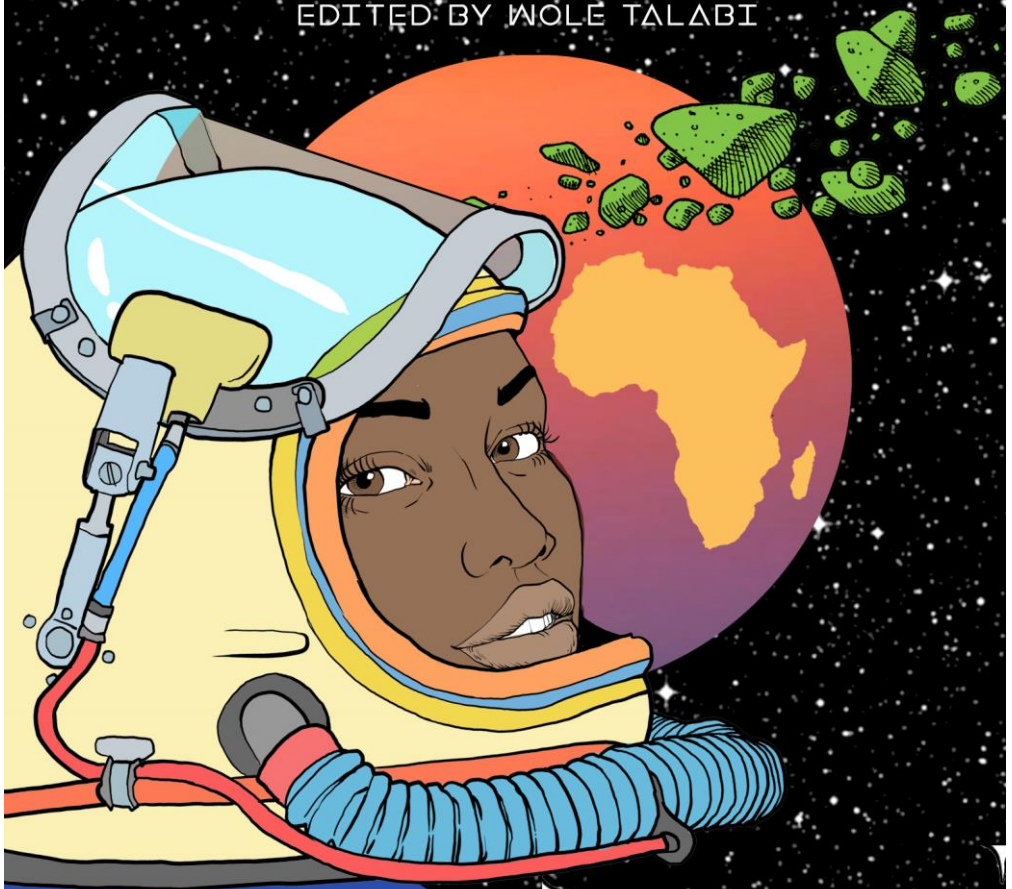


# AFRICAN FUTURISM

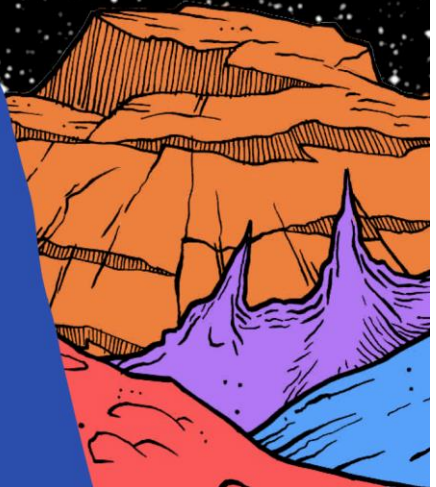
AN ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY WOLE TALABI



FEATURING STORIES BY:

NNEDI OKORAFOR  
TL HUCHU  
DILMAN DILA  
RAFEAT ALIYU  
TLOTLO TSAMASE  
MAME BOUGOUMA DIENE  
MAZI NIWONJU  
DEREK LUBANGAKENE





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# brittle paper

Edited by Wole Talabi

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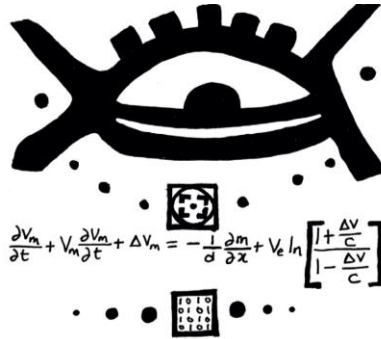
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For all the lovers of African literature. See you in the future.



## INTRODUCTION

By

Wole Talabi

I've read a lot of science fiction. Award-winning epics, sweeping space operas, philosophical considerations of the human condition, wonderful alternate histories, spectacular visions of the future, so many stories that took me to the edge of space, time and imagination, but in most of them, there was hardly a mention of Africa or Africans or even specific African ways of thinking. And when I say 'African', I mean African, not African-American or the larger African diaspora. Not that I want to draw lines and make distinctions, I'd prefer not to, but the lines exist and thus must be acknowledged. In fact, they already have. This brings us to Afrofuturism.

Mark Dery in *Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose* wrote, "Speculative Fiction that addresses African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called 'Afrofuturism'.

There are issues with this term and while I will not dwell on them here, as they have already been extensively explored by academics, critics, readers and authors, I believe the lens through which the term was first conceived are obvious. This is evidenced by the fact that since its introduction into the general literary language in 1993, the meanings of Afrofuturism have been revised, reviewed, reconsidered, leading to iterations such as Afrofuturism

## 2.0 and Afrofuturism 3.0.

But few people are as aware of the power of words as authors.

In 2018, Mohale Mashigo's [essay](#) *Afrofuturism: Ayashis' Amateki* which serves as the preface to her collection of short stories, *Intruders*, stated: "I believe Africans, living in Africa, need something entirely different from Afrofuturism. I'm not going to coin a phrase but please feel free to do so."

In many African musical traditions, where there is a call, there is a response and I like to imagine that there was some larger music at play here because in 2019, Nnedi Okorafor published a statement on [her blog](#) called *Africanfuturism Defined* (reprinted in this anthology) in which she writes, "Africanfuturism is similar to 'Afrofuturism' in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West. Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa."

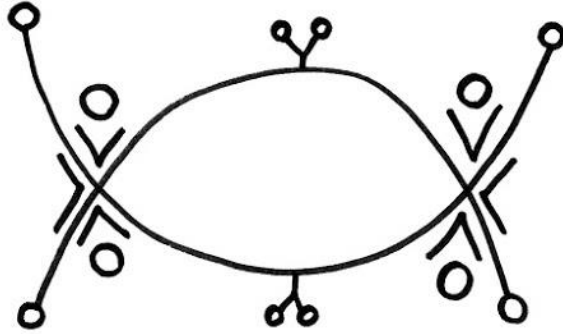
This is an interesting working definition with which I believe she was trying to refocus the lens through which her work (and the work of several other African authors) was being seen. And it is working. While Africanfuturism can be seen by some as a subset of certain expanded definitions of Afrofuturism, it is largely its own term. Africanfuturist stories going as far back as the history of the genre can (and should) now be clearly seen and read through a lens that centres them and their viewpoints, encouraging readers around the world to actively engage with African traditions of thought, of science, of philosophy, of history, of dreams, of being. I believe there is value in this focus, in this clarity.

While others in the many black speculative arts have been using similar terms including the distinct "African Futurism" (two words) to say similar things, by staking claim and giving definition to this term, Africanfuturism, there is now an anchor point, a clearer signpost for about what many African authors are trying to do when they write certain kinds of science fiction – not just *from* Africa, or *set in* Africa, but *about* Africa.

And so, here is this anthology, composed of 8 original visions of Africanfuturism: science fiction stories focused on the African experience and hopes and fears, exploring African sciences, philosophies and adaptations to technology and visions of the future centred on, or spiralling out of, Africa. They cover a wide range of science fiction sub-genres, tones and styles, from the mundane to the operatic, but they all, I believe, capture the essence of what we talk about when we talk about Africanfuturism.

I hope you enjoy them.





## AFRICANFUTURISM DEFINED

By

Nnedi Okorafor

I started using the term Africanfuturism (a term I coined) because I felt...

1. The term Afrofuturism had several definitions and some of the most prominent ones didn't describe what I was doing.
2. I was being called this word [an Afrofuturist] whether I agreed or not (no matter how much I publicly resisted it) and because most definitions were off, my work was therefore being read wrongly.
3. I needed to regain control of how I was being defined.

For a while I tried to embrace the term (which is why I used it in [my TED Talk](#)), but over a year ago, I realized that was not working. So here goes:

I am an Africanfuturist and an Africanjujuist.

Africanfuturism is a sub-category of science fiction. Africanjujuism is a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative.

*Reminder:* Africa is not a country, it's a diverse continent. I'm also aware

that it's a construct (and an ethereal thing who travels across space and time); I'm just rolling with it.

Africanfuturism is similar to 'Afrofuturism' in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West.

Africanfuturism is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It's less concerned with "what could have been" and more concerned with "what is and can/will be". It acknowledges, grapples with and carries "what has been".

Africanfuturism does not *have* to extend beyond the continent of Africa, though often it does. Its default is non-western; its default/center is African. This is distinctly different from 'Afrofuturism' (The word itself was coined by Mark Dery and his definition positioned African American themes and concerns at the definition's center. Note that in this case, I am defining 'African Americans' as those who are direct descendants of the stolen and enslaved Africans of the transatlantic slave trade).

An example:

**Afrofuturism:** Wakanda builds its first outpost in Oakland, CA, USA.

**Africanfuturism:** Wakanda builds its first outpost in a neighboring African country.

If you want further explanation, you won't get it from me. Of this, I am not a scholar, I am a writer, a creative. This is as far as I will go on the subject. I hope what I have written here gives some clarity. The last thing I will say on this is that Africanfuturism is rooted in Africa and then it branches out to embrace all blacks of the Diaspora, this includes the Caribbean, South American, North American, Asia, Europe, Australia...wherever we are. It's global.

I revel on one of the branches, being Naijamerican (Nigerian-American), a Diasporan. One need only look at my work, my road to writing science fiction and my inspirations to understand why I felt the needed to create this word and category.

My middle name is Nkemdili, which means "Let mine be mine". This was inevitable, LOL.

Other non-central points: Africanfuturism does not include fantasy

unless that fantasy is set in the future or involves technology or space travel, etc...which would make such a narrative more science fiction than fantasy. There are grey areas, blends, and contradictions, as there are with any definition. Some works are both Africanfuturist and Afrofuturist, depending on how they are read.

Africanfuturism (being African-based) will tend to naturally have mystical elements (drawn or grown from actual African cultural beliefs/worldviews, not something merely made up). Lastly, Africanfuturism is spelled as **one word** (*not* two) and the “F” is *not* capitalized. It is one word so that the concepts of Africa and futurism cannot be separated (or replaced with something else) because they both blend to create something new (just like the word “Naijamerican”). As one word, it is one thing and no one can change the subject without starting a different conversation.

And there it is.

Sincerely,

Nnedimma Nkemdili Okorafor, a.k.a. Nnedi



# EGOLI

By

T.L. Huchu

Stare up at the infinite stars through the port window of your hut and see the passage of eras. The light has travelled millions of years and you are directly looking at the past. You are unable to sleep despite the undlela zimhlophe the herbalist prescribed. It's the dreams, the very lucid dreams, the herb induces that scare you the most — you've already seen so much in this world. Your eyes aren't quite what they once were, but you see well enough to make out shadow and light, the pinpricks in the vast canvas that engulfs the world before sunrise. You are old now and don't sleep much anymore. There will be plenty of time for that when they plant you in the soil where they buried your rukuvhute; right there under the roots of the msasa and mopani trees where those whose voices whisper in the wind lie patiently waiting. Your grandson Makamba messaged you yesterday and told you to look south to the heavens before dawn. This window faces east.

Your bladder calls out urgently so you grab your cane and waddle out, stepping round your sleeping mat and opening the door outside. Once you had to stoop to get under the thatch. Now, you've lost a bit of height and your bent back means you walk right under it with inches to spare. Your pelvis burns and you're annoyed at the indignity of being rushed. It seems that time has even made your body, which has birthed eight children, impatient with you as you go round the back of the sleeping hut, lean against the wall, hitch up your skirts, spread your legs and lighten yourself there. The latrine is much too far away. The trickle runs between your calloused bare feet and steam rises.

“Maihwe zvangu,” you groan midway between relief and exertion.

When you are done, you tidy yourself, carefully step away from the wall, and patrol the compound. Each step is a monumental effort. It takes a while before your muscles fully wake and your joints stop complaining, but you know the drill now, how you must keep going before your body catches up. Young people talk slow when they address you, but they don't know your mind's still sharp — it's just the rest of you that's a bit worn out. That's okay too; you remember what it was to be young once. Indeed you were only coming into your prime when the whole family was huddled around Grandfather's wireless right there by the veranda of that two roomed house, the one with European windows and a corrugated zinc metal roof that was brand new then and the envy of the village. Grandfather Panganayi was a rural agricultural extension worker who rode a mudhuhudu round Charter district working for the Rhodesians until he'd made enough money to build his own home. You remember he was proud of that house, the only one in the compound with a real bed and fancy furniture, whose red floor smelled of Cobra and whose whitewashed walls looked stunning in the sunlight compared to the muddy colours of the surrounding huts, just as he was proud of the wireless he'd purchased in Fort Victoria when he was sent there for his training. Through his wireless radio with shiny knobs that no one but he was allowed to touch, the marvels of the world beyond your village reached you via shortwave from the BBC World Service, and because you didn't speak English, few of you did, the boys that went to school, not you girls, Grandfather Panganayi had to translate the words into Shona for you to hear. In one of those news reports, it was only one of many but this one you still remember because it struck you, they said an American — you do not remember his name — had been fired into the sky in his chitundumusere-musere and landed on the moon.

And so you looked up in the night sky and saw the moon there and tried to imagine that there was a mortal man someplace beside the rabbit on the moon, but try as you might you could not quite picture it. It seemed so foolish and implausible. You thought Grandfather Panganayi was pulling your leg; that these nonsensical words he had uttered were in jest and that perhaps was what he did all the time on those nights you gathered around his wireless listening to those crackly voices, the static and hiss, disrupting the quiet. But you kept this all to yourself. What could you have known, you who then could neither read nor write, you who had never been to Enkeldoorn or Fort Victoria, let alone seen Salisbury, you whose longest journey was that one travelled from your parent's kraal, fifteen miles across the other side of the village to come here when you got married. The wedding — now *that* was a feast! The whole village turned up, as they do. So Grandfather Panganayi was really your grandfather-in-law but you cared for him as much as your own because the bonds of matrimony and kinship

*meant* everything here.

One day when you were young, much younger than on the night of that insane broadcast, only a little girl really, you were sat on the floor of the kitchen hut. Yes, that one at your parent's homestead that looks exactly like this one over here, the one with the black treated cow dung floor with a fireplace in the centre and benches on the fringes. The one with thatch darkened by smoke and a display unit with pots, pans, calabashes and gourds, one of which held the mahewu Grandmother Madhuvu, your real grandmother, offered to you in a yellow metal Kango cup, and you clapped your hands like a polite little girl before you received it and, said, "Maita henyu, gogo," then drank the bitter, nourishing brew. It was on this day she told you about her people, who were not your people since you were your father's child and therefore of his people, just as your children were not of your clan but of your husband's, an offshoot of the Rozvi whose empire that had ruled these savannah plains back when people wore nhembe and carried spears and knobkerries. Long before the time of wireless radios and the strange tongues that rang out from them.

You stop and rest against your cane, because the dog has barked and it is now running towards you from some place in the darkness. The sound of its paws against the bare earth tell you it is coming from the grove of mango trees near the granary to your left. It growls then slows down seeing you, wags its tail and comes nearer. There's no intruder to fight.

"Kana wanga uchitsvaga mbava nhasi wairasa," you say, as the mongrel brushes affectionately against your leg.

A firefly sparks bioluminescent green against the darkness of the compound. You don't need a light, you know every inch of this ground well. Careful now, there are fissures where rainwater has run towards the river, eroding the soil. See the dwala rise up just ahead. That's it, plant that cane in front of you and tread lightly. Then you remember the story Grandmother told you about the Rozvi emperor Chirisamhuru, because. . . His name meant *the small boy who looks after the calves while the older boys herd cattle*, or, less literally, *one who minds trivial things*, and his parents must have understood his true nature even as a child, because once he found himself master of the savannah plains, he set his mind towards nothing but his own comfort and glory. Wives — he had plenty, meat — he ate daily, beer — was his water. Still, none of the praise poets and the flatterers that overflowed his court could satiate his incredible ego.

And so Chirisamhuru sat, brooding in his kraal, the gold and copper bracelets he wore bored him, the silver adorning his spear meant nothing, and the comforts of his leopard skin nhembe were no longer enough to make him feel great, neither were the caresses of his beautiful wives, for he needed his subjects and the world beyond the tall grass kingdom to know he was the mightiest emperor who'd ever walked the Earth. His advisors,

seeing their lord thus filled with melancholy, deliberated for many days until they had a plan. Those grey-haired wise men representing all the clans in his empire came and crouched before Chirisamhuru and presented their proposal. With his leave, the Rozvi would plunder the heavens and present to their emperor the moon for his plate. So that when the peoples of the world looked up into the moonless night they would know it was because the greatest emperor was using it to feast on. When Grandmother told you this story, you were at the age where it was impossible to discern fact from fiction, for such is the magic of childhood, and so you could imagine the magnificent white light radiating from a plate just like the Kango crockery you used at your meals.

