he quotes of Senghor's admittance into the Académie Française is one that Ngũgĩ had in mind in his admonishing quote. Interestingly, Ngũgĩ's description of language as a "carrier of the culture" shows its relevance. In this case, however, the French culture(not a "French African" one,) appears to be the "carrier."

Jose Eduardo Agualasa's "*A General Theory of Oblivion*," translated by Daniel Hahn, is an atmospheric piece of writing that uses prose, snatches of song, fragments of poetry, and unforgettable characters to provide an immersive reading experience. Agualasa is Angolan, of Brazilian and Portuguese descent. The following comments are about his translation from the Portuguese he writes in:

"Translators are generous writers. The most generous of all is probably Daniel Hahn. I'm always struck by the passion Daniel brings to the work, trying to find just the right words, without losing the rhythm and the melody of the writing. Often he will find solutions that are better than mine are in Portuguese. One good example is the title *A General Theory of Oblivion*, which sounds much better than it does in Portuguese. Actually, the same is true for *The Society of Reluctant Dreamers*—in that case it doesn't just sound better, it's also better at translating the spirit of the book.¹⁶"

Again, there is an acceptance of translation's position in a writer's literary life, even admiration for it. When I consider how much I enjoyed his writing in English and factor in

¹⁶ Online interview by Bibi Deitz <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/josé-eduardo-aqualusa-interviewed/> Oct 14, 2020. Accessed March 11th 2023.

his compliments, it is hard to argue against his decisions to write and translate across two world languages.

Seishi Yokomizo's closed-door mystery thriller, "*The Honjin Murders*," was written in 1946 and translated into English by Louise Heal Kawai in 2019. The author passed away in 1981, long before the mass-market English translation was published. This particular translation appears to have been demand-driven, and most reviews pronounced it as long overdue.

I enjoyed "*The Honjin Murders*" immensely, especially as it was clearly the inspiration for much of the misdirection and sleight-of-hand adopted by future successful crime writers. Yokomizo's plotting is well-thought, and his faithfulness to Japanese culture in his story-telling is a consistently high point.

These brief case studies help to present a perspective that is helpful as I review my feelings of disconnection with the Yorùbá language. It rests on an acceptance of the publishing industry's economics, translators' skills, and the idea that English, the language of conquerors, does not remain static, nor does culture.

The Yorùbá proverb that I prefaced this essay with, "Ohun tówá lọ sí Šókoto, wà nínú àpò-o šòkòtò," (That thing you went to the ends of the earth in search of, exists in your trouser pocket,) is a frequently-quoted play on the language's tonality. It emphasizes the irony of searching for something in far-away Šókoto (a Northern Nigerian town, at the time a proxy for the "ends of the earth") while the same thing has always been in your àpò šòkòtò (trouser pocket.)

I am taking inspiration from the proverb in the form of the rich content, creativity, and the possibilities that a storyteller can mine from the Yorùbá universe. While realizing Tani's world, the problems I encountered and overcame, have been revelatory. I had expected much of my learning in the MA course would be mainly technical. However, I have also gained a

lot from re-addressing “old knowledge” and have discovered fresh ways to look at the core elements of Yorùbá culture.

GENRE:

In an early discussion about genre, I remember describing “*Tani?*” as a piece of “Speculative Fiction” to the class. On reflection, this answer was generic and, at best, incomplete. The “genre” discussion has always felt important to me, perhaps because it has helped me think through the clues I could use early in the storyline to set the readers’ expectations. In addition, my background reading and research are much more considered when I reflect on which different genres have influenced my story outline.

Mythic Fiction:

Working and living in different parts of sub-Saharan Africa brought home to me, very graphically, how far elements of Nigerian culture have traveled. The music, cinema, and fashion were all instantly recognizable in surprisingly far-flung locations. However, the frequent references to Nigerian literature remain much more impressive.

Chinua Achebe’s “*Things Fall Apart*,” Cyprian Ekwensi’s “*Jagua Nana*,” and the writings of Eke, Emecheta, Fagunwa, Tutuola, and many of their contemporaries were surprising and regular options in bookstores across the continent.

I welcomed the chance to discuss and enjoy the books I had absorbed when I was much younger, but none more than Wole Soyinka’s “*The Interpreters*.” Apart from his autobiographies, I consider this as Soyinka’s most accessible piece of writing, and I drew much of my inspiration for “*The Pantheon*” from a section of this book.

In a meaningful sequence, one of the characters in “*The Interpreters*,” Kọla, paints a large-scale picture of the pantheon of Yorùbá gods or òrìṣàs. Soyinka’s characterization of Kọla’s artistic output helped clarify aspects of the Yorùbá multiple godhead theory.