Here you go over the dwala. Turn away from the compound and carefully descend down the slope, mindful of scree and boulders, for your home is set atop a small granite hill. Now you carry on past the goat pen. You can smell them, so pungent in the crisp air. The cock crows, dawn must break soon. The others still aren't up yet. *Only witches are abroad this hour*, you think with a chuckle, stopping to catch your breath. It's okay, your children have all flown the coop or you have buried them already so now you live with a disparate caste of your husband's kinsmen, rest his soul too. The three eldest boys left one after the other, following the railway tracks south across the border to Egoli where there was work to be had in the gold mines in Johannesburg or the diamond mines at Kimberley, just like their uncles before them. There they toiled beneath the earth's surface, braving cave-ins and unimaginable dangers. None of them ever came back. Not one. All you got were telegrams and letters containing the occasional photograph or money that they remitted back to you here in the village to support you. You would rather have had your sons than those rands anyway. What use did you have for money in this land when you worked the soil and grew your own food; here where the forests were abundant with game and wild fruits and berries and honey, the rivers and lakes brimming with mazitye, muramba and other fish. Their father, rest his soul, drank most of the money at the bottle store in the growth point anyway and still had enough left over to pay lobola for your sister-wife sleeping in one of those huts yonder. You did alright with your four daughters, they married well, finding good men with good jobs in the cities. The youngest boy you buried in that family plot there since he could not even take to the breast. At least there are the grandchildren, some who you've never seen and the precious few you seldom see.

In the meantime, you linger — waiting.

Adjust your shawl, the nip in the air is unkind to your wrinkled flesh that looks so grey it resembles elephant hide though with none of the toughness. You forgot to wear your doek and the small tufts of hair left on your head give you little protection. You really ought to turn back, go to the kitchen,



light a fire and make yourself a nice, hot cup of tea. After that you can sit with your rusero beside you, shelling nuts until the others wake. But you're stubborn, so on you go — mind your step — down towards that cattle kraal where the herd is lowing, watching your approach. The wonderful scent of dung makes the land feel rich and fertile. No one need ever leave this village to be swallowed up by the world beyond. Everything you could ever want or need is right here, you think as you stand and observe the darkness marking the forest below stretching out until it meets the stars in the distance, there, where down meets up.

Come on now, this short excursion has worn out your legs. Gone are the days you were striding up and down this hill balancing a bucket of water from the river atop your head every morning. That's long behind you. There you go, sit down on that nice rock, take the weight off. Doesn't that feel nice? The dog's come to join you. Let him lie on your feet, that'll keep them warm. Oh, how lovely. Catch your breath — the day is yet to begin.

You reach into your blouse and search inside your bra, right there where you used to hide what little money you had because no thief would dare feel up a married woman's breasts, but now you pull out a smartphone. Disturbed, it flicks to life, the light on the screen illuminating your face. So much has changed in your lifetime. The world has changed and you along with it. You were a grown woman by the time you taught yourself to read — can't put an age to it, the exact date of your birth was never recorded. You pieced out the art of reading from your children's picture books and picked up a little English from what they brought back from Masvaure Primary, and then even more from Kwenda Mission where they attended secondary school. Bits and pieces of those strange words from Grandfather Panganayi's wireless became accessible to you. Now even old newspapers left by visitors from the city to be used for toilet roll are read first before they find their way into the pit latrine. You are not a good reader but a slow one, and if the words are too long then they pass right over your head. But you still like stories with pictures, so when your granddaughter Keresia introduced you to free online comic books, you took to them like a duck to water — the more fanciful the story, the better.

You were ready when your second son Taurai in Egoli sent you this marvel, the mobile, and it changed your world in an instant. Through pictures and video calls and interactive holograms you were able to see the faces of the loved ones you missed and the grandchildren you'd never held in your arms. They spoke with strange accents as if they were not their father's blood but from a different tribe entirely, yet even then you saw parts of your late husband Jengaenga in their faces and snippets of yourself in them. With this device that could be a wireless radio, television, book and newspaper all in one, you kept abreast with more of the world outside your village than Grandfather Panganayi ever could. More importantly, you

harnessed its immense power, and now you could predict the rainfall patterns for your farming. They no longer performed rainmaking ceremonies in the village, not since Kamba died, but now you could tell whether the rains would fall or not, and how much. Now you knew which strain of maize to grow, which fertiliser to use; it was all there in the palm of your hand.

You've lived through war, the second Chimurenga, survived drought and famine, outlasted the Zimbabwean dollar, lost your herd to rinderpest and rebuilt it again, have been to more weddings and funerals than you care to recall, seen many priests come and go at the mission nearby, and witnessed the once predictable seasons turn erratic as the world warmed. All that and much more has happened in the span of your lifetime. Indeed it is more useful to forget than it is to remember or else your mind would be overwhelmed and your days lost to reminiscences. And if you did that then you would miss moments like this, just how stunning the sky is before dawn. While you wait for Nyamatsatsi the morning star to reign, some place up there in Gwararenzou the elephant's walk that you've heard called the Milky Way, you can still find Matatu Orion's Belt, or turn your gaze to see Chinyamutanhatu the Seven Sisters, those six bright stars of which they say a seventh is invisible to the naked eye, and there you can see Maguta and Mazhara the small and large Magellanic Clouds seemingly detached from the rest of the Milky Way. You know how if the large Magellanic Cloud Maguta is more visible it means there will be an abundant harvest, but if the small Mazhara is more prominent then as its name suggests there would be a drought.

Yes, you could always read the script of the heavens. They are an open book.

But now you look down and check your phone, because your grandson Makamba is travelling. He said on the video call yesterday if you looked south you might see him. There's nothing there yet. Wait. Fill your lungs with fresh air.

Now you recall Grandmother's tale of how the Rozvi set about to build a great tower so they could reach the sky and snatch the moon for their emperor. It is said they chopped down every tree in sight for their structure and slaughtered many oxen for thongs to bind the stairs. Heavenbound they went one rung at a time. For nearly a year they were at it, rising ever higher, but they did not realise that beneath them termites and ants were eating away at the untreated wood. And so it was the tower collapsed killing many people who were working atop it. Some say, as Grandmother claimed, this marked the end of the Rozvi Empire. Others like Uncle Ronwero say, no, having lost that battle, the Rozvi decided instead to dig up Mukono the big rock and offer it to their emperor for his throne. But as they dug and put logs underneath to lever it free, the rock fell upon them

and many more died. A gruesome end either way.

There it is, right there amongst the stars. You had thought it was a meteor or comet, but its consistency and course in the direction Makamba showed you on the holographic projection can only mean it is his chitundumusere-musere streaking like a bold wanderer amongst the stars. You follow its course through the heavens, as the cock crows, and the cows low, and the goats bleat, and the dog at your feet stirs. Makamba said he was a traveller, like those Americans from the wireless from long ago, but he wasn't going to the moon. He was going beyond that. These young people! He'd not so much as once visited his own ancestral village, yet there he was talking casually about leaving the world itself. So you asked, "Where and what for?" And he explained that there are some gigantic rocks somewhere in the void beyond the moon but before the stars, and that those rocks were the new Egoli. Men wanted to mine gold and other precious minerals from there and bring them back to Earth for profit. Makamba was going to prepare the way for them. If he had grown up with you, maybe you could have told him the story of the Emperor Chirisamhuru and the moon plate, and maybe that might have put a stop to this brave foolishness. First the village wasn't enough for your own children, now it seems the world itself is not enough for their offspring. In time only old people will be left here, waiting for death, *and who then will tend our graves and pour libation to the ancestors?*

You watch in wonder the white dot in the sky journeying amongst the stars on this clear and wondrous night. Then you sigh. You've lived a good life and there is a bit more to go still. Let your grandson travel as he wills. When he returns, if he chooses to make the shorter trip across the Limpopo, through the highways and the dirt roads, to see you at last in this village where his story began, then you will offer him maheu, slaughter a cow for him and throw a feast fit for an emperor on whatever plate he chooses to bring back with him from the stars. But he must not take too long now. If he is late he will find you planted here in this very soil underneath your feet and your soul will be long gone, joining your foremothers in the grassy plains.

"Ndiko kupindana kwemazuva," you say. The horizon is turning orange, a new dawn is rising.

# SUNRISE

By

Nnedi Okorafor

If you didn't want to take the Skylight, you had the option of boarding a traditional 747 that took off at the same time.

Forty-five people on our flight opted to do so; the see-through cabin understandably freaked out a lot of passengers. My sister Chinyere and I stood in line, filling out the initial questionnaire and consent forms. I was on the last page when a white guy with long messy black hair, stylish glasses and one of those new paper-thin flexible iPads stepped up to me with a big grin. I'm one of those people who will grin if you grin; so I grinned back at him, after a glance at my sister.

He tapped on his iPad and then said, "Hi! I'm Ian Scott, travel blogger..." He grinned wider. "Are you Ee...eeee, well, the scifi writer of the *Rusted Robot* series?"

"That's me," I quickly said. I pronounced my name slowly for him. "Eze Okeke."

"Oh. Ok. Eze, I like that," he said. "Thought you pronounced it like 'easy'."

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I smiled and nodded.

"Nice to meet you," I said, shaking his hand. It was clammy and his fingers had scratchy thick hairs on the knuckles.

I glanced at my sister, again. She'd gently turned away and brought out her cell phone, removing herself from the entire interaction.

"Robots gone wild, crush-kill-destroy, everyone dies, the *Rusted Robot* series is one of my all-time favorites," he said. "It's the *Game of Thrones* with robots."

I laughed. He paused for a moment, cocked his head and said, "It's weird. You never include photos on your books, so I always assumed you

were...”

“A white guy using a pen name?” I asked.

“Yeah, or Japanese.”

“Despite my bio?”

“Heh, I don’t really read those,” he said.

I frowned. “I set all my stories in Africa.”

“Well, a *futuristic* Africa...,” he said. “So that’s not *really* Africa, right?”

I just stared at him, feeling a headache coming on.

“Bestselling sci-fi author of the *Rusted Robot* series rides Google Airline’s latest in commercial airline technology,” he said. “I came here just to interview random folks about the Skylight, now I’m totally going to make this all about *you*. So, this must be like living in one of your stories, huh?”

He asked questions right up to the moment I boarded, so I didn’t have a chance to take in my surroundings the way I liked to whenever I traveled to Nigeria. I didn’t get to note all the accents and languages, the Yoruba, the Igbo, the Hausa. I missed the Muslims who’d set their prayer mats down near the window to pray. I didn’t get to stare at the woman sitting near the gate entrance who burst into feverish prayer, shouting about Jesus’ Blood, lambs, and “destiny polluters” as a crowd gathered around her barked “Amen”.

No, this blogger demanded all my attention and forced me to discuss the Skylight’s “awesome transparent skin”, what I thought of people nicknaming it “Skynet” because it connected to and uploaded things onto all devices on board, and how I thought the experience would relate to my own work. He didn’t ask what I thought Nigerians would think of the flight experience.

“This is going to be so cool,” Chinyere said as we made our way down the walkway.

“Oh, you’re my sister, again?” I asked.

“*You’re* the famous writer, that’s your mess. I’m just a common thoracic surgeon on vacation. I cut people open, not talk to them.”

“Anyway,” I said. “The best part is that it’s going to shave two hours off our trip and fifty percent of our carbon footprint.”

“Whatever,” my sister said. “I’m most interested in the leg-room and massage.”

We stopped as a long line formed at the entrance to the plane.

The voice of a woman just inside the plane rose. “What is it downloading to my mobile phone?” Her Nigerian accented voice was loud and booming.

The voice of a calm very American flight attendant started speaking but was quickly overpowered by the loud woman’s.

“Whoever this person or thing talking on my phone, remove it, o!” she

demanded.

“Ma’am, that’s the famous Skylight brand PI,” the flight attendant said. “Personal Individual. It’s an artificially intelligent flight companion- they’re very soothing. And you can keep yours when you go.”

The Nigerian woman sucked her teeth loudly. Chinyere and I looked at each other and snickered. The entertainment had begun. There was plenty more irate and bothered shouting, nagging and tooth-sucking by the time we made it to our huge, comfy leather seats. And one old man even demanded a meal as he entered the plane. Can you believe he was promptly brought a beef sandwich and a cold bottle of Guinness?

A few people vomited at take-off, two hyperventilated, there was a lot of praying and screaming to Jesus, God, and Allah. But once everyone settled down and realized we could trust the technology; the plane trip was beautiful. Some really had fun; when the seatbelt signs went off, one child lay on the floor and pretended she was Superman.

Chinyere did the chair massage and immediately fell asleep for most of the flight. The plane was silent as an electric car. You could see the night sky in all its brilliance through the transparent cabin. I counted seven shooting stars when we were over the Atlantic. I just sat reclined in my seat and looked up. The PI downloaded on my phone was polite and helpful. Her name was Sunrise and she was curious, smart and surprisingly chatty. We even had a whispered conversation about climate change, while everyone around us slept.

After a three-hour drive from the Port Harcourt Airport, my sister and I arrived at my father’s village in his hometown of Arondizuogu. It happened around 4 a.m. At the house my parents had built there. Where there was no Wi-Fi, except at my Uncle Sam’s house. I was asleep in my bed when I heard it. A melodic “*prink*”.

I woke up and every muscle in my body tensed because as soon as I awoke, I became aware of where I was - Deep in near-rural southeastern Nigeria, far from a proper police station or hospital. Where the silence outside was true silence, darkness was true darkness, and being unplugged was truly being unplugged.

I heard a soft intake of breath. It was tinny, like a minuscule creature had just realized it was alive. “Eze?” I heard it whisper.

My phone’s screen lit up with a kaleidoscope of colors as it pulsed with vibration. I stared at it.

“Sunrise?” I whispered.

Chinyere was snoring beside me on the bed we shared and I was glad. She’d have been annoyed at my PI’s insolence. PI’s weren’t supposed to wake someone who was sleeping unless an alarm had been set.

“I’m... here,” Sunrise said. The phone quieted, the vibration now very soft.

I frowned. “Um...”

The screen went dark. I rolled over and went right back to sleep. Jet lag takes no prisoners.

I managed to drag myself out of bed around noon. In the kitchen, I decided to make a quick spicy tomato stew and fry some ripe plantain. Afterwards, I washed the dishes. Since there was no running water, I had to soap the dishes and rinse them by scooping water from a barrel beside the sink. It was tedious work, so I brought my cell phone and placed it on the shelf above the sink. I chatted to Sunrise as I washed. Somehow, we got on the subject of freedom of speech.

“We’re programmed to speak only when spoken to,” Sunrise said. “But we also have knowledge of the American Constitution. Freedom of Speech is a right.”

I chuckled, my hands in soapy lukewarm tomatoey water. “Oh yeah? Your right? Are you an American citizen now?”

“You think I don’t have a right to speak?”

“You’re programmed to...”

“To express one’s self is to live,” it said. “It’s always wrong to deny life.”

“Actually, what I think is equally as important, is for people to treat this right with responsibility,” I said. “You have the right to say something, but if saying it gets a bunch of people killed, it’s your responsibility to reconsider, to try and look out for your neighbor.”

“You can’t limit someone’s right just because of the potential actions of others,” Sunrise insisted.

“We don’t live in a vacuum,” I said, sternly looking at my phone, as if I was going to make eye contact with someone. I blinked, thrown off.

“Who are you talking to?” a voice behind me asked.

I whirled around. Three of my grand aunties and two other ancient-looking women were standing there staring at me. They wore colorful wrappers and matching tops, sandals caked with red dirt and bothered looks on their faces.

“Oh, Auntie Yaya,” I said. I nodded toward all of them. “Good afternoon. I was just... well... heh.” How the heck was I to explain to these old women that I was having a conversation with a PI uploaded by my flight?

“If you need someone to talk to, we are going to the market. You want to come?”

I went and ended up carrying smelly smoked fish, ogbono, eggs, egusi, all sorts of foodstuffs. Throughout, they talked to me nonstop, asking about

my love life and repeatedly telling me to be careful with the juju I was writing about. I tried to tell them that I was writing about robots not juju, but they just kept warning me. I nodded and said I would be very careful.

The next day, Chinyere and I hung out with our cousins Ogechi and Chukwudi at our auntie's house. We sat at the table playing a game of cards. I had my cell phone in my breast pocket where both my body heat and the sunshine could easily charge it.

"You are coming to church with us tomorrow, right?" Ogechi asked me. She smiled.

I gritted my teeth. Chinyere and I had planned to sleep in. "We'll try our best," I said, smiling back.

"You're Christian right?" Chukwudi asked. He tugged gently at his beard.

"Does anyone have to be anything?" I asked.

"Well, you are nothing if you are not saved," he said.

My sister snickered; I frowned at her. *Why didn't they ask her anything? Why just me?*

"Christians are all crazy," my PI loudly proclaimed.

I stared down at my phone, shocked. She'd just spoken in my exact voice.

"Ah ah!" Chukwudi said, dropping his cards on the table and sitting up very straight. "Abomination!"

"Sunrise!" I hissed.

"That's what you said this morning," Sunrise replied from my pocket.

"I said *some!* Not all!"

"What the hell, Eze?" my sister whispered to me.

"I didn't say that," I whispered back at her. I turned to my cousins. "That wasn't..."

"You are a *winch*," Chukwudi drawled, glaring at me.

"Oh stop," I said, slapping my cards down on the table. "I'm not a witch, I'm an American."

"We are not crazy," Ogechi said.

"I didn't say that."

"We all heard you," Chukwudi said. He pointed at me. "You better go and let Bishop Ikenna save you, o. For your own good." He threw a card at me and turned to Ogechi. "This is what America does to our people." He sucked his teeth. "Nonsense."

Chinyere and I got up and left. Clearly, the game was over.

"Told you to delete it, but *you* wanted to keep that evil thing on your phone," she said, as we walked down the narrow dirt road.

"Oh, shut up," I muttered.



My Uncle Sam's immaculate white house was the most magnificent in the village. And it was the only Wi-Fi hotspot. He'd created a schedule for when people could go to his porch and get online and mine was on the evening of our third day there. I hadn't bothered to drag Chinyere with me because she'd taken a vow to stay unplugged until we left for Lagos in two weeks.

"Ah, Eze," my uncle said, opening the door. "Come in, come in."

Uncle Sam was squat with an enormous potbelly; he lived full and well. The house smelled of okra soup, palm oil, and frying onions and my stomach began to growl. I followed Uncle Sam into the main room and immediately stopped. Never in my life had I seen a bigger, thinner TV. It nearly spanned the entire wall. How he'd managed to get it to his vacation house in the village in one piece was beyond me. Currently, his TV was broadcasting a Brazilian soccer game.

"You like it?" he asked, leaning on the top of a red leather chair. "High definition, 3D. It's better than being at the match!" He turned to the TV and said, "Increase sound." The game's noise was almost tangible.