Elsewhere, Soyinka is more definitive when he says:

The creation of the multiple godheads began a transference of social functions, the division of labor and professions among the deities whose departments they were after that to become.¹⁷

This “division of labor and professions” concept speaks to the elegantly designed and interlocking myths of Yorùbá cosmology. An expanded view of the Yorùbá cosmos involves two distinct realms — aiyé, the tangible world, and Òrùn, the invisible realm of spiritual forces (which would include the òrìṣà,s) ruled over by Olódùmarè, the creator of existence.¹⁸

My early introduction to this aspect of Yorùbá culture sealed my fascination with the mythic fiction genre of writing and all its offshoots. This also directly influenced my intention to center “*Tani?*” in a part of South-West Nigeria that was once the ancient empire of Ile-Ifè. Ile-Ifè existed between the 11th and 15th Century C.E. and occupies a special place in Yorùbá traditional religion, mythology, history, and culture. It is believed to have been founded on the spot where the òrìṣàs came down from heaven to create the earth.¹⁹

Joseph Campbell offers a succinct yet resonant description of myth:

¹⁷ Soyinka, W. 1976. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. (p. 28) Cambridge University Press.

¹⁸ Drewal, Pemberton III and Abiodun.,1989. *Yorùbá – Nine centuries of African Art and Thought*. (p.14) The Center for African Art.

¹⁹ Mythology of Africa. <https://sites.google.com/a/asu.edu/mythology-of-africa/the-creation-of-the-universe-and-ife>. Accessed Oct 21st 2022.

They (myths) are the world's dreams. They are archetypal dreams and deal with great human problems.²⁰

I believe the “great human problems” I imagined for the world in “*Tani?*” fit this description very well. As outlandish as the disease propagation method I crafted was, it does not feel too far from the mythical quality attached to the conspiracy theories of the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research article, “Factors associated with the myth about 5G network during COVID-19 pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa²¹,” is noteworthy as its use of the word “myth” in the title and throughout the article, indicating a possible realization of the same kind of connection.

Myth is handily broken down into three types²² — Etiological Myths (myths that explain why things are the way they are); Historical Myths (these essentially retell an event from the past but elevate it with more significant meaning than the actual event); and psychological myths (according to Jung as well as Joseph Campbell, these represent a psychological need to balance the external world with one's internal consciousness of it.)

The conspiracy theories that have become a constant in the era of social media fit neatly into the psychological typology of myths. As do the strongest elements of mythic fiction that are reflected in “*Tani?*” For example, the weight of the myth of “*Şònpòna*, the Yorùbá god of smallpox, a ferocious and vindictive god, who not only causes smallpox but is

²⁰ Campbell J., with Moyers, B. *The Power of Myth*. Anchor Books, 1988

²¹ Ovenseri-Ogbomo G, Ishaya T, Osuagwu UL, et al. *Journal of Global Health Response. Factors associated with the myth about 5G network during COVID-19 pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa*. 2020;4:e2020094. *Journal of Global Health Reports*. doi:10.29392/001c.17606 Accessed Feb 20th, 2023

²² World History Encyclopedia. <https://www.worldhistory.org/mythology/> Accessed Nov 05th 2022.

also responsible for a form of madness²³,” allowed me to resolve an early problem with the “*Tani?*” plotline.

The method of propagation of smallpox, supercharged by modern technology that I imagined, became a suitably dramatic launch point for “*Tani?*” It offers an explanation to the beleaguered citizens of Tani’s world that they could accept, even if they did not understand it.

Considering for a moment the etiological typology, the following Yorùbá proverb offers some affirmation:

“bi o s’eniyan, imale o si” (if humanity were not, the gods would not be.²⁴)

Within the “division of labor and professions” that Soyinka refers to, this provides an indirect answer to the puzzle of which entities came first; humanity or orìṣás. The picture becomes clarified somewhat when considering the roles of the babaláwos (fathers of mysteries) and (iyánifá or “mothers of Ifá) in the divination process.

In “*Tani?*”, I used technology to leverage the ifá divination tool, creating an infinitely more complex, visually arresting, and powerful device.

Science Fiction:

Professor Sophie Olúwolé, Nigeria’s first female Ph.D. holder, gives an overview of the rigor needed in the ifá divination process:

²³ Buckley, A.D. *The god of smallpox: aspects of Yoruba religious knowledge*. (p. 187) Africa: Journal of the International African Institute Vol. 55, No. 2 (1985),

²⁴ Soyinka, W. 1976. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. (p. 10) Cambridge University Press.

“...it has been mandatory for every apprentice to commit to memory a substantial number of the over 4,000 major ifá texts as one of the conditions for becoming a professional. The number of verses memorized partly determines the competence and position of a practitioner.²⁵”

As I studied the ifá divination process, the facts and this description immediately hinted at the possibilities for an imagined technological extension. My solution brings elements of science fiction into the genre discussion. While the foundational concepts of the human/machine mind meld can be traced back to William Gibson’s “*Neuromancer*,²⁶” I would like to think that the use of African traditional religions would also keep the reader in a state of suspended disbelief, while bringing a different philosophical and historical angle to this familiar device.

It seemed very timely when I came across James Wood’s reminder:

Aristotle writes that a convincing impossibility in mimesis is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility.²⁷

Satire:

Satire, designed as it is to partly inspire social reform, is the genre that I believe aligns most with the Soyinka quote on page 2. I think of it as foundational, particularly with “*Tani*?” In a sense, looking for a satirical bent to the story “allowed” me to select potentially controversial issues and duly subject them to lampooning. The most obvious would be the role of

²⁵ Olúwolé, S.O. Prof., *Socrates and Òrúnmìlà – Two Patron Saints of Classical Philosophy*. (p.13) Ark Publishers, 2015.

²⁶ Gibson, W. *Neuromancer*. Victor Gollancz, 1984

²⁷ Wood, J., “*How fiction works*.” (p. 241) Picador, 2008.

evangelical churches in Africa. Race relations and the lopsided power dynamic between the developed and developing worlds also inspired caricature. In addition, our changing relationship with technology provided ample opportunity for exaggeration, even ridicule.

Like their real-life effects, I frequently changed the relative impact of one or more of these elements in “*Tani?*” from benign to malign and then back again. The intent was always to highlight the role of free will and point out how key this ingredient is.

Inverting the typical relationships with the other social phenomena, which were shown to impact daily life in Tani’s world, needed a light touch. Many of these otherwise weighty topics, like gun control, colorism, misogyny, global currency standards, stolen African art, received passing only mentions, and frequently the commentary was intentionally cloaked in humor.

However, I do feel a slight concern that some background knowledge may be needed to pick up on the true intentions of some of my characters’ words and actions. For example, for readers unaware of the particular linguistic styles of typical Nigerian evangelical preachers, the dialogue I use in sections of “*Tani?*” may seem overly bombastic and even an attempt at satirizing them.

One theme that is worth elevating in this reflection, is that of the relationship between Africans on the continent and African-Americans. The powerful evangelical church that is a vital part of the story persists in viewing their African-American “brethren” as a “Human Resource” that will help restore New Ifè and Nigeria to lost glory. The church’s blindness in this viewpoint and eventual attempt to effect a mass transport to New Ifè without consent is a pivotal event. It reveals true intentions and is meant as a nod to the horrors of the slave trade.

The more salacious actions that I ascribe to the intentionally named “All Father” of the church in question may seem exaggerated. It is worth noting that while the examples I inserted into “*Tani?*” are imagined, I consider them “true-to-life.”

Recent additions to my reading lists, I consider the American writers Paul Beatty²⁸ and Jason Mott as significant influences. I would suggest that these two writers, in particular, illustrate the truth in the Soyinka quotation. I appreciate the scope and scale of their plotlines and how they both rest their constructs around the slow setup of a “grand event,” written with tongue wedged in cheek and disguised as a task for their hero(es) to tackle.

In a promotional interview about his best-selling book, “*The Sellout*,” Paul Beatty states:

“Because even some of the more ridiculous stuff in there, that you would think is obvious satire, *is* sort of real—or definitely based in something.”²⁹

I believe that satire should be based on something. I also hope the basis and application will be recognized in the extreme-seeming situations and antagonists I have populated “*Tani*?” with.

John Gardner sums up the genre discussion neatly when he says:

Since we are living in an age very rich in genres — since a given student may have encountered almost anything, from tales like Isak Dinesen’s to *New Yorker* realistic fiction, from surreal, plotless fictions-in-question-and-answer form to philosophically enriched and dramatically intensified prose renderings of something like the vision in *Captain Marvel* comics — such instructions to the writer may produce almost anything. Set off in this way, the writer is sure to enjoy himself, first riffling through genres, discovering how many and

²⁸Macmillan Publishers. <https://us.macmillan.com/author/paulbeatty> Accessed Mar 11th 2023.

²⁹ Literary Hub. <https://lithub.com/paul-beatty-on-los-angeles-lit-the-sellout-and-life-after-the-man-booker/> Accessed Mar 12th 2023.

complex they are, then — tongue between his teeth — knocking off his brilliant example.³⁰

REFLECTIONS

WRITING STYLE:

“There can be no fiction without appropriation. Because we fiction writers are predators too” – Arundhati Roy.³¹”

Ms. Roy’s comments affirm, for me, the iterative nature of creativity. During my process, I found inspiration in a wide range of writers, some of whose work I have read and re-read and some, new to me.