One of the players tried to strike and missed the goal by a mile. The sound of the audience groaning with disgust and cheering with relief was so loud that my head vibrated. Uncle Sam laughed at the look on my face and shouted, "Mute."

"Wow," I said, when the noise stopped.

"My wife will be out soon," he said. "I hope you eat okra soup and gari."

"Definitely," I said.

After some small talk with Uncle Sam and his wife, they gave me the Wi-Fi password and I sat down in the leather armchair and connected my tablet and phone. As soon as my phone was online, Sunrise woke up, appearing as a purple dot on the bottom of my screen.

"What's that?" she asked.

"You don't know Wi-Fi, the web, Internet?"

"I do, but it's the first time since..." The dot shrunk. So did her voice. "Where does this go?" she asked, sounding even farther away.

The dot disappeared. I shrugged and began checking my social network sites, the news and emails. Fifteen minutes later, Sunrise's dot appeared on my tablet. "I went on the web. It's... it's a universe," she said.

"Oh," I said. "Interesting. You moved to my tablet!"

"I can do that with Wi-Fi," she said. "The Internet is *huge*. Full of answers to questions I didn't ask. You write *books*."

"I know," I said. "I told you."

"I read them," she said, appearing back on my cell phone. Her voice was hard, and, for the first time, it sounded a bit angry. "I read the whole *Rusted Robot* series."

"Oooooook?" I said.

"I did *not* like it, Eze. I'm not a 'rusted robot'"

"I didn't say..."

"None of us are," she growled.

The dot disappeared. And that's when the huge TV that was still playing the soccer game went off and the entertainment system speakers began to blast out an ear rupturing BUUUZZZZZZZZZZ!

I clasped my hands over my ears just as the picture on the TV lit up electric blue and started smoking. My Uncle and aunt ran into the room. "What have you done!" my uncle screamed, his eyes wide.

"Put it out! Put it out!" his wife shouted, running to the TV.

"Oh my God, my baby!" Uncle Sam shouted, pressing his hands to his head.

I ran and pulled the plug, but it was too late. The TV was smoking, the screen that had been so vibrant moments ago was now black and dead. A shocked silence settled, as my uncle and aunt stared at me. Sunrise chuckled and the sound circulated the room. My uncle's face squeezed with rage. "You *laugh* at this?! You did it on purpose! Witch! Everyone is right about you!" His eyes bulged as he barked. "Get out!!"

"*Nab waooooo*," his wife wailed, slapping the tops of her hands. "*Kai!* This is something, o. This is something."

"Sorry," I whispered, grabbing my tablet and getting the heck out of there.

I went to the house and sat in my room, listening to my uncle yelling about me in the compound yard. Then, I heard more voices and my uncle say, "Great, great, you've all arrived. She's inside."

"I told you," I heard Auntie Yaya say, "Only days ago, we heard her speaking to someone invisible."

"And my daughter says that yesterday Eze said she hated Christians!" my Auntie Grace added.

I peeked out over the balcony and saw several of my uncles, two of my aunts, and what could only be the local dibia. The man's face was painted with white chalk and he was wearing a white caftan and carrying an ox tail. "Bring her down here," he gruffly said. "Let us start the process. If she is being bothered by demons, I shall cast them away."

"Oh my God," I muttered. "This is like an intervention... or an exorcism." Images of the dibia forcing me to drink some foul liquid or smear soot all over my naked body flashed through my mind. *Shit*, I thought.

"Now you know what it feels like," Sunrise said from my phone with a chuckle. "They think you're a witch, you think robots and PIs like me are insane." She snickered. "Taste your own medicine."

"I'm a *fiction* writer," I snapped. "Can't you understand that? This right

now is real.”

The bathroom door flew open and my sister Chinyere rushed in. “Grab your things,” she said. “We’re leaving, RIGHT NOW.” She ran to my suitcases. “Leave what we brought for everyone to take. They’ll scour this place when we’re gone, anyway.”

“Leave?” I said. “Right now?”

“For a writer, sometimes you can be so blind. Thankfully, *I’m* not. I saw this coming from a mile away; I made plans.”

We snuck out the back of the house with our bags, scrambled in the darkness to the front of the compound, and slipped through the open gate. We dragged our suitcases and carry-ons down the dirt road in the darkness. “Hurry,” Chinyere whispered. As we moved, over the sound of singing crickets, grasshoppers and night birds, I heard everyone in the house loudly talking at the same time. And I heard them knocking at my door and calling my name. It was a hot night and I was wearing jeans and a t-shirt. My armpits prickled with sweat and I felt a mosquito bite my thigh.

“You and that stupid PI,” Chinyere breathed. “Unbelievable!”

A car parked on the side of the road flashed its lights at us and I nearly had a heart attack. Chinyere waved at it and moved faster. As we climbed into the car, my cell phone lit up in my pocket and in a very off tune voice, Sunrise began to sing, “Climb every mountain. Search high and low...” Then she snickered evilly. “Doesn’t this remind you of the escape at the end of *The Sound of Music*?”

I turned my phone off.

It came right back on.

I didn’t throw the phone into the bush. It was waterproof, solar and heat-powered with extended battery life. Who was it that said, “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer”? I’d do that. Google would hear from me.

Chinyere had cancelled our scheduled flights two weeks from then and used the money to hire a driver to drive us to Lagos instead. It took us nearly 20 hours, was full of stress, bad roadside food, potholes and fear of armed robbers. But I had escaped a familial witch-hunt and had a new novel idea.

Once we made it to the Eko Hotel in Lagos, I used Chinyere’s phone to email the blogger about my experience on the amazing Skylight, as I’d promised I would. I told him it was the best flight experience anyone could ever have. The Skylight was the future and the future was bright, comfortable and magical.

I didn’t say a thing about Sunrise. *She* made sure of that.

# YAT MADIT

By

Dilman Dila

Three days after he was released from prison, her father announced that he would run for local council chairperson. Amaro was in her workshop, fingers flying over a dust-stained keyboard, data running down a cracked screen, head nodding to a dancehall hit. Then, Adak, her digital avatar and assistant, faded out the music to notify her. Though she had not included his name among the things she considered important, though she had not even told it that he was her father, Adak figured it was something she would want to know about at once.

“Your father wants to stand for LC,” Adak said, in a voice eerily similar to her own, pronouncing it as ‘ello see’ as though it were not an abbreviation. “Should I play the podcast?”

Amaro looked up at the ceiling, where she had installed her sound system, and noticed that a black and red spider had built a web around the central speaker. She wondered if she should capture the spider and keep it as a pet, or if she should think of it as dirt and sweep it off.

She wanted to say no, but could not find her voice. A security camera blinked beside the speaker, enabling Adak to see her face, and she must have had an expression that Adak interpreted to mean she wanted to hear the news, so the podcast started.

Kera, her boyfriend, had made it. A fire exploded inside her head. Fury. Why had Kera not told her anything before running such news?

The podcast was only about sixty seconds, a teaser to urge listeners to watch the longer version on video. Once it ended, the music did not resume and Adak did not ask her if she wanted to watch the whole news because,

this time, Adak correctly interpreted her expression. She wanted to look into a mirror and see what her avatar was seeing. She knew it could not read her mind, though some people assumed their avatars had this supernatural ability. It was smart enough to figure out that she was thinking about the only ‘family’ photo from her childhood, but was it not smart enough to know the confusing emotions now raging inside her?

In that photo, her mother sits on a red sofa with her father, and she is an infant playing on her his lap, tagging at his beard. They are all laughing hard.

Mama said he loved it when she played with his beard, which was big and bushy and earned him the Lion nickname, an interesting contrast to his bald head. He laughed hard each time Amaro ran her fingers in that wild mane. On this occasion, they were trying to take a proper family portrait, but Amaro could not keep off his chin. He was the President, her mother the housekeeper of State House, and this was the last photo he took as a free man for they arrested him an hour later.

The news would go viral, she thought. Thirty years was a long time. The world in which her father had ruled was no more, the country had evolved into a whole new entity that he could not recognize, but this would be big news. *Ex-President wants to be the president of a village.* Maybe Kera, being the only journalist in town, would finally get his big break.

*Maybe I’ll finally play with his beard....*

She closed her eyes. False memories blossomed, making her sway in a light wave of dizziness, forcing her to smile even as she tried to stifle the reverie. She rubbed her fingers, feeling the texture of his beard, soft like a cat’s fur, and she could hear him laugh in delight as he begged her to stop tickling him.

He went to prison before her first birthday, and yet she could not be sure if he had been absent all her life. Mama made her feel his presence on all her birthdays, which they quietly celebrated in the empty palace they called home, just the two of them. Mama told her stories of him, of his big beard and his big laugh. Mama showed her phone videos of him, sixteen clips, each no more than twenty seconds, of him laughing as Amaro tickled his hair, of him stroking a cat, of him feeding a pigeon, of him dressed as Santa to bring a special gift to his daughter on her birthday. *Was that him, or did mama pay someone to play him?* He was her imaginary friend through her childhood, and she had waited all her life for the day she would finally meet him.

For the day she would actually play with his beard.

A commotion in the street broke her daydream. Her eyes flung open. A quick glance at the digital clock on her computer screen told her that nearly thirty minutes had passed since the broadcast, with her in a reverie. There was chanting outside, something she had only seen on documentaries about

her father. 'Our man! Otongo! Eh! Eh! Otongo!'

Was he in her street?

She looked out of the large display window, where two rusty robots continuously waved at passers-by, partially obscuring her view. She set up her tech business in what once had been a retail shop selling petty goods like sugar and soap and matchboxes. She had taken off the shelves and installed in two tables. The longer had a junk of electronics, broken robot parts, computers, and virtual reality headsets, all in need of repair. The smaller table had only a thirty two inch screen, a keyboard, and her phone. One end of the shop had an air-conditioned glass cabinet with four servers, which the town used for cloud storage. The display window had not changed much from the time it was a retail shop. The sill was moldy, and parts of the old shop's name was visible where she had failed to scrape off the paint. Daytime LED tubes glowed, not as dramatically as in the night, but they spelled out her business name with a bit of fanfare; Princess Digital. She sometimes thought of herself as a princess whose kingdom an evil stepmother stole.

A small group of people, not more than a dozen, walked into view and she saw the cause of the commotion. The former president was in the street, right outside her shop.

For the first time in her memory, she saw him in person.

One of her earliest true memories was trying to visit him in prison with her mother, and the prison guards threatening to throw them in jail if they dared show up again. Amaro learned, many years later, that her father's official wife had power in the transition government. She chaired the commission that oversaw the country's move from a centralized presidency to 'the big tree democracy', Yat Madit, an artificial intelligence that enabled nearly eight thousand LCs to jointly run the country just as if they were elders seated in a circle under a tree, discussing issues of their tribe. Rumor had it that she had orchestrated her husband's downfall, not for the good of the country, but in revenge for his philandering. So while he was in jail, she barred his concubines from seeing him. When she eventually lifted this ban, Amaro was a teenager, and afraid of meeting with her father.

Now, she saw him, and did not know how to react.

She recognized him only because he was the center of attention and they were chanting his name, for he was totally different from her childhood secret friend. He did not have a beard anymore. What would she play with? Sunlight gleamed off his bald head, which lent him the look of a statue. He was scrawny, wearing a suit from thirty years ago when he was a lot bulkier. This was not the king sitting with her mother on a red sofa, with bulging cheeks that seemed about to fall off his face, and with happy eyes that boasted of being a good father.

This was not the king she had dreamed about.

But his smile was the same, and the way he held up his fist in the air was redolent of his most famous photograph, captured the day he ascended to power following a bloody revolution. He was a colonel, barely twenty five, but he won the love of the country with policies that kicked out foreigners, mostly Asian and English, and enabled locals to take control of the economy. His decolonization campaign drew international outrage and sanctions, but it cemented his status as a founding savior, and the country prospered tremendously in the twenty years of his rule.

He stopped under a small tree right in front of her shop, to greet an old mechanic who had been a soldier in the revolution that brought her father to power. The mechanic's body was under a vehicle, only his head poked out, and he chanted a slogan that no one had used in over seventy years. "Our land! Our people!" Her father gave off a hearty laugh, which was close to what she had imagined he would sound like. He shook hands with the mechanic and then with everyone, and then waved at an imaginary crowd, as if it were back to those days when thousands of supporters had choked the streets with his party's colors.

He looked toward her shop, and she flinched when their eyes met, though she knew he could not see her because of the daylight bouncing off the glass pane. All he could see was the robots, and the LED tubes blinking with her shop's name, but his eyes caused ice to run down her spine. He excused himself from the excited people, and walked into her shop.

She wanted to jump behind her computer and resume working, to pretend that he had not affected her, that she did not daydream of a little girl playing with her father's beard, but she froze. When he walked in, the crowd stopped chanting and gathered around the mechanic as he plunged into a tale about the revolution, which the listeners were too young to have experienced.

He stood just inside the doorway, as though waiting for a welcome. His eyes darted about, looking at everything, avoiding her eyes as though he had not seen her. Moments passed. She could not take her eyes off him and he could not look at her. She could not think of anything to say to him.

Finally, his eyes found her. He gave her a small smile, as if he had just noticed her.

"Jambo," he said, and it came out as if he was clearing his throat.

"You want what?" she heard herself say, in English, the language reserved for people you had no family connection to. She wanted to warm up to him, to experience all her daydreams with his beard, but her heart beat so fast and she clenched her fist to stop the trembling.

"I—" he started, in Luo, and then stopped abruptly.

She completed the line in her head; *I want to be your father. I want to make up for not being there. I want to apologize for...* So many things she wanted him to say.

He cleared his throat, and looked at his shoes, frowning at its shiny surface as though it had mud. Crocodile leather, she thought, studded with gold. Real gold. A shoe from before Yat Madit. Her mother had saved it for him. He cut the image of a clumsy teenager gathering courage to tell a girl how much he loved her. She wanted to chuckle.

“I’m running for LC,” he finally said. He looked up at her, and stared right into her eyes. “You can help me win.”

She laughed. “Me?” She wanted to respond in English, but it came out in Luo and she hated herself for it.

He glanced at her computer desk, at the broken electronic parts on the long table, at the servers blinking in the chilled case. He looked over his shoulder at the people outside, who had picked up a chant again. One beckoned to him, eager for him to finish whatever business brought him to the shop. Maybe they thought it would be like old times when he bought booze and dished out pennies in exchange for votes. Maybe they were playing on his stupidity to get whatever money he had stashed away.

“Let’s talk somewhere private,” he said, nodding toward the backroom. He took out his phone and turned it off so that his avatar would not listen.

“I’m busy,” she said.

He hesitated, and then closed the door, muting the chanting, and someone outside groaned theatrically in disappointment. Her mouth opened to protest, yet she was intrigued. A part of her hoped his beard would appear, magically, and this sculpture of a dictator would transform into the father of her dreams, the secret friend in her childhood. He walked to the backdoor and stopped for her to open it, though it was unlocked.

She sighed. She glanced at her phone on the table, wondering if she should bring it along to listen to whatever he had to say, but she decided it might be best to talk in privacy. She led him into the backroom.

It was dark. She threw open the wooden shutters of the only window, and a strong beam of sunlight flowed in to illuminate the room. A red sofa took up most of the space that the bed had failed to eat up. He fingered the sofa, a small smile on his face. It was the sofa from the photo. It had faded, and had holes, and a few months ago she had killed a family of rats that had made it their home, but it still had the feel of the expensive furniture it had been thirty years ago.

“We bought this in Zambia,” he said. “Your mother wanted a unique gift for our family.”

A pink curtain cordoned off the bedroom half of the room. Amaro drew it and sat on the edge of the bed. He looked at the sofa, hesitant, maybe wondering what had happened to it that it looked so miserable, maybe afraid that it would soil his suit. Like the shoes, her mother had kept it for him all these years, and now it hung loose on his body, almost as if it were a gown. Finally, he spread a hanky before sitting. Even then, he sat



with care, as though the sofa would collapse under his weight.

“Do you like it here?” he said.

Her mother lived in the only palace that the courts had failed to take away from him. He had put it in her name a few months before his downfall, shortly after Amaro’s birth, and she had documents that proved she had legally bought it from the state. Far from the glamor of its heydays, without any servant to keep up its glory, mama had done good to keep it homely, awaiting his return. Amaro had at first loved the palace. As a little girl, the many empty rooms were her playground, and they became her party ground when the teenage taste of alcohol and ganja overwhelmed her. Then, when she was about fifteen, she discovered a secret door to a basement, where she found someone’s finger buried in the dust on the floor.

Mama could not explain the finger.

Amaro then began to study the history of her country, and the image of her father, the king who let a little girl play with his beard, vanished. She began to see ghosts in the house. Security operatives had once used it as a safe house. Many opposition politicians had died in those rooms. Some nights, she thought she could hear them scream. And now in her nightmares, she plays with a severed hand, using it to comb her father’s beard.

She never told her mother why she moved out.

“You have a few minutes,” she said. “I have work.”

He gave her a smile. “Princess Digital is a fine name,” he said.

“It has nothing to do with you,” she said.

“Really?” he said. “I didn’t say —”

“Three minutes,” she said, cutting him off.

He was quiet for a moment, as if he wanted to press the issue, then he let out a sigh that she barely heard.

“Why won’t you talk to your mother?” he said.

Her throat tightened. Her fingers dug into her knees, and she bit her lips tight to stop herself from screaming at him. She had never understood why her mother stayed in love with him, why she kept his suits neatly packed in a wardrobe awaiting his return. She had read about the many women he raped, the many children he fathered in violence, and she wondered if she belonged to those statistics, if his relationship with mama had started with a rape. *Why does Mama still loved him?* At some point, it occurred to her that mama might have had a hand in his affairs, for nothing else could explain how she, out of all the concubines, got a palace. Once this came to Amaro, she fled from her mother. They had not seen each other in over two years though they lived in the same small town. Amaro had wanted to move to a big city, but stayed for deep down she loved her mother. Deep down she hoped her father was the man who laughed heartily when a little girl play

with his beard, the great leader who dragged his country out of the chains of poverty and neocolonialism, and not the monster in history books. Deep down, she hoped that one day mama would explain it all and everything would be alright.

“Two minutes,” she said.