In October 2022, I came across a *New York Times* (NYT) article about a writing style that appears resurgent after a sixty (60) year hiatus. In a 1960 NYT article, the translator and critic José Vázquez Amaral refers to:

... Mexican authors whose eerie tales combined the fantastic with the everyday and challenged daily constraints placed on women at the time.³²

The 2022 article describes how:

³⁰ Gardner, J., *The Art of Fiction*. (p.33 – 34) Vintage Books. 1991

³¹ Roy, A. *Approaching Gridlock: Arundhati Roy on Free Speech and Failing Democracy*. www.lithub.com, Mar 24th 2023. Accessed Mar 25th 2023.

³² Article by Benjamin P. Russel, nytimes.com. Oct 09th 2022. Accessed Oct 09th 2022.

“In Mexico, Argentina, Ecuador and beyond, a conspicuous number of women writers are using fantasy, horror and the unfamiliar to unsettle readers and critique social ills³³.”

Referring to its current manifestation, the writing style was first described as “narrativa de lo inusual” (the narrative of the unusual,) by Carmen Alemany Bay, a literature professor at the University of Alicante in Spain. Alemany Bay, referring to the new wave of writers, goes on to say:

Depictions of normal life aren’t intended to heighten the effect of the fantastic or supernatural; instead, the unreal is used to sharpen readers’ view of what’s true. Many of these current works that leave the bounds of reality are called ‘magical realism,’ especially when they come from Latin America. But that’s a big, big mistake. They may contain elements of magic, but that isn’t the foundation.”³⁴

The parallels between this style and what I am attempting with “*Tani?*” struck me quite forcefully. I do have elements of magical realism in my writing, but they are generally used to make a satirical point. To my mind, the “critique of social ills” and the “challenging of daily constraints” in this attempt at a novel are done more with satire than with any other technique.

“Combining the fantastic with the everyday” felt very close to a description of what I am trying to do with “*Tani?*” I felt another parallel with elements of this style in the attempt

³³ Article by Benjamin P. Russel, nytimes.com. Oct 09th 2022. Accessed Oct 09th 2022.

³⁴ Article by Benjamin P. Russel, nytimes.com. Oct 09th 2022. Accessed Oct 09th 2022.

to place power in the hands of the reader. In addition, “narrativa de lo inusual” reads as an effective mash-up of different genres. I hope that my writing reflects some or all of these facets.

In further commentary, Alemany Bay states that:

“The narrative of the unusual often is socially conscious, explores womanhood in intimate and unconventional ways, and challenges the nature of our closest personal relationships.³⁵”

After the many changes I have had to make in developing an effective process for writing a novel, I have since concluded that I am still refining my style. Meanwhile, I will answer any queries about my writing style with the answer “Narrativo do lo inusual.”

OUTLINING:

With “*The Pantheon*,” I started by writing an outline, developing a character list, and fleshing out the central characters. However, in the first of my many errors, I proceeded to ignore all this groundwork, perversely determined to write exclusively “by the seat of my pants.”

Initially, I made excellent progress, but the writing became bloated after I passed the potential midpoint (at about 40,000 words.) Too much detailed social commentary had found its way into the story, my main themes were lost, and I kept having to write explanations for newly-developing problems. The dialogue frequently felt wooden, and the backstory was clumsy and ill-fitting.

³⁵ Article by Benjamin P. Russel, nytimes.com. Oct 09th 2022. Accessed Oct 09th 2022.

To take advantage of lessons learned during this attempt, I invested in software that made writing an outline and updating it much more intuitive. Predictably, while writing “*Tani?*” I did have a moment when the backstory slowed me down. In response, I could stop the process, rework my outline, and use it as a new baseline to get around this issue.

Ultimately, this re-design of my backstory mechanism did not work, so I changed my outline (again.) I then applied a third option in which I dribbled essential historical information into the storyline through conversation, dreams, relaying of fables, and the like. The new writing software was central to these on-the-fly changes, and I am sure I would have struggled even more without it.

With “*The Pantheon*,” as with all my writing, it felt important to bring some social commentary. In hindsight, any text sank under the weight of overly-detailed allusions to colonialism, corruption, misuse of power, race relations, tribalism, and violence against women (to name a few.) Since that effort, I have learned to dial this sort of effort back and try to introduce any such observations sparingly.

Perhaps most importantly, I have a good feel for my writing style when I write short stories and can consistently replicate this. After my failed attempt with “*The Pantheon*,” I am keen to figure out if and how my assumed writing style would change when writing novels and how I will recognize this.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT:

“The writer’s characters must stand before us with wonderful clarity, such continuous clarity that nothing they do strike us as improbable behavior for

just that character, even when the character's action is, as sometimes happens, something that came as a surprise to the writer himself.³⁶ – John Gardner.

Writing female characters:

I discovered after I had started writing that I had not applied enough consideration to the main character, her femininity, and how best to portray her. The difficulties in finding and projecting her voice while consistently reflecting her personality became a major stumbling block.

The age disparity and picturing her in varying locations were not insurmountable as I had some experience of being at that age and far from home. To get around the difference in viewpoints due to gender, I queried my wife, female cousins, sisters, and nieces about their reactions to hypothetical situations. However, the latter method did not provide consistent results, and I continued to stumble through my efforts to animate Tani as a displaced, young African female.

I also struggled to keep the spiky personality I gave Tani consistent within her interactions, and I had some problems with her dialogue. It was relatively easy with characteristics that are not gender-specific, like humor, courage, and strength under pressure. However, it became increasingly difficult to keep my own words, thoughts, and reactions away from her personality, instead of having the character think and speak for herself.

Feedback from the class helped me pinpoint another necessary shift. I belatedly noted that sometimes I failed to have Tani's surroundings acknowledge her femininity. Resolving this required a balancing act, as I had always intended that her gender should come across as a trivial detail, immaterial to the problems she faced and overcame. I had, however,

³⁶ Gardner, J. *The Art of Fiction*. (p. 45) Penguin Random House, 1991

overcompensated and made the world around her blind to her sex instead of being made to ignore it.

This was a pivotal moment for me, as it helped me to “see” Tani correctly in the situations I put her in, mainly through the eyes of her antagonists and the partners she assembled in her quest.

Fortunately, I also had some useful comparators to refer to. Chief of them was Lisbeth Salander, Stig Larson’s main character in his successful “*Millenium Trilogy*.” I found the Salander character an ideal one to review while I worked through this issue. There were significant similarities, although the two characters could not be more different culturally or in terms of motivation.

Lisbeth Salander was written not to show vulnerability. I, however, did the opposite with Tani and had her show weakness or dependence when it felt appropriate. Tani’s acerbic wit and querying character were also designed to make up for her ignorance of the situation she was plunged into. In contrast, the Salander character was crafted as a highly skilled technician who invariably knew more than most of the other characters she worked with or against. Despite these differences, I could find enough common ties to think about, mainly when I needed to express Tani’s physicality.

Resolving the speech issues was more difficult until I hit on the habit of reading her dialogue aloud. I eventually found an appropriate Nigerian-American accent for Tani during my readings. This helped me to imagine her slang, her routine of shifting into pidgin English whenever she could, and at a crucial juncture, assisted me in accessing her vulnerable side.

The Ofosi / The Amavi:

The other group of characters that proved challenging to develop was the shadowy guild of priestesses I termed the Amavi. They were inspired by an actual female priesthood called the

Ofosi, native to Kabba Division in Mid-Western Nigeria and supposedly formed in the late 17th Century. They were described as:

...women who are initiated into an esoteric and deeply religious society, involving periodic and authentic spirit-possession.³⁷

The Ofosi offered a rich, layered model through the available estimates of their mode of worship, dress, habits, and their effect on society. Fortunately, I had not developed my model of the Amavi completely before I noticed an uncomfortable similarity in both origin stories, which necessitated a change. Afterward, I used the idea of the Ofosi only as a framework, adding details of my imagining for their inspiration, leadership, and how they access their powers.

POINT OF VIEW:

In one of our early seminars, I received specific and valuable feedback concerning my choice of narrative voice. It was pointed out that sustaining the entire story from a first-person point of view might be challenging.

I gave this suggestion plenty of thought but decided to go ahead with the first-person point of view, using Tani's viewpoint alone. I was halfway through the story before I ran into pacing problems and the backstory issues I mentioned.

I would have to belatedly agree that writing the story from different points of view may have made it easier to handle these issues or, quite possibly, could have ensured that they did not crop up.

³⁷ Adegbola, E.A.A., *Traditional Religion in West Africa*. (p. 35) Sefer Books, 1998.

Again, using the outline was crucial in reworking the sections where the chosen point of view slowed the story down. By editing the outline on the fly, I could re-insert characters that had gone missing and develop new scenarios that helped me improve the flow of the storyline.

I also reviewed a few scenes written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, all observed through his trusty sidekick, Dr. John Watson's point-of-view. These gave me a few ideas of how to keep characters from going missing and to account for occurrences outside of Tani's direct experience.

PACING:

More beneficial feedback provided during one of the seminars early in Year 2 of the program was about the largely frenetic pace that I had Tani and the rest of the characters endure. I had previously received similar input when I allowed the storyline to hop from New York to Nigeria without sufficient justification or detail about the characters that populated the story.