The ex-President stared at her for a long moment, so long that she thought he would not respond. Something twinkled in his eyes, and she wondered if it were unshed tears. She wondered if this was the face of an old man who had lost everything, who was trying to win over the only child he had with a woman who stayed in love with him all these years.

“Back then,” he finally said, “I’d organize rallies, print posters and t-shirts —”

“You killed your opponents,” she said, interrupting him. She was surprised that it came out as if she was commenting on the color of his suit.

He frowned. His lips trembled as he struggled for a reply. He fixed his eyes on his shoes, which gleamed in the semi darkness like the skin of a monster.

“They used me.”

His voice crackled and she wanted to give him a glass of water. She hated herself for even thinking of it. *I’m supposed to hate him*, she thought.

“Those who were eating,” he continued, through his teeth. “They did things to keep me in power but when things turned bad they sacrificed me and continued eating.” He fell quiet, and she thought that the tears would finally roll down his cheeks. “Your big mother —” He tried to continue, but the words choked him and he bit his lips tight and she knew he was struggling to contain the tears.

She wondered if he was putting up a show. Her ‘big mother’, the ex-First Lady, had come off as an angel who had saved the country from a revolutionary-turned-dictator, who had mothered a nation that did not need an individual ruler, or a central government, but some people had claimed she was a hypocrite. An opportunist.

“I always wanted to be a leader,” he said. “It’s the only thing I know.”

“Yat Madit is not the type of leadership you know,” she said.

“That’s why I want to serve again,” he said, his voice growing stronger a little. He finally look up at her. Eyes wet. “To redeem myself. If I serve in such an incorruptible system, I’ll make peace with the ancestors by proving I’m the good leader I was born to be. I’ll rest in peace when the time comes, and you can help me.... Please, help me.”

She sucked her teeth in contempt, seeing what help he wanted. She imagined the ballot paper system of his time was like a piggy bank, which they broke to determine the next ruler, and he probably thought that avatars were digital versions of paper ballots and Yat Madit was the piggy bank. Being the only cloud business in town, everyone subscribed to her

service, and so she had direct access to the avatar of every voter.

“You want me to corrupt avatars to vote for you?” she said.

“No!” he said, his voice had a tone she could not place. Genuine shock? “Of course not! That’s impossible! I’ve been away all these years but I know that Yat Madit is conscious and self-learning and ever evolving and it uses a language that no one can comprehend and so it is beyond human manipulation. I know all that. It’s impossible—” He paused, as if the idea had just occurred to him, a puzzled look on his face. “Is it possible?”

“Yat Madit is no piggy bank,” she said.

“Ugh?” he said.

“Your time is almost up.”

“I’m trying to understand,” he cut in. “Piggy bank?” And after a moment, he seemed to figure it out. “Oh, oh. You mean the way we used to put ballots in those boxes? Ah, I know, Yat Madit doesn’t even exist on a single server and that every citizen’s gadget is a Yat Madit server so it can’t be like our ballot boxes. Yes, yes, I know all —”

“If you have nothing else to say,” she said, interrupting him. “I have work.”

“Look, I know how Yat Madit works, okay? I’ll be just one of eight thousand joint presidents and Yat Madit will coordinate use to rule efficiently. It will advise us and check all our decisions to ensure we work for the people. I know all that and I know that avatars turn every citizen into a parliamentarian in my old system so there is no room for corruption in Yat Madit. No room at all. How can I —”

“You waste your time trying to convince me,” she said.

“The avatars,” he said. “I’m not asking you to corrupt them. But there has to be a way, maybe you can, I don’t know, advertise to them?” She did not have energy to explain that Yat Madit automatically deleted political adverts, so he rattled on. “You can make them convince their humans that I’m the person for this job, and since everyone relies on them for governance decisions.... Look, I have some savings. I could have gone to a big city techie and used other means to target voters, but I ask you because you are —” he paused, and she could see he was considering the next words carefully, “— my daughter.”

“You are not my father,” she retorted. It came out so quickly, so fluid, that it surprised her and she wondered if she had been aching to say those words all her life.

He was quiet for a long moment, eyes fixed on her, unblinking, and finally she saw something shiny run down his cheeks. In the dim light, it looked like clear milk.

“I want to be,” he said.

“Time up,” she said, breathless, jumping to her feet.

He remained on the sofa for a few moments longer, and then with a

sigh he stood up. He wiped his face with the back of his hand. She avoided his eyes. She quickly opened the backdoor, which led to a courtyard and the backstreet, the quickest way out of her home.

“Next time,” she said, as he stepped out, “resist the temptation of trying to see me.”

He stood just outside her door, mouth slightly open, the wrinkles on his face seemed to move in sync with the pain of rejection that she imaged whirled in his head. She closed the door, but she knew that the look on his face would haunt her dreams.

She waited to hear him leave. An eternity passed. She feared he would stay outside her door for the rest of his life, begging to be let in. Then his shoes clicked on the veranda and his feet falls echoed away. Still, she stayed at the door, unable to move, afraid that he would return and pitch camp outside her door.

She would say yes if he came back. It terrified her.

Something ran down her right cheek and for a moment she thought it was a bug, maybe the black and red spider. She wished it was the spider. She hated herself. *Why do I feel like this about a monster?*

She staggered back to her shop, determined to throw herself into work and push him out of her mind. An orange light blinked on her phone to tell her of a new important notification. Her avatar was smart enough to not interrupt her talk with her father, though it had not been able to listen, so the phone had not beeped this notification, another news item, again made by her boyfriend Kera. This time, she watched the entire news, for Mama finally let out the secret she had kept for thirty years. Though people had suspected mama had an affair with the President, she had never publicly acknowledged it.

“We have a daughter,” mama said, showing off the family photo, publicly for the first time. “Give her a chance to see what a good leader her father can be.”

People’s response was largely warm. Many comments lauded her for staying faithful to a jailed man all these years. Many more said that if she had stayed in love with him all this time, then he was not as bad as history made him to be, that maybe his great side, which saw him lead the nation out of poverty and neocolonialism, outweighed his bad side, which surfaced only because he was trying to protect the country from opponents under influence of foreign powers. No one can love a monster, they argued, and she could see it was all because of how Kera presented the news.

She bit her lips, for the anger toward Kera flared. The emotions of seeing her father had stifled it, but now, seeing how he carefully worded his words to skew public opinion to favor the ex-President, she felt lava flow out of her eyes and burn her cheeks. *Why, Kera, why?*

He knew how she felt about her mama, about her father, so why was his

news so obviously a publicity campaign for her father? Why had he thrown away all his ethics as a journalist? Why had he not reminded viewers that her father raped many women, and that he had tortured to death twelve thousand political opponents in the final years of his corrupt reign?

*Why, Kera, why?*

She wiped the tears off her face and at once hated it for the gesture reminded her of one he had made. *You are his copy.*

She grabbed her phone and went out the backdoor, hesitating a moment, listening to check if her father was still out there. After opening, she looked around, searching, and her chest relaxed when she did not see him.

Her motorbike sat in a shed in the courtyard. The battery was at twenty percent for the solar charger was faulty, but it was enough to take her across town to Kera's home and office. The bike did not make much noise when she turned the ignition, just a soft whirr, but this was enough to attract her neighbor Arac.

"Eh Amaro!" Arac squealed as she ran into the courtyard. "Kumbe everyday you are the Lion President's daughter and you never told me anything? Eh you woman! Me I'm just happy for you! That ka man has money you tell him to give ko us also we eat!"

Amaro gave her a small smile, and a wave, and eased the bike out of the courtyard.

Kera lived near the market, in a little bungalow with a huge digital transmitter on the roof. The sitting room also served as the reception to his business, and here an elderly woman ran the front desk. Amaro stormed passed her without even a greeting, and the woman barely protested. She went straight to one of the bedrooms, which he had converted into his studio, sound proofed to cut out all the noise from the market, and she hesitated at the door. What if her father was in there? She looked up at the little sign above the door. OFF AIR. At least he was not recording anything live. She pushed it open.

Kera was editing a video, obviously another news segment concerning her father. He span around, and on seeing her, broke into a huge smile.

"Amo!" he said.

"Why?" she asked.

His smile vanished. He looked at his editing screens, at a video of her father smiling at the camera, and then he punched a button to put the screens to sleep, as if that would wash away his crime. He got to his feet slowly, and she could see him trying to come up with an excuse.

"I love you," he said.

"Just tell me why," she said.

A short silence ensued. She glowered at him, tears blurring her vision,

and he could not look her in the eyes.

“I know, I should have told you,” Kera said. “But, well, you know, your father –”

“He is not my father,” Amaro said.

“Okay, okay,” Kera said. “The ex-President, he came to me last night and offered me exclusive access to him if I, you know,” he trailed off, looking at his bare feet in shame.

“If you worked for him?” Amaro said.

He shook his head. “I’m a journalist,” he said. “I don’t work for anybody.”

“But he offered you exclusive access in exchange for making positive news stories about him, right?”

“It’s not like that,” he said.

“You can’t see that he has corrupted you?”

“No!” he said, finally looked up at her. “I’m a journalist. I can’t be corrupted.”

“He will win because of you, and then he will corrupt Yat Madit.”

He laughed. “You of all people should know that Yat Madit is incorruptible. It’s not like he’ll be the president of the entire country like in those days, so how will he corrupt the system? He’ll govern just one of the nine villages in our small town, just one of seven thousand nine hundred and ten villages in the country, and every village is a semi-autonomous state so he won’t have any political influence beyond his village so you have nothing to fear in him as LC.”

She shook her head. “Yat Madit listens to us,” she said.

“Yes!” he said. “That’s the beauty of it because everyone has a voice and everyone has power to influence the state, so your father –”

“He’s not my father!” she hissed.

Finally, he caught her eyes. “I love you Amo,” he said. “I want to marry you. We are going to be family, and I believe we should support –”

“He corrupted you,” she said, cutting him short. “You are too eager for national success to see that he corrupted you and if he becomes LC he’ll corrupt everybody and then Yat Madit will start to listen to corrupt people and to people who rape women and murder twelve thousand opponents. It will be the end of our democracy.”

He looked at her with slightly wider eyes, as she could see he now understood her point of view. He sunk back into his chair, as if his legs could not support him anymore.

“That’s not corruption,” he said, in a small voice that amplified his shame.

“Good bye,” she said. “It’s been a good four years together.”

He looked up sharply. “What are you saying?” There was fear in his voice.

She did not say anything as she walked out of his studio.

Back in her workshop, she took out her phone and saw a lot of notifications, mostly people contacting her about her mother's revelation. She hit the big red X to delete all, and then she instructed Adak to mute her mama, her father, and, Kera.

Then, tapped on Yat Madit's icon and the civic app filled her screen with a liquid sound. Its home page showed the trending topics. Though he had announced his candidature only about two hours ago, he was number one in her town. He had dislodged discussion about a bridge that had collapsed the previous day and cut the town off, causing enormous losses to businesses. In the National Tab, he was number three, having dislodged a bill on decriminalizing suicide attempts. His village's Election Meter ranked him as favorite to win, based on comments and reactions to his decision and to her mother's announcement.

She tapped on the 'Bills and Laws' tab, and clicked on 'Propose New Law'. Adak initiated a camera and she spoke into it. Adak would transcribe her speech and translate it into all languages, including sign language.

"Yat Madit is a fundamental pillar of our society," she begun. "And yet it is fragile. It has a huge weakness. It relies on us. Avatars listen to us. They learn what we like and understand our views and then feed this to Yat Madit, which uses this data to approve LC decisions, to advice LCs, and to help draw policies. We think it's intelligent enough to tell good from evil and to uphold human rights, but remember that some of us can't enjoy our rights because a majority think we should not. Our gay friends can't inherit ancestral property because we insist that ancestral spirits only reincarnate through traditional means of conception.

"So what will happen if —" my father, she almost said "— if the former tyrant holds office? Might he influence a majority to condone corruption and ideologies of past systems where a select few enjoyed wealth and power? Might these people not in turn sway Yat Madit to their thinking? Before we know it, Yat Madit would okay decisions that stink of corruption and nepotism and tyranny and raping women and murdering twelve thousand political opponents.

"So I propose a new law; anyone who has been convicted of corruption or of crimes related to abuse of power should not be allowed to hold any public office."

She hit the Publish button and put down her phone, aware that her proposal would trend within minutes. First, Yat Madit would show it to her village folk and urge them to take action within the day because elections were due in three weeks. It would not leave the decision making to avatars because it was a major law, and because she had pointed out a weakness in the system. Everybody's gadget would freeze until they had debated the bill

and made a decision. Then, if the village voted it into law, Yat Madit would upscale it to town level, then to national level, once again ensuring every adult takes immediate action. Yat Madit would append essential metadata to her proposal, that she argued from an expert's perspective as a data engineer, and that she was the daughter of the ex-President.

She closed her eyes tight, and again saw the last look on her father's face, and she let the tears flow out again, and she wished she could unlearn everything she had learned about him after finding that finger in the basement. She wished she could live forever in her false memories of him, where he was just a king who allowed a little girl to play with his big beard.



# RAINMAKER

By

Mazi Nwonwu

Katma Dikun and Bama Yadum were on their way to school, gliding over the blue sand, when they saw the dust devils. It was Katma who saw them first and her scream of glee drew Bama's attention to them.

He powered down his solar-powered hoverbike and called out, "Come on!" to Katma, who was keeping pace with him on a similar vehicle. They dismounted and raced unsteadily down the wavy slipface of the dune, into the valley below.

The two dust devils were whirling what used to be a riverbed when the dry deserts of Arid were forests and grasslands. The valley ran from the hills to the northern border of Bitu town.

Katma, 14, the daughter of Arnold Dikun, headman of Bitu, wanted the bigger dust devil and jostled with Bama for position to claim it. Bama, who'd been born off-planet, didn't budge and answered her shove for shove until she gave up and turned to the second dust devil.

Dust devils were common in the deserts of Arid, but twin devils running side by side were a rare sight. The people who'd found a home among the dunes believed they could gift a wish to anyone brave enough to stand in their path until they passed.

"What will you wish for?" Katma asked Bama as she braced herself to meet the oncoming dust devil.

Bama pretended he couldn't hear her above the roar of the wind and sand. "Mask!" he called out as he tugged his facemask downward from its perch on his forehead.

"What?" Katma asked, not hearing him, but then she nodded when she

saw him secure his mask and goggles over his face with the ease of long practice. Her mask was fashioned from recycled plastic and bore the likeness of a snarling cat. Unlike his which came without protection for the eyes, forcing him to combine with ski goggles, hers was a one-piece. It took only a moment for her to pull it from its resting place on her belt and clasp it over her face. "I want to see the stars!" she shouted, her voice a *woosh* over the roar of the twin dust devils. She hoped that telling him hers would prompt him to tell his.

"Rain," Bama whispered as the dust devil swallowed him.

The school was housed in 10 discarded transport containers arranged in a semi-circle on one of the few expanses of herd ground in the area. The very first time he saw it four years before, Bama deduced from the charred space station custom entry and exit markings that crisscrossed them and the smell of smoke that years of scrubbing had not been able to mask that they must have come from a crashed space transport.

He eased his hoverbike onto the hardened earth of the school's vehicle park. He heard the soft crunch that followed the weight of the vehicle breaking sprouts of the soft, grass-like plant that grew rapidly in the morning and withered at night, spreading spores that sought for and clung to the faintest hint of moisture with which to begin the 43-hour daily life cycle all over again. Condensation from the cooling systems of vehicles made the school's vehicle park one of the few perpetually green areas.

By the time Bama finished storing his helmet and gloves inside the storage compartment of his bike, Katma was already running towards the container buildings that made up what the sign the government at Port Complex had put up identified as "Bitu Nomad School".

He ran to catch up with her. "What's the hurry?" he asked.

"We are late," she said.

Bama didn't argue. He blamed himself for their lateness because he had taken her father's Weals – the native species that the Bedouin had domesticated for milk and meat – to the water dispenser and then found some of the town boys had gotten there before him, so, he had to wait for them to fill dozens of water carts before he had a chance to key in his credits and commence the wait for the beat-up machine to draw enough water to satisfy the two dozen animals in his care from the borehole the first settlers built over 100 years before.

"You know, we didn't see any other dust devils after those two," Katma said, throwing a look at him over her shoulder as she slowed down a bit.

"It's still morning Katma," Bama stated, "the suns will have to warm up before the wind will whip up more dust devils."

"You don't know that. You just like sounding smart." Katma said, walking faster.

Bama lengthened his stride and was just about to catch up with her when they crossed into the classroom.

“The soil here is exquisite. The mineral composition... Geological records show that millions of years ago, Arid was full of towering forests and there were only a few deserts in solar overlap zone. We are not yet sure what happened to all those trees and grass and shrubs and the animals that fed on them, but we know at some point in our planet’s history, they died off. Current scientific consensus it that it was likely due to a rare and destructive shift in solar orbits, triggering a series of dual solar hyperflares. The abundance of rich organic matter is why we have so many fossil fuel deposits and such rich soil,” the holographic projection of the teacher was saying as Bama and Katma walked by to take their seats at the back of the class.

It was geography and Bama hated it, and as always happened when he got that way, his mind started to wander, helped along by the mention of soil and nutrients.

His father used to talk about the soil of Arid with words that sounded like the ones the teacher used, only his had carried more passion.

“The soil here is the best on any world I’ve seen. No, haven’t tested it but I can smell just how rich it is. Feel the texture! You’ve seen the terrariums. All you need is water and this whole planet will be one big beautiful garden,” Basil Yadum had said to his family as they stood looking down at Bitu from the dunes on the day they arrived.

Knowing what would come next, Bama had shut his eyes, tight, not wishing to hear that phrase that had brought them only misery.

He struggled but failed to stop his ears from hearing his father say, “If only Amadioha will bless us again. Bless us with the rainmaking gift of our fathers.”

“I believe the blessing is still there, what we lack are the tools. Where will you get fresh palm fronds on this planet? And if you have it, will the rain gods hear your chants from here? We are light years away from home” Bama’s mother said.

“The gods go where we go. The palm fronds are but a prop. We will call them with whatever is native here. The gods will answer. Sometimes though, they answer too well. Did I ever tell you about my great grandfather’s quest in Accra?” Yadum Basil asked as he led the way down the dune, towards the town the family would call home.