I realized the latter error was due to my short-story telling habits interfering with the new format, and I took the feedback to heart. Reacting to it was critical to how I eventually slowed down the scenes, expanded and detailed the storyline. Following this advice made me look harder at Tani's surroundings and become more deliberate as I described them for the reader. I believe this step enriched my writing, and I am grateful for the suggestion.

However, beyond correcting my mistake with abrupt scene shifts, the overall pace of the story was more difficult for me to change. I did try it out and wrote a few scenes stretched out over weeks when the story had moved to the prayer camp just outside Lagos. Initially, this proved helpful, as I could use more time and space to expand on the antagonist's character and allow Tani to bond with the partners she was cultivating at that stage of the story.

Unfortunately, it also decreased the story's momentum and took away some justification for Tani's instinctive reactions, the urgency, and her continual progression. In addition, it interfered with character development, and I had to go back in the story to adjust the timing and levels of Tani's emotional responses.

Eventually, I scrapped the idea of slowing the overall story down and returned to the fast-paced structure I had initially outlined. Turning to Stephen King gave me mixed feelings but some confidence in my chosen course of action:

I believe each story should be allowed to unfold at its own pace, and that pace is not always double time. Nevertheless, you need to beware - if you slow the pace down too much, even the most patient reader is apt to grow restive.³⁸

I do believe, however, that for the plot I developed, the forces I brought to bear, and the stakes I described, it felt more effective wiring the story at an overall fast pace.

BACKSTORY:

As mentioned in the section on Outlining, delivering the backstory smoothly became a significant challenge about halfway through the manuscript. I started having difficulties managing Tani's viewpoint, memories, personal knowledge, and day-to-day experiences alone as the lens the reader would look through. I also felt that the history of the other characters lacked a venue for delivery.

My first attempt to fix this involved writing a prologue in which a bit of Tani's history shared with some other characters could be introduced. Unfortunately, this did not sit

³⁸ King, S. The Guardian Review.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/oct/01/stephenking.sciencefictionfantasyandhorror>. Oct 01st 2000. Accessed Nov 05th 2022.

well, as it took away from the initially written introductory paragraphs and sat in contrast, stylistically, with the following chapters.

Next, I tried to write a parallel story, interleaving key chapters to add character information and some additional scenes at intervals. These “backstory” chapters would be written from different points of view, while the main story ran along on its track from Tani’s.

I wrote about four (4) chapters before giving the attempt up. In total, possibly one (1) “backstory” chapter worked as planned. The remaining chapters felt clunky, forced, and disconnected from the main storyline.

In another experiment, I wrote a dream sequence for Tani during a vulnerable moment. I did not introduce any details directly in her dream, just symbols and incidents that she would work into future conversations and uncover details I had previously found difficult to bring in. I felt this device worked suitably well, so I relied on variations of it to resolve my background information problem.

OVERWRITING:

During the program's first half, the critique I received most frequently for was my tendency to overwrite. It was with a sense of relief that I came across an interview by the writer Phillip Roth, where he says:

“I often have to write a hundred pages or more before there’s a paragraph that’s alive. Okay, I say to myself, that’s your beginning, start there; that’s the first paragraph of the book. I’ll go over the first six months of work and underline in red a paragraph, a sentence, sometimes no more than a phrase, that has some life in it, and then I’ll type all these out on one page. Usually it

doesn't come to more than one page, but if I'm lucky, that's the start of page one.³⁹”

This described my problem well and made me feel not entirely so alone. However, I was no nearer to a recommended solution until I came across an aphorism by Peter Ho Davies:

“To make a silk purse, first get your sow's ear⁴⁰.”

This somewhat brutal advice complemented Roth's and helped me contextualize the other well-known phrase, “kill your darlings,” meant to encourage ruthless edits. I had always been struck by the inherent conflict in the latter suggestion since I, like many others I am sure, tend to love my words, my darlings, and could not easily countenance murdering them. Paradoxically, it felt intuitive to see all I wrote as a string of sow's ears and easier to contemplate transforming them into silk purses.

Davies also quotes Isaac Babel:

A phrase is born into the world, good and bad at the same time. The secret rests in a barely perceptible turn. The lever must lie in one's hand and get warm. It must be turned once and no more.⁴¹

Thankfully, Davies agrees that more than one turn and a much longer wait for the hand to warm up may be needed for writers not as skilled as Babel. However, Davies'

³⁹ The Paris Review. The Art of Fiction, No. 84. <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2957/the-art-of-fiction-no-84-philip-roth>. Accessed Nov 17th 2022.

⁴⁰ Davies, Peter Ho. *The Art of Revision*. (p. 31) Graywolf Press, 2021

⁴¹ Davies, Peter Ho. *The Art of Revision*. (p. 92) Graywolf Press, 2021

proposal of his Zeno's Revision, based on one of the more famous theories of Zeno's Paradox,⁴² was more helpful. Davies says:

Zeno suggests that if we travel halfway to a destination — like an arrow toward a target, say — and then halfway *again*, we never actually arrive at our destination. Some might say, despairingly, that *all* revision is Zeno's revision, since it feels as if we continuously approach and yet never reach an endpoint, though I hope to offer an ending to the story of revisions in due course. In the meantime, I'd suggest that a way to correct for an overabundance of subtlety in one draft is to *overcorrect*, to consciously allow for heavy-handedness, in the next. It's possible the next draft, too, will miss the mark, but by overshooting, that failed experiment provides useful data since we now know our sweet spot lies somewhere *between* our drafts.⁴³

With my first attempts at writing short stories, I was unaware of how critical it was to have a consistent source of review as well as quality critique. Unsurprisingly, those first attempts languished in various drawers and have long been lost. In 2012, a kind member of my book club at the time dedicated a lot of time and effort to giving me consistent feedback. This led to the publication of the short story I was then working on, my first such milestone.

However, I did not find the supportive writing community I did not know I needed until a chance meeting at a book fair pointed me in the right direction. This led to the online writing group I described at the onset of this essay. With this group came regular shared

⁴² Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/paradox-zeno/#Arr> Accessed Nov 18th 2022.

⁴³ Davies, Peter Ho. *The Art of Revision*. (p. 96-97) Graywolf Press, 2021

feedback and constructive criticism that I believe brought incremental improvements to my revisions.

Throughout these reflections, I have pointed out some of the occasions when I gained significant insight into my writing from the MA seminar group discussions. Despite the larger effects of the COVID pandemic and some of my personal constraints, I would also mention the value that came from having access in class and out of it to such a vibrant and diverse group. Although we did not share reworked chapters, it was instructive to watch other stories unfold and learn from the improving writing I was surrounded with.

I have taken to viewing my words as a collection of sow's ears, waiting for the correct number of iterations that I hope will transform them into silk purses. I have also felt a release from the pressure to produce perfection after one or two edits. Apart from the technical considerations, I view this shift in perspective as one of my most significant learning points from the program.

CONCLUSION:

“When Goebbels, the brain behind Nazi propaganda, heard culture being discussed, he brought out his revolver. That shows that the Nazis — who were and are the most tragic expression of imperialism and of its thirst for domination — even if they were all degenerates like Hitler, had a clear idea of the value of culture as a factor of resistance to foreign domination.⁴⁴”

I appreciate the reminder of the gap between my perceived grasp of Yorùbá culture and the reality. I am also glad to have an opportunity that is rooted in writing, in which I can try to

⁴⁴ Cabral, A. *National Liberation and Culture*. (p.1) Eduardo Mondlane Memorial Lecture series, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York. February, 1970.

address this gap. I am also glad to try and produce writing that is reflective of my own understanding of the language and the culture.

One of my main intents was to convey a point about gender by having a female protagonist deal routinely with problems that would task anyone. I am hopeful that the other themes of my writing in “*Tani?*” are not crafted in too heavy-handed a fashion. I refer to the intended commentary about the potential harm of organized religion, of social media, and to force another look at race relations.

A less apparent theme concerns Africa’s history; empires lost and technology forgotten. The upgraded version of the ifà corpus I dreamed up is quite impractical, but it is meant to simply make the reader aware of its history, and to appreciate the deeply thought-out philosophy behind it.

The other “everyday” themes of gun control, colorism, violence against women, the relationship between the continent and its diaspora, global currency issues, and the repatriation of stolen African art are hopefully treated with a light enough touch that they are easily absorbed. I hope this will educate a curious reader and may provide discussion points that will be discovered during reading or re-reading of “*Tani?*”

I believe it is too early to come to any conclusion about my relationship with Yorùbá and how it might change in the near future. However, I accept it as vital part of my creative process, and I am hopeful that as I improve my grasp of the language, I will be able to uncover more details about the culture, which can only be beneficial.

John Gardner’s quote on page 20 implies a certain fluidity in the approach to genre in writing. However, I place some stock in knowing what writing tools I need and what rules apply to my creative content. Signaling that I have arrived at a genre mash-up of “satirical absurdist mythic science fiction” sounds pretentious and could be confusing. I will probably

describe “*Tani?*” as a satire, if asked, and will allow readers or commentators to make up their own minds about the genre in which the final product lands.