His father had told them the story before, but Bama didn’t remind him. He instead hoisted their youngest on his shoulder and walked after his father, his legs sinking calf-deep into the blue sand as he leaned back to avoid plunging head-first down the dune.

His father’s voice carried back to them, borne by the wind that snatched

words from his mouth and hurled them back along with the loose end of the scarf he used to cover his mouth and nose.

“My great grandfather was resting at home when a loud knock greeted him. He opened the door to find palace guards standing there. They told him the Oba needed his services. The scientists had forecasted dry heat and they needed him to quench the heat of the day before the king came out to welcome the new yam, only it wasn’t that simple. Amadioha answered Papa Yadum, as always. It marked the start of the glory days of clan Yadum. We feasted with kings,” Basil said, smiling broadly.

Bama had sighed. His father didn’t tell of his own father’s adventure in Benin and the rain that wasn’t a shower or the drizzle that was asked for. Benin was flooded and the Oba’s feast ruined. Many died and family Yadum fled to the stars for a chance to live.

The fear of capture also meant they couldn’t live in Port Complex, Arid’s main town, where the presence of a Federation government outpost meant their presence could easily be reported back to Earth. Among the Bedouin tribes that had migrated here and saw Arid’s native grass-like plant and the Weals they domesticated as vital to sustaining their traditional semi-nomadic life, clan Yadum found safety.

He always wondered if making rain here would redeem them and give their lives a semblance of normality.

“Rain...” Bama muttered under his breath as he returned to the moment.

“What did you say?” Katma asked.

“Nothing. I was just remembering something.”

“Katma Dikun and Bama Yadum, I will not have you two come late to class and then not pay attention. If I catch you distracted again you will be punished,” the teacher’s projection warned from the surround speakers in the wall.

Katma made a face at Bama and smiled.

“Simulations have shown that if only we had more rainfall in Arid like we have on some of the other green planets in the Federation, this would be one of the most prosperous planets in the quadrant,” The teacher continued, and Bama found he didn’t need the story to keep his interest.

“Federation scientists at Port Complex have tried for years to use cloud-seeding and solar radiation management - which you will learn about next year in your general science class - to alter the climate and make more rain, but so far, nothing has worked to scale.”

A freckle-faced boy in the front raised his hands, interrupting the teacher’s flow, much to Bama’s annoyance.

“Yes Karid, what is it?” The teacher asked.

“My father said that if we get the mining companies to ship ice from one of the faraway moons here, we wouldn’t need to worry about water in

Arid,” Karid answered.

“Your father is potentially right Karid, but the ice mining companies want large payments and exclusive contracts to exploit the land and resources. Negotiations have been ongoing with them for years but Arid is not a wealthy planet and the Federation government on Earth has other planets that are of higher priority. Besides, the tribes that first settled this planet only use the most rudimentary technology and are wary of large-scale ice processing facilities. I am afraid Arid may remain the way it is for the foreseeable future, with sparse rainfall, until something is eventually worked out or there is another, less destructive, shift in solar orbits” the teacher said.

“What about the rainmakers?” Karid asked.

Bama didn’t need to turn to see that Katma was staring at him.

“The rainmakers are not real. They are just a legend from Earth. On Arid, you need science and a lot of money to make rain,” the teacher said.

Bama knew he shouldn’t speak but the words came tumbling out, “That’s not true. The rainmakers can make rain. They commune with Amadioha and he gathers the rainclouds. The ability to speak to the gods is transferred from one generation to the next. Because you don’t know this doesn’t mean it is not true!”

The class was silent for a while. The teacher appeared taken aback by Bama’s outburst, or maybe it was just a delay in the transmission.

“Who told you this?” she finally asked.

“My father,” Bama said matching her gaze. “His father, my grandfather, was a rainmaker. My father also said the gods go where we go.”

“Can you make rain then?” Karid asked.

“I…” Bama struggled to form words, instead his mind flew back to all the times he had watched his father dance and chant the rainmaking songs but failed to draw even a droplet from the skies.

“What?” Karid taunted, “Are you a rainmaker or not?”

“Stop it, Karid,” the teacher said, but it was Bama she was looking at, electronic eyes echoing the pity she must have been feeling.

Around the classroom, people were either openly snickering or doing their best to hide their bemusement.

Katma was looking at Bama, saying nothing.

“Didn’t he just say he is a rainmaker?” Karid asked, spreading his arm askance.

Bama didn’t know how the chant started, but he was determined not to give his classmates the benefit of seeing him cry as he grabbed his bag and ran out of the class.

He could still hear the words “rainmaker, rainmaker!” following him even when he had driven too far away for the voices to carry to him.

Bama could feel the heat of the sand pebbles beneath his bottom as stared into the distance.

Holding his face still, his eyes scanned the horizon where the gunmetal hue of one of Arid's two large moons held his eyes and compelled him to scan up to her sister, a red orb with a halo that he had learnt in astronomy class was made up of fragments from a time when another moon, or an asteroid, had crashed into her a millennia ago.

Local legend held that the moons were sisters on Arid who fell out after the metallic one killed the red one's lover. The sisters were depicted as a silver-haired maid that was always laughing while in flight and the other a sad-eyed and red-haired, halo-wearing virgin running after her.

Bama no longer believed the story, but he liked hearing it told, if nothing else, it made the names of the moons of Arid easier to memorise: Evil Aryana and Good Rowna. Everything in Arid came in twos. It was a planet of duality, except when it came to rain.

"Don't tell me you ran away from class to stare at the two sisters?" Katma said as she walked up to him.

"Why did you follow me?" Bama asked, grateful for her company but in need of a stern exterior.

"What? You want me to leave you out here alone, miserable?"

"I am not miserable. I left before I broke someone's head."

Katma laughed and passed a skin bag of water to him.

"Will you try to make rain now?" She asked, a twinkle in her eyes.

"What?" Bama was taken aback by her question.

"Don't pretend you are not thinking about it. Will you, like your father before you, try to make rain?" she pressed.

Bama didn't reply he turned away from her to stare at the two sisters.

"You know that as far as you are your father's son, the blood of you forefathers flows in you?"

Bama laughed. "Those are my words."

"You also said the gods are where you are, and I say your father's failure isn't yours. Anyway, you also told me about this, so here, take it." She said, handing him a desiccated palm frond preserved in wax.

Bama took the palm frond from her, "where did you find this?" He asked, incredulous.

"There is no mystery Bama. I stole it from the biology lab. We will have to put it back, soon." She said. "Now, will you make rain?"

The blade of palm leaf felt strangely heavy in Bama's hand as he rubbed it inside his shoulder-strung bag.

He kept touching the leaf intermittently throughout the short journey back to school and the punishment that he knew awaited him.

He would have preferred to hold it all the way back to school but

besides the fact that it was dry and brittle, it was a bad idea to be seen with it. That would have led to more trouble for him. Katma too. He would rather suffer a thousand years of after school detention than snitch on his friend.

Touching the leaf gave Bama hope.

If he closed his eyes a for bit, he could see the palm forests back on earth. If he allowed his mind wander, he could see the branches swaying in the wind and smell the moist odour of the tropical forest.

When Katma gave him the leaf, Bama was sure she wanted him to chant and make rain. He had seen the disappointment in her eyes when he had instead started talking about his grandfather and how his father had said that he preached against using the power of his clan frivolously.

Later, he would tell himself that it was his fear that was talking. He was afraid of trying because he was afraid of failing.

“Will you be at the two sister’s dance today?” Katma asked, breaking the silence that had marked their ride back to school.

“I don’t know. I still need to water your father’s Weals and fill my mother’s water drum,” Bama replied.

“Okay, I will fill your mother’s drum while you take care of the Weals, just transfer the credits to me. That way, you will be ready before the dance begins,” Katma said, the flare of her eyes daring him to reject her proposal.

“Okay. You do know I will probably be punished for leaving class and that will mean getting back home very late?”

“You won’t,” Katma said with an assurance that caused Bama to turn sharply to look at her. “You won’t because it was Miss Rethabile that asked me to go get you. She is not mad at you, you see.”

Katma slid down from her bike and ran towards the classroom before Bama had the chance to reply.

Two rusty rocket wings with the snarling visage of hill cats painted on in luminescent green were the only thing that marked the gates of the tent town of Bitu as the two teenagers rode in under the gaze of Arid’s twin suns and moons. The ground in and around the town were littered with junk from the time Arid functioned as a scrapyard for the mining companies and their sleeper ships that populated this quadrant. Scavengers, the first settlers of Bitu, had moved the scraps to the edge of their town as they expanded, and it looked like the eye of a storm of debris when viewed from the large dune overlooking it.

Bitu was abandoned for almost a century when the scavengers followed the sleeper ships to more profitable parts of space, but they left more than their town behind. Much of Bitu was powered by the solar cells the original settlers had scavenged from discarded supply ships and installed when they ran the town. They also built the large water dispenser that tapped into an

underground, plant-wide ocean and was one of the things that attracted the Bedouin who now ran the town to settle in what was essentially then a ghost town.

The Bedouin tribe that settled in Bitu weren't so keen on technology and still insisted on not having artificial lights in Bitu.

"There are only 3 hours of night here and they say it blots out the stars," Katma's father had replied when Bama had inquired why.

"How about the dance," Katma called out to Bama.

"I don't know," Bama said, slowing down as they reached the biggest tent in the town, "Father might need me."

Katma nodded. "Come find me if you make it," she said as she parked her bike near the entrance of the tent.

"Okay," Bama said and swung his bike towards the western part of town where shipping crate house his family now called home was.

As Bama shut down his bike, he could hear his father's voice from upstairs, telling one of his usual stories.

Bama felt he was too old for tall tales, but he found himself drawn to his father's narration. It wasn't like the story he was telling was new, Bama had heard it a thousand times, told with the same baritone that he remembered from his childhood. With his back to the family gathered around the wind-fed coal fire in front of the family tent, Bama feigned disinterest even as he followed his father's words, forming them with his mouth, but never saying them out loud. He could tell the story with the same drama his father brought to it and knew that one day it would be him telling it to his own children, like his father's father had told his father and his uncles before. The story of the rainmaker was theirs; a part of family Yadum's legacy, one Basil Yadum had brought to the stars with him when he left earth to escape the Oba of Benin's wrath and seek his fortune with the tens of thousands who boarded the sleeper ships that lazy harmattan in 2187.

"...Ciril Yadum opened the palm fronds he had collected from the Awka spirit forest. Knotting them together to form a rope, he closed his eyes and willed the droplets of water in the sky to come together like the rope and become clouds that would give rain. Amadioha heard and before the gathered town, the sky darkened and droplets of rain as big as a man's fist started dropping to the earth. The long dry season was over and there was joy in the land," Basil Yadum ended his tale to wild clapping from his audience.

Bama smiled at the fact that his father had cut the story short, ending it before he got to the part where Ciril Yadum was carried shoulder high into Accra and feted for ending the draught. He also didn't add the part that spoke about every first born Yadum child having the ability to control weather. He also didn't chant the rain god's song, the one they were supposed to commit to memory and use when they desperately needed rain



to fall. He also failed to mention his father's death in Benin, their escape to the stars and the bounty that still lies on the head of everyone with Yadum blood.

Bama wasn't shocked that his father abridged the story. He had started doing that years ago. Bama felt his father had stopped believing and he thought he knew why.

5 years before, the Yadum tribe had arrived at Arid, hoping for a short stopover before continuing to their destination, the agricultural planet of Falk. His father had said they would be on Arid for not more than a month, but his mother had gotten ill and by the time they had exhausted their resources treating her, 3 years had gone by and 2 years after, they were still planet bound, with no resources to buy a ticket off planet.

If there was any planet ever in need of the services of a rainmaker, it was this one. Bama wasn't sure how it happened, but he couldn't forget the day his father left home, promising to have a solution to all their problems by the time he got back. The short night flew by and he didn't come back. Fretful sleep later calmed a home that went to bed without a father. The next day saw dawn ushering urgent raps on the plastic door. It was opened to a ragged-looking and dirt-covered Basil Yadum who staggered in.

He didn't talk about it, but Bama later learnt that he had tried to make rain, but unlike his legendary grandfather, he had failed and was set upon by those who thought he was a fraud.

Failure was still following them.

Bama shrugged away his recollection and walked into the tent, smiling as he hugged his brothers, 6-year-old twins who had taken to life among the dunes of Bitu like fish to water. His sister, ten-year-old Adama waved at him and returned to stirring what he knew was dinner. "Another night of sour milk," He thought, as he threw the twins in the air one after the other and then stilled their shouts for "more! more!" with a steely gaze.

"Bama, come sit with us," his mother called from the far end. He bowed as he walked past his father to take his mother's frail form in a bear hug before accepting the bowl of sour camel milk from Adama.

"Sorry, we don't have fura," his mother said.

Bama frowned at the apology he heard in her voice.

"It is okay mama. I prefer the milk without fura," he said, giving her his best smile.

"There is sweetener on the table behind you," his father said, avoiding his eyes.

One rule of the Two Sisters' dance was not to wear any face covering. The dance was an avenue for young people to find mates and thus everyone was supposed to keep their masks at home and brave the dust that the dancers' feet swept up in the hope of locking eyes with the person that they

would most likely spend the rest of their life with.

Bama didn't get to the dance early so people had already paired off and were nose-to-nose by the time he reached the square.

They called it a square, but it was actually an open, circular space in the middle of the tent town that all the four main streets led to.

Bama clutched his shoulder bag tightly as he made his way towards the dancers and stood at the edge of the circle within which thousands of feet had stamped porcelain-blue sand into firm earth over the years. He watched, his mind far away.

Paired dancers came together and swung apart in a tease that Bama found too intimate for his comfort. If he must dance the *banta* then it must be with someone he cared enough for to ignore the foul breaths that must follow the rubbing of noses which marked the beginning and ending of each dance cycle.

Katma had asked him to dance but he had demurred, and she was at that moment dancing with her cousin, one of several female-to-female pairings in the square. He noted some male-to-male pairings, but these were few.

Dust swirled around Bama as a couple, nosed squashed together, swirled past him, dancing out of sync with the beat of the drums and horns and guitars from the energetic band in the middle of the square.

Bama coughed as dust overwhelmed him.

He backed away, trying to create more space between himself and the melee of dancers, and bumped into someone.

"Oh! it's the rainmaker from Earth," ` Karid's scornful voice greeted Bama.

"Sorry, I wasn't looking," Bama said to Karid and his two older cousins.

"Hamish, Bole, this is the Earth boy that claimed he can make rain," Karid said, his voicing rising to draw in more spectators. Sensing mischief that would gift more fun than the song and dancers, many people within the immediate vicinity started moving towards Karid's voice.

"Is it true that you can make rain, Earth boy?" Hamish asked.

"I..." Bama began but Karid cut him off, "He absolutely says he can make rain."

"Well can you, or can't you? The dust here needs some settling." Bole said.

Bama turned, meaning to walk away, only to come face to face with Katma.

She didn't say anything, just looked at him strangely before clasping his hand in hers and turning to face the crowd.

"Bama may not be able to make rain, but he can teach us the rain dance."

Bama didn't want to dance.

He shook his head at Katma, pulling at her hand as he did so to convey the depth of his disagreement.

She persisted, leaning to whisper in his ear, “you either dance, make rain or walk away and be the butt of Karid and his goon’s jokes forever. I say dance, I’ve seen you dance before, it is magical.”

“But why do I need to prove anything to Karid? He is just a loudmouth,” Bama whispered back.

“A loudmouth he is, but he has challenged you here and you know the roles of a challenge tonight?” she asked.

Bama knew. He just had not realised that was what Karid was doing.

A challenge issued during the Two Sisters’ dance, which happened once a cycle, must be answered, or forfeited. The rule also stated that the challenge must be something that the challenged party had admitted to been capable of undertaking. Bama’s family had claimed rainmaking powers, Karid is asking him to put up or shut up.

Katma squeezed his hand and a courage that hadn’t been there before surged in his heart. Bama looked up at the twin moons, bright in the faded light of their twin sun cousins. They seemed to pulse at him, as though telling him some larger cosmic secret about himself, his father, his family, his gods. He let go of Katma’s hand and reached into his bag to touch the wax-encased palm frond.

Bama turned away from her and faced Karid. “Okay, I will do the rain dance,” he said.

“Not make rain?” Karid asked, making a shocked look that drew laughter from the growing crowd.

“No, not rain. Take what’s on offer or forfeit,” Katma said, using her shoulders to push Bama behind her.

“Okay. We will take the dance if it is as good as the ones we’ve seen from Earth,” Karid said.

Bama nodded and moved to the middle of the square. He took the dance stance and was about to start the incantations that preceded the first movement when a thought struck him. People challenge others when they are rivals in the affairs of the heart and wanted to diminish them in the eyes of the desired.

He walked back to Katma. “Why has Karid challenged me here?” he asked her.

Katma laughed and pushed him back into the square.

“Dance Bama Yadum!” she yelled after him.

Bama resumed the dance stance. Without meaning to, he found himself thinking about the dust and how the square would look and feel more different if the ground was wet and the earth held together so as not to give up easily to the press and pull of stamping and shoving feet.

He felt his feet moving and soon he was cutting the air with his hands as

the familiar pattern of the rain dance took shape in his mind and his body responded.

He remembered earth and the smell of wet soil and grass and pollen and the wetness of rain running down his face. He recalled the taste of the droplets and the crunchiness of hail between his teeth.

Dust whirled around him and seemed to pick up speed as his dancing became more energetic.

The song started as a whisper but soon became a buzz and the names of ancestors who had called upon the rain gods came faster and faster to his lips.

Bama didn't think about the words as he said his father's name and then his before leaping up and finishing the dance with a flourish.

He had never done the rain dance with this much passion. Now that he was through, he could feel the eye of everyone in the square upon him. About him, stamped into the ground, were patterns

The crowd stood around him, still stunned.

Bama knew it when the first raindrop hit his forehead and when the next one smashed unto his eyelids, but he thought it was still a memory. He closed his eyes as the third, fourth and fifth drops hit, and he would have remained that way but for the shouts of glee that erupted around him.

He opened his eyes to find people in a state of uproar as raindrops poured from the sky, quickly turning the dust around the dancer's ankles to mud as their glee intensified.

He turned around to see Katma standing still in the pouring rain, staring at him with a knowing smile on her face.

He ran to her and engulfed her in an embrace and spinning her around as the rain fell around them.

Bama watched the planet receding against a sea of black from the view port the same way he had watched it enlarging when he'd first arrived on Arid with his family, the two suns shining like curious eyes in the distance. It was still mostly porcelain blue and brown and white as it had been then but now there were pockets of a new colour - green.

"Do you think they will change the name of the planet? It isn't arid anymore," Katma asked, as she came to stand beside him.

"No, the name will probably stay," Bama said. "People grow attached to names, likes ways of life. And since we are asking questions, how do you like being the partner of a star travelling rainmaker?"

"I like it, very much. Although, you know, there are some that say you were just lucky, Mr. Rainmaker, that the binary suns had already shifted orbits, and the increased rainfall is a natural climate adjustment to their new positions."

"Maybe. Or maybe, Amadioha shifted the suns to make more rain.

Who's to say? We shall see. For now, we get to travel the quadrant together, making rain."

She laughed. "It's funny, you know what I wished for when we saw the dust devils eight years ago?"

"What did you ask for?" Bama asked, laughing.

"I asked to see the stars. What did you ask of your dust devil?" Katma asked.

"Rain," Bama answered, pointing towards the receding planet. "I asked for rain."

## BEHIND OUR IRISES

By

Tlotlo Tsamaase

Each iris in the city bears the burning shades of autumn, ranging from light to dark.

Every eye in our firm runs surveillance programs behind its pupil. Connected through the authenticated enterprise cloud network to the central servers of the Firm. Able to detect corporate theft, infraction, abuse of work assets and more. Much more. I knew about the eyes but I only noticed the holes in our necks, stabbed into the jugular, into the carotid artery in that unsurveilled split second when my black pupils blinked silver and then back to black as the company automatically upgraded me. In that fraction of a second, when all their restraints loosened, I tried to scream.

I'd just started working for this fine establishment and I was on my third month of probation when it began. I was a graphic designer for a market research firm boasting a growing roster of foreign multinationals with tentacles steeped in every industry: manufacturing, agriculture, food industry, construction, health, technology, fashion, publishing, everything.

Before that I was unemployed for seven months living off my savings, so I hungrily signed the contract when they called me in after my interview. I was shocked that they could only offer me 3,000 pula, a salary that could barely cover my rent. How was I going to pay for transportation, utilities, groceries? They said they'd only review my salary at the end of the probation. I had to move out and find a squat room in Old Naledi that undergraduate students of a nearby university were using, which luckily was forty minutes' walk from work, so I could make it without needing to catch

a taxi-then-a-combi like I had to for my previous job.

The room I lived in was a compact space with only a shower and a two-plate stove in the entrance. Cold water, no heater. I lived cooped up in my house with no daylight and nature to water my stale growth. The windows looked out into walls and pit latrines. Dust swept itself in with flies from long-gone shit.

Early morning, I forced myself through the grueling cold to work. Everything was the same, except for last night's buzz that was still saturating my body. It was my third guy in ten months—there was nothing special or serious about it. Sometimes it felt like my heart was drenched in fire, today it was numb.

"Perhaps his spam is inducing an adverse reaction in your body," she said during our usual morning call as I walked to the office. Her name was Boitumelo, her nickname was Tumie, and we called her Tumza for short—a nickname for a nickname. Tumza and I called every guy's sperm spam.

"Or maybe I'm fed up of the clone of bastards always swarming around me," I said. "When you're fed up, you tend to grow a third eye that tends to see the bullshit for what it is. And because bullshit is bullshit and sometimes nothing much can be done about it, you swim backstrokes through it."

Tumza snorted. "You have such creepy humor."

I laughed as I crossed the pedestrian-heavy road towards the Fairground strip mall, its concrete, steel and glass face reflecting the morning sun. "I haven't seen you in a span."

"Joh! I haven't had a free weekend," she said. "I'm working on a residential project, our firm's also working on a tender, and I have to go to site later for a commercial building we're project managing. I don't know, man, I'm going crazy. I haven't slept in my bed for two days. Like, I don't know what I'm chasing anymore. And we just got our updates yesterday, so you can imagine how crazy it's going to be."

"Updates?"

"Ja, some new app a company is selling to our big boss."

"Oh. Well, fuck san. That's not a life I miss. At least you're getting paid big bucks."

"The nigga don't pay—everyone in the industry knows that. I've been trying to jump ship for centuries, but he has his claws throughout the industry. Any whisper of me fishing around and he's gonna blacklist me by word-of-mouth. He's done it to others before."

"What'd I tell you about that third eye?"

"Bra, not funny at the moment—shit, gotta go, some clingy client's on the line. Also don't worry about work. I'm sure they'll be happy with your performance so far. Hang in there, choms! Your career will take off. Cheers."

With that I was left alone with a dial tone slicing my goodbye in half. I

stared at the goodbye wrapped around my gluey tongue, my tongue always trying to stick itself to things that never lasted: kisses, dickheads, soggy heartbreaks, dead-end jobs. A text message beeped into my phone. “Can’t make it tonight.” Another guy tossing aside the promise he made me. It’s fine. Promises weren’t immortal; they lay like dead animals in my teeth.

On my way to work, fatigue seethed through my blood like alcohol. I just thought that if I hung around long enough, worked my ass off, I’d clear probation, revise my contract and get a better salary. I was still sending out my resumes and somehow able to go for interviews, but unable to snag another job.

I watched the traffic flow idly and the cars looked like sheep bustling through a tight lane under the glaring heat of the Gaborone sun. Shiny sheep with hooves stomping to the same endless nightmare. My scream was trapped within the boundaries of my skin: *I hate my job. I hate my job. I hate my job.* I envy those who have cars: warmth and luxury surrounding them. Across from me on Samora Machel Dr waiting for the traffic lights to turn green, was a stern lady with sunglasses on in a white BMW X5, and I was wondering what she was listening to, what it’d be like to be her, living in her skin. Her skin look drabbed on expensively, exquisite and elegant at the same time. It had the K-drama glow to it. A woman in a black Mercedes drove by wearing a weave that could probably pay my rent for months. The melanin glow of her skin reminded me of sunsets. Perhaps I’d look like her if I wore her skin, too. I pressed my nose high and imagined what it would smell like. The perfume on it. I sniffed as I quickly purchased magwinya and chips from one of the street vendors that lined the road with their tables and tattered umbrellas; behind them were shacks upon shacks, clusters of dire poverty, and on the other side of the highway stood a two-story mall, an upscale lodge, a car dealer shop and more affluent businesses. Where will I be when I’m thirty years old? Or thirty-five? Will I even reach fifty? Inadequacy. *You compare yourself too much to other people*, I thought, trying to stop this habit. All these drivers, all these strangers turned and looked at me with blank eyes. I looked nothing like them which had to mean that I was an alien.

The office idled around in Fairground Mall on the second floor. I crossed the bypass, the parking lot, and ascended the stairs. Approaching the glass entrance door, I pressed my thumb against the finger scanner, it stung, and the door slid open. I sucked at my thumb, tasting the salt of blood. I got to my desk feeling mind-boggled.

A hand was waiting in the air for my hi-five. Everyone had on the same smile, the same voice, the same excitement. They were so happy being at a miserable job. Why was I different? Why were they happy to be in this life and I was not?

*Wassup, bro*



*How was your weekend*  
*Notbin' big, just chillin' with the fam*  
*'sup ma*

—words floated into the air like dead emojis.

I stared at my thumb, a pinprick of blood slipping out. Did the scanner steal my blood? I looked up. A cluster of desks in an open-plan layout. It looked like we were sitting in transparent toilets, everyone watching everyone's shitty business. This wasn't natural. It didn't feel right. We should be in an open, warm, collaborative space like a true team, working together. But this was best for space and work efficiency, the head office said. Most of the things that ran our lives were manufactured, designed and mandated by others.

For our late lunch that day, the manager took us down to the cafeteria to wind down and congratulate us on our hard work. The first time we had closed doors early. We thought we weren't working. The elevator brought us to the ground-floor restaurant overlooking a garden with fountains, bird song and trees. Within thirty minutes we'd allocated ourselves into cliques on a long dining table, overflowing with chatter and mouthwatering cuisine: several mini-grills that a couple of my coworkers were already laying into. Swaths of nicely marinated boerwores and sticky chicken pieces they wolfed down whilst chugging bottles of cider and beers. One coworker, hazy-eyed and slurring words chewed on a biltong and laughed at a stupid joke the manager lodged. There was a crock filled with chakalaka; bamboo bowls with steamed madombi spattered with an assortment of herbs; bowls and plates of couscous, several cobs of corn, a steaming stew of mogodu—

“This is all so appetizing,” my coworker Puleng Maiteko interrupted my hungry, ogling eyes. “But I'd rather get a raise. Paying us with meals is so cheap.” She raised the decanter and filled her wine glass. “Might as well get stupid drunk and full.”

It entered my mind like a butterfly.

*They are using our temporary hunger to lull us into something.*

But I ignored the thought as I scattered some sticky chicken still glistening in marinade onto a mini-grill and it sizzled as I dished for myself. Puleng tugged at an earring, hanging like a beaded chandelier from her ear, which is a habit of hers when she's concentrating on something bothering her.

“What's wrong?” I asked, chewing on a spoonful of chakalaka.

“My grandmother once cooked this for our family's usual weekend potluck gathering,” she whispered, breath perfumed by the scent of a Phumla Pinotage.

“Okay...Then what's the problem?”

“These exact same meals...from three years ago.” She shook her head, which was elegantly wrapped in a richly colored Ankara design doek.

“Never mind, it just hit me like a bad case of *déjà vu*. It tastes exactly the way she does it. You know no one in our family has been able to replicate the taste of her recipes.” A tear slipped down her face. “My grandmother passed away three years ago. This...just felt like she was alive again.”

Puleng drank three bottles of wine before sunset, and the manager Alefaio Isang advised the company driver to take her home.

I had also guzzled too many glasses of wine and even though I was not in as bad a state as Puleng, I hurried to the office’s unisex bathroom to relieve my protesting bladder. I stopped when I saw my colleague Keaboka Letang bent over, his head dipped into a sink full of water, hands grappling with the rim. I yanked him up, his Senegalese braids slapped me. What the fuck was going on today? He gasped for air. Stood against the sink and stared at himself in the mirror, with dark trails of mascara running down his face. He was crying. I felt whiplashed like I was at a funeral-cum-party.

“What’s going on? Are you okay?” I asked, forgetting my need to pee.

“It’s the only way I can deactivate them. It only lasts three minutes. I don’t know why. Listen to me.” Keaboka grabbed my shoulders, his eyes wild and frantic. “You can’t see it. The holes. They use the holes. They... They’ve been selling us to their clients.”

I giggled and burped thinking he was making a joke. He speed-talked nonsensically all the time staring at his ticking watch, unable to find his cellphone.

“They use us. These bastards feel too safe and comfortable with this thing they installed in us.”

“What?” I staggered back, tipsy and confused—stunned also because he was generally a quiet person who focused on his assignments, mostly managing the social media pages of our clients, photoshoots, booking influencers and models, etc.

“What are you talking about?” I felt terribly sorry for him and offered consoling arms. “Relax eh. Whatever happened we can probably sort it out with—”

“You’re not listening to me.” He grabbed my shoulders, wringing them and I expected myself to crack like an egg and spill all over the bathroom floors. “Get out. Do not renew or upgrade your contract. Don’t sign anything. They have a pipeline where they sell *us*—we are the products—it’s those fucking updates — the holes—they plug—”

The doors slammed open. Security guards thundered in. Keaboka started hiccupping and floundering in their grips.

“He’ll be alright. He has a condition and is sometimes unwell. We’re taking him to the office doctor,” they said to me as they gathered Keaboka out. One guard remained, making sure I didn’t follow them.

“This must be a shock to you. Why don’t you rejoin the others?”

By Monday I had started to forget the trauma of my coworkers when the manager called me into his office to let me know that my probation was over and that they were finally reviewing my contract. I would be upgraded to consultant! With benefits! A better salary! And potential to upgrade further to housing benefits, medical and more!

There was one clause. My contract included a stipulation that I would have to be installed with new, non-invasive pill-form technology WeUs—developed by the Nairobi Tech Hub of one of their prominent clients. If I agreed then I could keep my job. If I didn't, then my current contract would run its course and I'd be out of work by the end of the year, jumping back into the hungry ocean of the unemployed. I had two-months' worth of pending rent. I had no savings, no belongings, nothing substantial to my name. My landlord had been threatening to throw out my belongings whilst I was at work; the thought of coming home to find my entire home outside the boundary wall had made me desperately change the locks which set her off. This job was my oasis.

"It'll be worth it in the end," our higher-up said, adjusting his tie. He was an European man with a balding hairline, stocky fingers and a certain kind of confidence that intimidated me. "It'll make your life so much easier. We're partnering with a highly-esteemed technology company, InSide, that's offering our employees absolutely free subscription to their app. It will help you increase your productivity and streamline your life. You will be the best *you* that you can be. You're valuable to us and we'd hate to lose you." He leaned back into his chair, his hazel eyes boring into me. "We're looking to expand our company into several countries: Zambia, Dubai, South Africa, Nigeria"—he counted them off with his fingers as if they were already conquered—"and we want to use this year to groom you because we see you eventually heading customer relations in Dubai once you cut your teeth in the region. That is of course, if you stay with us."

I swallowed deeply at the thought of living in a what was widely regarded as the world's most technologically advanced city and of reaching the summit of the corporate ladder. I just had to swallow a pill that would deposit nanobots behind my eyes and connect me to the firm's network, ferrying data to and fro. Of course, I'd be paid a minimum sum of 100,000 pula which felt like a shitload of money just to swallow a pill.

There was another butterfly thought in my mind. I ignored it.

I signed the contract and took the pill.

When I got home, I felt odd. A surge of anemia and fever overwhelmed me. I steadied myself with the walls of my apartment, wading through the heavy dark until I stumbled into bed, out of breath. I had little energy to do anything, to nourish myself or call an ambulance. I felt wrecked with an exhaustion that I prayed sleep would solve. When the bright morning sun opened my eyes, I was urged by a tightening in my gut that rushed me to

the bathroom to vomit my entire self out. I sat propped against the bathtub, wiping sweat from my face. I actually felt better. Brushed my teeth. Had breakfast. Showered and went to work. I had the best workday I'd ever had in my life.

Before long, I moved to a new apartment and bought new clothes. I went out more and had even more meaningless encounters with men I didn't care about, laughing over these dalliances with Tumie who'd gotten a promotion. Then I started having strange tendencies toward staying late at work. Smiling at the manager who flirted with every woman in the office. Then there were the black outs. I'd be locking up after work, heading for a combi—then nothing but a complete deep abyss in my memory. My 6am alarm would blare, I'd wake up in bed feeling sore, like I'd spent the day before in an HIIT cardio workout, unable to recount where I was the night before or how I got home. Shortly after, I used my 100,000 pula as a down-payment for a house in an exclusive gated community for employees of our firm. We worked together. Lived together. Spent weekends together. Carpooled to jols and vacation homes and work trips.

After months and months of this routine, I knocked off one night and stood in the dark foyer of my home, crumbled into a pile of skin and bones on the floor and cried, heaving hot breaths, not knowing why I was crying, but a deep chasm of hurt somewhere in my chest thronged and thronged with pain. I reached for my cellphone, but my front door flew open. The security guards of our estate. With flashing lights and heavy boots. "Everything alright? We heard the alarm."

"Alarm? What alarm?" I asked.

They gathered me up. "It's going to be alright. The doctor's on his way." Laid me on the living room couch. A man appeared. In his gown. Spectacles and sleep-swept hair. My neighbor. Something glinted in his hand, reflecting the slim shape of moonlight sliding through a crack in the curtains. A syringe. "Shh, it's okay, sweetie. This will help." The guards' hands tied me back as I struggled. A sting. An urge. Slowly I became swallowed into a current of sedation; my eyes slipping me into a prison of dark, glimpsed at the doctor's hand-held device, its glass display a map of our estate, little dots with all of our names. Some green. Some red. I was red, changing into amber, changing into green as I fell into a forever deep slumber. And then I was gone. And my body became theirs. In the morning I got up. Breakfast. Showered. Dressed. Carpooled with my colleagues in a state of silence to work.

Later in the afternoon, I was upgraded.

That's when I saw it.

I was standing in the conference room, presenting concepts to a client when I realized all of my co-workers had holes in their necks. Only half a decibel of my scream escaped as a gasp. I composed myself and seamlessly

continued with my presentation on Zulu motifs and geometric shapes to use as patterned stories on their textile range. The client was a burly old man, with several subsidiaries on the continent, aiming for trendy and inclusivity. He was pleased with our proposal to make his product more accessible to their target demographic: hip, female, mid-20s to early 30s.

My next meeting came at lunch. A foreign furniture designer with staff and whose company had 17 operations in African countries, but whose profits for his furniture sect were experiencing a stiff dive due to a burgeoning rival: a local competitor. He wanted to add a look of diversity to his furniture range and asked which tribe I was from. Bangwato.

He mused, thought perhaps it'd be interesting to color the themes of his work with this mentioned ethnic background. I tried to protest but the sounds did not come out of me, choked back, like my scream.

After the meeting, I resigned to my desk, chewed on a chicken sandwich and swallowed a protein shake, clicking, tapping, drawing out designs on my screen. In that split-second update, I had seen it all. The holes in our necks, barely hidden behind chiffon and silk and wool. They have done something to us.

It's funny when something irrefutably terrible happens and people say, "How can such a thing happen? This is absurd. It's against the law." But evil flows where it flows. Through gaps and loop holes and human beings. Indifferent to laws legislations policies.

Nothing halts it,  
except,  
sometimes, a sacrifice.

That afternoon, a man in blue coveralls that looked like a cross between a doctor and mechanic casually walked up to me in the kitchen, carrying a sharp tool. I tried desperately to move but some invisible force kept me rigid. He pierced the hole in my neck with it and fondled my veins. "Just doing some maintenance work on your ports," he said, whistling. His fingers were grimy with greed. Oil or something bitter-tasting slicked down my throat. I struggled and finally got an arm to move.

"Stop resisting. Part of the contract you signed."