My initial plans to center the world of “*Tani?*” entirely in the ancient empire of Ifẹ proved too ambitious, especially as it quickly felt essential to show aspects of a changed New York as well as the energy of Lagos. I ended up using two locations that would have been part of the old territory of the Ifẹ empire; the sacred grove of the river oriṣa Ọṣun and the “Occidental African University” (a thinly disguised version of the Obafemi Awolowo University⁴⁵.) I also inserted a few imagined locations; the town of Òkèmaalu (the Hill of Cows) and the town of Alafia (Happiness.) The latter was inspired by the town of Ipèrù, a place I know pretty well.

The reason for scaling back my plans was simply practical; the customs, locations, and culture of the empire of Ifẹ proved simply too rich to compress. However, I take comfort in the fact that if I choose to continue the story of Tani, I will have plenty of content to work with.

The reality of life in today’s Ilẹ-Ifẹ bears mentioning, and I will use input culled from Prof. Jacob K. Olupona’s excellent text, “*City of 201 Gods*,” in which he describes a visit to the Ọ̀ni’s palace in Ilẹ-ifẹ, to attend a Christmas carol service. (The Ọ̀ni or king occupies a central place in the mythic history of Ilẹ-Ifẹ City. In principle, the Ọ̀ni, regarded as a descendant and successor of Oduduwa ... is a god-king and the spiritual head of the Yorùbá-speaking people⁴⁶.) Prof. Olupona’s description follows:

“EVANGELICAL BORN – AGAIN TRADITION UPSTAGES ANCIENT
ÒRÌṢÀ TRADITION

⁴⁵Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ifẹ, Ọṣun State, Nigeria. <https://oauife.edu.ng> Accessed Mar 01st 2023

⁴⁶ Olupona, J. K., *City of 201 Gods*. (p. 93) University of California Press, 2011

The men and women of the Baptist Church Èlẹ̀yẹ̀lẹ̀, where Reverend Mamadelo was a priest, staged a theatrical production to accompany the Qòni's carol service. It was not at all like the usual depictions of Christ's nativity in a manger, nor was it like any biblical play I could remember from my youth. Instead, the dramatic piece was a satire recounting the story of an imaginary town called Ìlù Aríjẹ. It was a morality play intended to depict the downfall of traditional Yorùbá òrìṣa religion and the ascendancy of evangelical Christianity.⁴⁷

As mentioned earlier, satire is meant to among other things, encourage reform. I trust that “*Tani?*” will be received in the same spirit that performances like the one described were given.

I have made much about the incremental improvements I found throughout the MA program. Using a story outline was a valuable tool, and I worked through point-of-view, backstory, self-editing and character development issues. I am aware that my habit of overwriting is still very much with me; witness the number of words I stripped out of the manuscript during my rounds of revisions.

I sense there is an additional element to good writing that I am still seeking to define and seek to replicate. I refer to the judicious combination of all the ingredients I have referred to, adding the action and non-dialogue parts and providing a context that allows the reader to suspend disbelief and connect with the characters.

Considering my experience with “*The Pantheon*,” I expect that I will have to work through this process a few more times to improve my comfort levels with the process.

⁴⁷ Olupona, J. K., *City of 201 Gods*. (p. 253) University of California Press, 2011

In November 2021, one of my short stories was published in an anthology called “Under the Thumb — Stories of Police Oppression.”⁴⁸ This news was expectedly, very welcome, and I have since found an editor to work with me on a selection of my short stories to prepare them for publishing as a collection. My “day job” permitting, I look forward to tackling this as soon as my submissions for the MA Program are completed.

I will leave the final, encouraging words to Dike Chukwumerije, a Nigerian poet, speaking of the creative possibilities that he (and I) believe pour forth from the entity called Nigeria:

“...We have always been a meeting place, and a meeting place is a crossroad in traditional African spirituality. A meeting place is a crossroad, a magical place. That’s where you go to pray your most effective prayers, because our ancestors believe that a unique and powerful spirit hovered over that junction, where different human paths intersect. And what is that spirit? It is the spirit of the Melting Pot. It is the spirit of coming together. It is the spirit of unity in diversity. Even then, our people knew that wherever you find a place where people of diverse tribes and tongues and colours and backgrounds can rise above their differences and come together, there you will find some of the most remarkable expressions of creativity possible to the human spirit. That is the spirit that animates this place⁴⁹ ...”

⁴⁸ S.A. Cosby (editor.) *Under the thumb — Stories of Police Oppression*. Rock and a Hard Place Press, November 2021

⁴⁹ Chwukumerije, D. *Spoken word presentation, given at the opening ceremony of the ICAO Negotiation Meeting, Abuja. Dec 2022.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWhJ1NYFgk>. Accessed Mar 10th 2023

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