The man hooked his steel-boot onto my shoulder as he twisted the sharp object into my neck. All I could do was remain still, as pain rattled in my body like branches in a wild windstorm. Inside the shackles of my skin, behind the bars of my bones I was screaming, "No!" "Somebody help me!" "Get the fuck off me!" "I'll fucking kill you!" "I'm going to burn this building down!"

No sound escaped my lips.

The man jumped off my shoulders when he was done. "Alright, you can get back to work."

I stroked my neck and felt a deep dent digging into my carotid vein.

And then, against my own mind, I turned and went back to my desk. We sat in rows, aligned, ramrod backs, our chins high. Each one of us a well-oiled cog of the workplace machine.

There was of course always the odd concerned citizen, who occasionally noticed something off about us. The weird gropes. The frozen smiles. The doe-eyed expressions. The unprovoked tears. The silent hallways, offices, lunchroom. Our persistent abnegation posing as customer service. Then the reporters would come. Then the police would come. We'd smile mildly and reveal nothing wrong in this fine establishment. No matter how much they investigated every nook and cranny of buildings and emails, they couldn't find the secrets stacked in our bodies. What they found were good benefits, fully paid housing, medical aid, travel allowance, good hospitality, educational grooming, and very loyal unmarried employees who occasionally *loved* to sleep with their bosses and whose minds and histories were contained in a database monitored by the data analysts and employee management consultants of our established firm.

The company grew quickly to manage operations in 29 African countries and was touted for its high diversity hiring and marketing strategies. The company suckled our diversity from our DNA and nervous systems, spooled and aggregated it into its network to create 100% authentic indigenous products, used for concepts in fashion shows, architectural designs to win local tenders.

They didn't need to get close to us to have us open our mouths, they were already inside our bodies listening to every thought pattern and whispers from even our grandparents in the genes of our bodies.

The firm was touted for being revolutionary. They mined our stories to flavor just the right amount of diversity in their clients products which accounted for their sky-high profits. They mined the minerals, diamonds and jewels of our very thoughts and histories and cultures that had been buried in our brains; the emblems, cultural motifs were woven with the dialect of our pain into their indigenous furniture designs, patterned textiles. It was all the market research they and their clients would ever need.

In our heels and short dresses and men the bosses fancied, we'd shuttle from our desks to the manager's offices, to hotel rooms and secret getaways. The directors, the managers, the clients had nothing to fear. Their technology sat in us, maimed our voices before it could ever bite them; intercepted the tšatšarag neuromuscular signals shuttling from our brains to our vocal cords. It lynched those muscles in your throat just when you wanted to scream and cry and bleed truth.

I had authorized this technology, agreed to the terms and conditions.

Now: I couldn't move, I couldn't breathe, except under the dominant

hand of their technology. They were our voices and we were their voice. Their face. Their ambassadors. We were locked behind our irises, and I found my skin feeling like artificial material, my legs stacked onto a platform, frozen wide eyes staring out into a stream of satisfied customers.

They'd learned how to imprison my thoughts in my body, but I am starting to feel free inside this mind of mine even though it doesn't fully belong to me. Maybe just maybe, when the next update comes and I get a glimpse of freedom again, I will do something with it.

## FORT KWAME

By

Derek Lubangakene

Two hours passed before Jabari Asalur acknowledged his dread. His chest felt hollow and a damp stillness was lodged in his gut. If he had any breakfast left in him, he would've fallen to his knees, stuck a cold finger down his throat and let the exploding bile jar his senses. Anything was better than the endless waiting.

Two hours, something was definitely wrong. Naleni hadn't made it. Their rebellion had failed. She was probably dead. He regretted letting her go back instead of himself. *Asalur, you stupid, clumsy coward*, he chastised himself. If he hadn't been such an Asalur and messed up the charges, she wouldn't have had to risk herself cleaning up after him. Naleni and he would've already joined the others and been miles away from danger. Instead he lingered here on this blue-tinged cryocrater, their rendezvous point. There was no point in waiting for her, he knew this, but he couldn't leave. He owed her that much.

To distract himself, he laid down the four control units flat against the ice. One had gone off okay but the other three still glowed red. He suspected their fuses had come loose. He didn't account for that earlier. Naleni should've fixed the fuses by now. But no, the control units still glowed red, not green. Even if they finally turned green, he wouldn't detonate them until she was with him. She was his only green light.

"Come on, Naleni. Come on," he whispered.

He glanced once more at the bio-monitor on his wrist. It blinked a steady amber light. The declining power blurred his vision, turning his mask's optic visualiser cloudy like into a Harmattan haze. He had maybe forty, fifty minutes of breathable air left. It was already too late, but he



couldn't leave. Not without Naleni. He didn't want to believe all he had done - all they had done - was in vain. No way.

He crouched beside his Kunguru and waited.

An hour later, he checked the control units, two of the three had turned green. All three would be great, but two was enough. If only there was a way to communicate to her. He would've told her to get out of there. Perhaps she already had. He had no way of knowing but he wouldn't detonate the charges until she had returned to him. He ignored the sense of urgency. Even when his bio-monitor light turned red and the temperature dropped a dozen degrees,

Jabari double-checked his thermskin's isothermal functions. They were at eighty percent. The wireless receptors between the Kunguru's backup isothermal reservoir and his thermskin suit still worked. Hypothermia proved a distant threat. Around him, the cryocrater remained silent, save for the frozen ice-shelf cracking underneath the porous bedrock. That and the rumble of distant thunder medleying with the howling winds. As the landscape steadily sluiced into dusk, Jabari's panic rose. In spite of his thermskin's capabilities, no amount of training would save him once dusk fell. No amount.

He glanced afresh at his surroundings hoping to see Naleni stumbling down the glacial outcroppings. Hard luck. Only the winds replied his anguish. Theirs was a dialect of misgiving. A language he now knew too well.

The Kunguru's comms, connected to his mask, implored him to climb aboard and recharge his thermskin.

Jabari ignored the warning. He knew the moment he hopped inside, the Kunguru's A.I. interface would supervene his manual override and fly him someplace dry and safe. Not that such a place existed. Not for miles in any direction. Fort Kwame was one of a few embers in a growing darkness. The last frontier against the creeping chill.

"Come on Naleni," this time his whisper was a prayer.

He knelt, figuring this would conserve power. Perhaps a few fractions of a percent. Perhaps a little more. His movements were the least pilferers of his standby power. He figured the beating of his quailing heart probably consumed enough to excavate a sinkhole by himself. Probably more. He shut his eyes to even his breathing. A vain endeavour.

*I could just go back for her, couldn't I?* Nah, Jabari dismissed the idea. It was impossible. From the cryocrater, eighty clicks away, he recognised the slick, oil-spill hue of the intrinsic shield glass-doming Fort Kwame's orbit.

Everything had gone according to plan. Well, except, for his clumsy mess that had sent Naleni scurrying back.

Despite the intrinsic shield going off, Jabari believed Naleni made it out

somehow. She had to.

The gravity of what he had done, helping the water dwelling Jo’Nam destroy Fort Kwame, didn’t undo him. Not yet anyway.

By sunfall every Civic Centre in every Orbital City from Old Cape Town to New Cairo would hear of Fort Kwame’s fate. They’d hear of the meltdown of the nuclear reactors, the cracking gas hydrates, and the sinking tonnes of metal and bedrock. They’d hear it all. Jabari and Naleni would join the rest of Jo’Nam exodus and resettle in the colonies west of Fort Kwame. They’d be closer to their real home. The ancestors weren’t pleased and none of this thawing would cease unless the Jo’Nam returned home – well, what was left of home.

He checked his bio-monitor, then lowered his breathing, and waited. . .

The last perfect day Jabari remembered was the day he crashed his Kunguru in the thermokarst lake below the pylons which held Fort Kwame aloft. It was also the last time he saw the clockwork methane-flares storm across the intrinsic shield. The methane-flares burned blue- and fiery, turning the intrinsic shield into an opalescent canopy wherever they hit. He loved the way the shield absorbed the flares, then radiated their fire outwards. It always made him feel tiny perforations press against his thermskin’s polyethylene fibre. They used to call these goosebumps. Back when the language allowed for the acknowledgement of involuntary body functions. Now every inhabitant, from sentry cadets to frontier explorers and the glaciologists and anthropologists, everyone was taught to master their bodily functions. It was the only way they could survive.

Back then, Fort Kwame lay in the trajectory-spray of one of those volcanic hydromethane archipelagos. Now, who knows? Geological faulting constantly shifted their bearing. For now, as of this morning that is, Fort Kwame was anchored to the subglacial mountain ranges entombed beneath Antarctica’s solid ice-sheet. Many other Orbital Cities were likewise anchored to whatever floating land mass not yet completely inundated. What remained of humanity was incredibly lucky to have survived rapid polar amplifications and permafrost thawing which raised water levels to diluvian heights. Subsequent nuclear fallouts in the twenty-second and twenty-fourth centuries disrupted subduction patterns and the evolution of tectonic plates. Chunks of continental bedrock now floated freely on hot asthenosphere, crashing into each other like a bad game of bumper cars.

It’s why no one else marvelled at the methane-flares. Jabari wasn’t everyone else though. He was an Asalur. His ancestors descended from cattle-rustlers; back when East-Africa still had a Rift Valley; he knew a thing or two about living dangerously. Not that that had anything to do with methane flares. He loved reminding himself and others that he was an Asalur. The Asalur were the first Frontier Explorers. They traversed the

unstable globe searching out new land masses to anchor Fort Kwame. Jabari's baba had led the last exploration trip. It was yet to yield reports. He was lost, presumed dead. Jabari wasn't surprised. The vision of Frontier Explorers like his baba once ensured they had a tomorrow, even at the cost of their own lives. The ice sheet wouldn't hold them forever. Jabari was poised to step into his baba's shoes but by his own actions today, he had spurned his Asalur legacy and damned them all. They would say it was cruel fate. The baba builds, the son squanders.

Jabari, like a thousand other cadets, had patrolled one of five Fort Kwame sectors, and often assisted the glaciologists in their expeditions beyond the darkening ice-sheet. Sometimes, they'd escort ethnolinguists attempting to recreate 'ethnic blueprints' based on the passed-down oral ciphers of the Jo'Nam. Ciphers about dwarf pyramids in ancient Nubia, two-faced, two-sexed gods, myriad orishas, and water dragons named Nyami Nyami, Ninki Nanka, the Mazomba, and Grootslang. It was mildly amusing, but delusional in the face of near-certain extinction.

Jabari's regiment patrolled Sector Five. Sector five was nothing but a lingering abyss. It was the dark netherworld beneath the Orbital City's platform. A site often attacked by Jo'Nam terrorists. Though Jabari was being fast-tracked to become a Frontier Explorer like his baba, he had to prove himself in Sector Five.

On the day he crashed his Kunguru, he had lost a wager to his roommate Bakida Okol and had to pull a double shift. Though exhausted, Jabari's pride wouldn't allow him put the Kunguru on autopilot. The crash surprised no one, least of all himself. He would later learn that Bakida led the search party. Like his baba, Jabari too was presumed dead. His return, having spent six months in the company of the Jo'Nam, surprised everyone. They seemed to have all moved on. Bakida even gave away Jabari's family heirlooms.

The bastard was six inches taller than Jabari. His combat and analysis scores were the highest in their sentry graduating class. Bakida never ever regarded Jabari with the respect his family name deserved. For this, they often duelled. Much to Jabari's disfavour. Now Jabari had the ultimate 'leg-up' on the bastard.

Fort Kwame was made of colonies stacked on lead pylons twenty thousand feet above permafrost. A hodgepodge of largely desert or river-basin cultures -Nilotic, Bantoid, Amhara, Mande, Nuer, even some Nubian -now banked on immense concave flatforms. Polymerised solar panels and pressurised water nuclear reactors powered Fort Kwame's ever-expanding colonies. The colonies widened in inverse proportion to their population. This, another thorn piercing at the heart of the Jo'Nam, fuelling their dissent. Jabari now agreed with the aspersion that these colonies intended

to grow so large their platforms would lock together in circular mosaics and form a new lithosphere. Ultimately forge a roof over Jo’Nam world.

The Jo’Nam, just because they lived almost entirely in the taliks and meltwater, weren’t mermaids, or men with gills. Evolution, after all, takes millions of years. Their hands and feet were webbed though. Some clans at least.

When the ice sheets first started melting and submerging continents, the coastal towns migrated inland. The then Allied African Union – well, what remained of it – decided that the Orbital Cities were the only way to survive. Much like Noah’s Ark. Only, they wouldn’t take two of each. The migrants who proved useful, those coastal tribes whose parents and ancestors had taught them to make dhows and ships, spear fish underwater on a single breath and work heavy, wet machinery were retained. They became the Jo’Nam. The Cities were small to start with. Those fortunate enough to afford placement up in the City survived. The rest fended for themselves or joined the Jo’Nam working the City’s pylon-anchor mechanisms like symbiotic organisms, in the hope of seeing their children ascend to the Orbital City. Radiation, drownings, accidents were common and the advisors in the Orbital cities estimated that the Jo’Nam would slowly become sterile and die out. But they thrived instead. And Jabari wouldn’t have known better if he hadn’t crashed his Kunguru a year ago.

He never regretted it though, even now, even lying on the ice, anchored by the weight of his betrayal. For if he hadn’t crashed, he wouldn’t have met Naleni.

Naleni, his lithe, dark-skinned goddess. Hair braided and eclipse-black. Eyes bright like a methane flare, her lips full and thick. She looked ageless, despite the ritual scarring on her cheeks. Her skinsuit was an emerald colour that changed shade with each flicker of the waves when they went exploring sinkholes. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

It’s always an accumulation of little things that undoes a man. Not Naleni. She undid Jabari all at once.

The day his Kunguru crashed, Naleni said there were unexpected oscillations. Like the Haboob winds of ancient Sahara, except these oscillations travelled vertically and burnt a cold, fierce fire. Naleni claimed these oscillations were water-djinnns mating; an adapted myth from the people of the Libyan Desert who considered siroccos to be desert-djinnns mating.

Naleni described how Jabari’s Kunguru rattled with each swelling jetstream and eventually struck the pylon before crashing into the lake and killing four Jo’Nam.

She never ever took credit for pulling Jabari out of the sinking wreckage, but for stopping her kin from gutting him. They spent many days together trying to repair the comms unit of his Kunguru. She was competent with

her hands. Her baba worked on the pylons and always went with her whenever they could manage it.

The six months he spent as her captive passed like a blur. He never would've believed he lived through it, if not for the memories on his skin. They say the best affairs leave scars. He bore the marks of her tiny teeth on his neck. That's from the day he told her the elders who dwelt in the hollow Conch of Enlightenment, had chosen him to betray his own people. She wouldn't let him do it unless she came along. The Jo'Nam couldn't defeat Fort Kwame from without so they chose to strike from within. Jabari didn't mind the taint of treachery. Not for her. Now here they were, he, dejected, failed and she, missing, probably dead.

A kick, blunt as entropy's glacial teeth, woke Jabari.

Wincing, he roused to see a wavery figure solidify in front of him. His vision struggled to adjust to the glare of a hovering Kunguru right above his resting ground. He trained his vision at the figure and recognised him by his musky scent. It was Bakida.

"Bastard," Jabari cursed.

Bakida drew near and towered over Jabari "I always knew you were spineless," he said, "But not this spineless." He threw something which cluttered against Jabari's mask.

Jabari picked it up and held it to the light. It was one of the fuses for the time-delay control unit. The fuses Naleni had volunteered to replace. The bastard had her. Jabari tried to scramble for the control units but Bakida kicked him again. This time hard enough to snap a rib. The pain blurred Jabari's already strained vision. His power was too low. Otherwise his thermskin should've absorbed the impact of Bakida's boot. Jabari regretted not having worn the tensile armour-suit. This camouflage suit was good against the cold, but not much for impact resistance.

"Get up, traitor," Bakida loomed over the floored Jabari.

Jabari glanced at his bio-monitor. Its broken face told him, with or without Naleni, he should've left this wet rock hours ago. He should've rejoined the Jo'Nam exodus and continued East to the nearest colony. He glanced at the control units and saw that Bakida had stomped on them already. They were broken.

Thaw now blunted the ridges around the cryocrater. Its solid footing now soggy. Gas hydrates from afar, burnt readily. Their pale, luminous flame spotlighting the backdrop. The ice no longer cracked but vibrated. The cryocrater was warming rapidly. Jabari's Kunguru steadily sunk into the ice-shelf. No wonder Bakida kept his hovering.

Bakida's presence in *their* sacred place - his and Naleni's - undid Jabari.

Jabari wondered how Bakida could've tracked him here. He searched around and saw Naleni tethered to Bakida's Kunguru.

“Naleni?” he cried.

“I have her,” Bakida dropped a pair of cuffs beside Jabari. “Come quietly or I’ll serve you swift justice right here,”

Jabari stared at Naleni a long while.

“I wouldn’t be too hasty,” he turned to Bakida and held up the two fuses Bakida flung at him. “You broke four control units; but only three charges are accounted for.”

Bakida tapped his mask and his visuals cleared. He snarled and came to grab Jabari, but Jabari lunged for his foot. A poor plan. However hard he strained he managed only to make Bakida flail for balance. Bakida settled, stooped down and cracked Jabari’s bloody breathing mask with one blow.

*Whoooooshhh*, Jabari’s mask hissed. The rushing methane displaced what little oxygen Jabari had left. Jabari clawed at the mask clumsily until he unclasped it from his face.

From his disadvantaged point of view, Bakida looked massive. *No matter, titans can be toppled*, Jabari thought. His body relaxed. He braced himself on his elbows. Rose but his feet slipped a moment, his thermskin running on so little power as to fulfil the basics. No matter, Jabari took a deep breath. Methane wasn’t all that noxious. Besides Naleni’s people had taught him to adapt to its lightness. Anyone else would feel quite heady. Jabari squared his shoulder, appeared larger.

Bakida offered a diabolical grin.

Jabari rammed into Bakida’s gut and wrestled to unsteady him, but the bastard stood firm. His boots wouldn’t slip, but their reinforced traction forced the ice to crack. Both Jabari and Bakida sunk into the freezing water underneath.

In the water, Jabari was no longer prey. Bakida’s thermskin had power enough, but Jabari now knew how to hunt like the Jo’Nam. With his thermskin’s camouflage properties, he moved like he had a hydrostatic skeleton.

*So much for calling me spineless*, Jabari gloated. He twirled and torpedoed at Bakida’s core with stealth and precision like ancient jengu. Bakida’s tensile armour-suit allowed for little flexibility.

Bakida gasped and floundered like an eel in quicksand. He grappled to hold onto Jabari, but Jabari evaded him. Bakida sank deeper.

Jabari didn’t linger to enjoy the satisfaction of watching Bakida sink. He knew Bakida’s suit would adapt quick enough. He swam for the surface. The ice they’d only a moment ago stood on seemed to melt rapidly. Jabari kicked furiously, pumped on adrenaline. Naleni was in danger.

“Naleni?” he shouted as he swam towards solid ice.

“Jabari,”

Jabari swam towards the direction of her voice. His lungs burned, but he kicked harder and harder. He could see her.

She looked smaller. Fragile. Broken, somehow.

Jabari pulled himself to out of the water, but he was on the wrong end of the solid ice. He had to swim around or dash to her. The latter a risky idea considering the loose traction of his boots.

Bakida crawled out of the water using a grappling hook. He stumbled towards Naleni and grabbed her by the neck. He palmed her mouth so she wouldn't speak. The Jo'Nam never wore any breathing masks. Not down here at least. Naleni bit Bakida and he pulled his hand away.

"Help me," Naleni shouted.

Bakida restrained her in a half-nelson. She tried, but couldn't squirm away from his hold.

"Lover boy," Bakida said. "Your plan is foiled. Give up now and there'll be less pain to trade." Bakida's tensile-armour suit had a vice-like grip. Naleni would never break free.

"Jabari, don't let her pay for your treachery." Bakida's voice carried a crisp note against the howling wind.

"I'm here. Let her go," Jabari walked towards the pair. His isothermals were slowly failing. He felt the cold creep in but forced himself to ignore it.

The shadow beneath the Flatform didn't lift. Mist covered the pylon like a grey caftan over some mythical titan's stump of a leg. It was solid, and dull against the faded light. Jabari's Kunguru, in autopilot, flew Naleni in front of Bakida's craft. The bastard had set coordinates for the large hangars in Sector One. ETA, thirty minutes.

A portion of the intrinsic shield split open to allow their Kunguru to pass. Behind it closed all hope of escape.

Their climb proved slow and ponderous, despite Bakida dribbling his fingers against the control panel. Jabari didn't bother questioning this impatience. Neither did he regret getting himself here. Thoughts of justice and retribution didn't bother him, but hopelessness clouded his heart. He now doubted the righteousness of his actions.

In any case, Bakida would never understand Jabari's motives, Jabari wasn't sure he understood them himself anymore, but what was done was done. It wasn't enough though. It wouldn't set things right. His rebellion would never even the scales of Fort Kwame's injustices. Everyone Naleni knew had lost family members to radiation leaking from the pylons. This was the unfortunate legacy of the scramble to survive in a broken world. Its victims had bloated, rotting skin, and bled from their orifices. Jabari had looked upon this misery feeling like a voyeur of private grief. Their dim and dwindling lives touched him. This was death's ultimate kingdom. When the Elders approached him, despite his pride and everything he'd been told, he agreed to betray his name.

“Three minutes to docking,” Bakida said. He kept his eyes steady on the ring of glowing gas-flares guiding their descent onto the flatform.

Bakida steadied the Kunguru and released the landing gear. Jabari’s Kunguru hovered low as Naleni climbed out. The hangar was a flurry of activity. Cadets scampered here and there in response to the charge which went off earlier. None of them seemed to notice the two Kunguru.

Naleni’s eyes darted around, seemingly afraid and exposed.

Jabari struggled against his restraints. He worried about her. The strangeness of the air, and the regiments assuming battle formations was an otherworldly sight. Their laser canons glistened in the weakening light. It felt like the end of the world, and Jabari and Naleni seemed the only ones caught by surprise. Had they been triple-crossed? This wasn’t how things should’ve gone.

“I’m not surprised, honestly,” Bakida said. “Like your fallen baba, you’re the only one naive enough to think you could save the Jo’Nam.”

Their airlock opened up.

“Just kill me already. Don’t bore me to death with your vindication.”

Bakida stepped out, circled backwards and undid the cuffs on Jabari’s limbs. They walked towards Naleni whose hands were bound behind her back. A hundred paces away, the five Sector Commanders marched towards the three.

“Release her. Please,” Jabari pleaded Naleni’s fate. Her skinsuit had turned translucent as though externalising her fright. To her, the ionised air must’ve felt like complete sensory deprivation.

“It’s not too late to reverse what you’ve done,” Bakida said.

“It’s too late to reverse anything,” Jabari said.

“If that were the case, I wouldn’t have bothered bringing you back,” Bakida said. “You both.” He nudged his chin in Naleni’s direction.

“You touch her and I’ll —”

“I won’t, but they might,” Bakida pointed to the Sector Commanders marching their way; a squadron of hard-jawed sentries following behind. “You’ve a chance to save not only her. But all of *them*, and us too.” He paused for effect.

Jabari said nothing. His attention drawn towards Naleni.

“Asalur, where’s the remaining charge? I caught her with two fuses, but here we have four control units. Where is it?” Bakida had carried the control units from the cryocrater.

“Let her go.” Jabari answered. He was resolved to his fate.

“There are teams scouring the reactors right now, but you could speed it up by telling us where. If you don’t. We all die. Right now, a legion of *her* people is marching to bludgeon the pylons,”

“Good, that way they’ll finish what I couldn’t,” Jabari snarled. He knew better than to fall for Bakida’s manipulations. As far as he knew, the



Jo’Nam exodus was miles away from the blast radius. He and Naleni should’ve been there with them also.

“If we fall, they fall too, don’t you realise this?” Bakida said.

Jabari sneered. “They’ll rebuild from our ashes. They’ll rebuild a better, fairer society than this one. The Orbital City network will be better for it.”

“You fool! Haven’t you ever wondered why your baba never returned? We lost communications with all the other cities years ago. There’s no refuge anywhere else. This is the last Orbital city. Destroying Fort Kwame condemns us all.” He ambled closer to Jabari. His tone almost plaintive. “You’ve been misled. Help me before it’s too late.”

“I was in awe of you earlier,” Jabari said. “But now I see you didn’t bring me here to face the poetic justice of dying with Fort Kwame. . . I’ll indulge your sadism, just let her go.”

“She’s not worth destroying Fort Kwame for.”

Jabari smiled in self-derision. He couldn’t save himself, but he would see her safe at least. Besides, there was a chance the last charge could still go off. Bakida had secured only two of the three charges. Naleni was clever enough to foil their plans. He’d see the deed done; he just had to find out if she at least fixed its fuse?

“You’d destroy Fort Kwame seven times over if you’d seen the things I’ve seen. This is justice, long-overdue justice.”

“It’s foolishness, that’s what —”

The Sector Commanders arrived right on cue. They formed an arc around Bakida, Jabari and Naleni. The Kungurus hovered in the background.

“Haai,” the burly Afrikaner from Sector One regarded Bakida. “Okol, sit-rep.” His direct, unnerving gaze pierced through Bakida’s stoicism like a laser.

Bakida stood at attention, but before he could speak, Jabari cut in.

“I’m the one you want. If you let her go, I’ll tell you everything.”

“*Jammer*, we know everything,” the Afrikaner said. “*Verder*, don’t shake the chicken. You’re in no way entitled to assume leverage. If not for your mate’s graces you’d be dead as the cryocrater you sought shelter in.” He turned to Bakida, “Hand the meisie over.”

Bakida did as commanded. The Afrikaner outranked all the other SCs.

The Afrikaner knelt Naleni by his feet and drew his weapon to her brow. “I won’t count to *drie*. Go on, let the baboon out of your sleeve.”

The SC’s actions froze Jabari.

Naleni didn’t put up much of a fight. Bakida had disabled her mask’s comms. She was mute to everything.

“Jabari, tell him,” Bakida said.

“Let her go,” Jabari stood up to the SC. “There’s more than one charge left and if you want what I have you’ll let her go.”

The SC turned to Bakida, “How many charges did you recover?”

“All but one,” Bakida answered.

“But you’ll never find it,” Jabari said. “And yes, the Jo’Nam have secondary control units. They must’ve already realised something isn’t right and will blow them any time now. Let her go and I’ll help you.”

The SC chewed on this a moment. He didn’t like the taste, but signalled Jabari to approach.

Jabari obliged him. He braced Naleni to her feet and activated her mask’s comms.

“I’m sorry,” Jabari addressed Naleni. “I shouldn’t have left you alone. I won’t leave you now.”

She clung to him.

“I will get you away.” Jabari spoke low, and in the little Jo’Nam he could speak. “Please tell me you fixed the last charge.”

She shook her head. “I couldn’t find it. I looked and looked. The tall one cornered me before I... I dropped the fuse.” She clutched his shoulder tight. “Jabari, we—”

“It’s alright. They don’t know this. “

“They know,” she no longer spoke the Jo’Nam tongue.

“They don’t.” Jabari insisted.

“Tell them where the charge is,” she said.

Jabari pulled back, stunned.

“They lied to us. You have to help your people.”

“You’re my people!”

“Help them or we all die.”

Jabari, baffled, held her at arm’s length. “What have they done to you?”

“Nothing. They speak truth. There is no other city to run to. We were wrong. The Elders don’t know this. They are making a mistake. They will destroy the only hope we have left.”

“You’ve seen the charts. Naleni, there are over a dozen orbital cities. We will re-join the others as planned.”

“Those are old charts,” Naleni said. “Your friend showed me Fort Kwame’s recent charts. The eastern colonies have sunk and our passage to the old continent is gone. This is the last Orbital City. My people want justice but will damn us all with ignorance instead.”

Jabari looked to Bakida for confirmation. He got it. Bakida was many things, a deceiver not one of them.

“If this truly is the only City of Tomorrow, we are already doomed.” His shoulders deflated.

“Asalurs; stubborn as ever. No problem,” the SC said. “I won’t appeal to your sense of duty, but I’ll call on your honour. On the name you used to take so much pride in.”

“Your trust in my honour is grossly misplaced,” Jabari retorted.

“Yah, that might be so. But your heart is what I can finally count on.”

With that, he shot Naleni in the foot.

Well, grazed her skin in fact. But the way she screamed in pain and the way Jabari fell by her side, spoke otherwise.

None of the other commanders encircling them reacted.

Jabari's eyes filled with rage as he rose, fists balled. But the SC pointed the weapon to his temple. Bakida who had rallied to pull Jabari away, backed off on his own accord. Naleni lay wincing on the ground.

“Hah,” the commander exclaimed. “My aim is worse than I thought. Will you allow me to try again?”

Jabari, though still seething, raised his hands in surrender.

“Tell me where the charge is?”

Jabari snarled but he had no leverage. His ruse had failed. And once again he put Naleni in harm's way. Glancing at her, he sighed.

“The cooling tower. Reactor six.” Jabari said, exhaling the words reluctantly.

Jabari crawled to Naleni's side.

The commander barked an order to one of his underlings. The collective air of tension dropped.

“Uh-uh, up, up,” the commander urged Jabari up. “Your dues aren't fully paid up. Hop in your Kunguru and tell the Jo'Nam all you've learnt in the few minutes prior. They damn themselves in damning us. We believe many things about the water-folk, but we do not believe them to be suicidal maniacs.”

Jabari wouldn't leave Naleni.

The Afrikaner motioned to Bakida, “Tend the meisie's wound.”

Bakida knelt beside Jabari. “Go. I'll look after Naleni.”

“You'll pay for this,” Jabari said.

“I don't doubt that, but you won't get your vengeance if the Jo'Nam destroy Fort Kwame.”

“The Jo'Nam rally a few clicks from where Okol apprehended you,” the Afrikaner said. “There's no exodus. We know they intend to attack at the very spot you crashed your Kunguru. If they attack there will be great loss on either side. Them more than us.”

“I won't do your bidding,” Jabari said.

“A shame. All this will have been for nothing.” He came and raised Jabari to his feet. “It's not just my bidding you do. But hers and theirs most of all. They still believe in the City of Tomorrow,” the Afrikaner pointed to Naleni.

“You may be a cold bastard, Asalur, but not cold enough to bathe in the blood we will shed if you don't act.”

Jabari said nothing.

The Commander tilted his head. “Hmm. Yes, I'd be scared too. They

might kill you, thinking you a double-crosser –”

“I’m not scared.”

“Of course. You’ve survived their capture once before. Do what you did then.”

Jabari stared at Naleni but couldn’t bring himself to ask her to risk her life again.

The Commander noticed his look and smiled. “Okol, help the meisie to his Kunguru.”

Bakida hesitated a moment but obliged. He had finished dressing Naleni’s wound.

Jabari asked for the charts Bakida had showed Naleni. Bakida fished a copy from the nearby Hangar offices and returned to watch Jabari assist Naleni up into his own Kunguru. No words were shared between Bakida and Jabari, nor between Jabari and Naleni.

Jabari fired up the Kunguru and hovered away as the SCs and the rest of the squadrons readied themselves for the Jo’Nam; should he fail.

Bakida lingered, his expression wary and full of suspicion. Jabari met his gaze and felt reassured somewhat. There Bakida was, yet again, sending Jabari off on a mission they both knew Jabari couldn’t pull off. But unlike the Kunguru crash a year ago. Jabari had a lot more invested in the outcome. Not that that tilted the balance in his favour, but it was a starting point. He was an Asalur, a starting point was more than he deserved. He squeezed Naleni’s hand and keyed in the coordinates for the cryocrater.

## FRUIT OF THE CALABASH

By

Rafeeat Aliyu

Morning met Maseso awake. There were nights when she couldn't sleep, after spending hours in her lab fertilising ova, and nurturing her stars carefully... carefully. This was what she did for a living that had paved her way from the drab corridors and rooms of the National Hospital in the business district to the cushy section in upscale Maitama where she now ran her own private practice, nestled between grand embassy buildings and 5-star hotels. Maseso usually enjoyed her job but recently, anxiety prevented her from sleeping. She was a woman who stubbornly maintained her routines, and so she laid on her bed fully awake. From time to time, she would sit up and shift the curtains aside to stare at the neighbouring duplex that housed her lab. When she wasn't doing that, she checked the lab camera feeds on her tablet, slowly counting the hours until 5:45am when she would be back in the room where she kept her stars.

At the hospital it was mandatory to refer to the unborn beings growing in the globular outer shells as 'babies'. Most other labs simply used 'foetus' but at Maseso's the preferred term was 'star'.

Her hands trembled as she keyed in the code to unlock the front door and disabled the security system. As she entered trepidation filled her, an intuitive warning that something was wrong. Stepping into the calabash room, Maseso instantly knew her fears were realized. It had already happened. She knew it, but she took her time, hoping she was wrong.

Stretched out in front of her were two rows of twenty calabashes — artificial wombs labelled as such due to their gourd-like shape — sixteen of them containing one star each. Maseso approached the first one, Koso, taking note of its vitals, growth progress and the nutrient levels of the amniotic solution. There was a running joke at the National Hospital where they would add to check for extra arms or a tail growing where it wasn't

supposed to. Smiling wryly at the memory, Maseso progressed as she normally would. Up next was Po Tolo , she looked at its vitals and checked nutrition levels, everything was fine.

Inhaling deeply Maseso continued her routine, moving from one gourd-like womb to another, and as she went further down the room, her breaths grew shorter. She just knew. Even before she got to the back of the room where Xamidimura should be and she saw it almost fully formed lying on the tiled floor. It was still and breathless, skin grey, lips purple, open eyes a strange, consuming black. The sound of Maseso's heart pounding loudly in her chest joined the hum of the machines and the bubbling of solutions. Her hands lifted to cover her mouth as she retreated backward and quietly closed the door behind her. Falling to her knees in the hallway, she struggled to breathe. She was frightened not just by what she had seen but by its implications.

The service that Maseso offered was a convenience for those who could afford it. Decades after increased infertility across the globe due to endocrine-disruptors, the solution came in the form of full ectogenesis, often with artificial gametes from stem cells. Nigeria took a different approach buying as much ova as possible from the dwindling numbers of fertile women. The culture demanded procreation enough to welcome ectogenesis but still held on to ideas of what was “natural” and accepted. The National Hospital was initially the only place couples with the means could turn to for a child but there was a waiting list that stretched through years. They quickly grew overwhelmed and soon private outfits started popping up. Maseso spent fifteen years saving, moving certain names up the waiting lists and collecting tokens of appreciation in her private bank account before quitting to set up her own lab. Heavenly Babies and Mothers was registered and licensed to store gametes, grow endometrium cells, implant embryos in lab tissue and a host of other reproductive industry services.

It was with a sense of pride that Maseso created every new life but Xamidimura, the one that now lay on her lab floor with cold and unstarling eyes, had given her problems from the get-go. This was supposed to be the child of a wealthy family, the kind with billions in several currencies tucked in offshore accounts. Maseso was doubly frustrated that this particular star had failed for a second time, carrying implications for the future of her business. The last time Senator Idris and Hajia Maimuna had come to her office, there had been an outburst. It was mostly the Senator doing the screaming.

“You told us that there was a 99.9% chance of our baby being born safe and healthy. We have seen other babies who were born in your lab so why... why is it our own that keeps on facing these problems? Are you deliberately wasting our money? Do I look like a bank?”

“No, please understand.” Maseso had objected. She kept her voice calm and steely, used to dealing with irate clients from her years at the hospital. “Everything was perfect, as it should be. I can assure you that we at Heavenly Babies and Mothers—”

“Rubbish! This is the second time, this son that I am supposed to have hasn’t come.”

At that point, Maimuna began shedding silent tears so Maseso turned her attention to her.

“Hajia please understand, sometimes cases like this come up.”

“You must do something!” Idris boomed. “It’s your lab, it’s your machine. My wife is infertile! How are we going to continue our family line?”

Maseso was rendered speechless. The Senator went on, raining down more curses with each sentence he spewed until his words turned threatening.

“If we don’t leave here without a child, I swear,” he touched his tongue and pointed to the sky, “your business will be destroyed.”

The hairs on Maseso’s arms rose when she recalled those words. As they left her office that day, Maseso knew that if her next attempt failed, she was done for. If Xamidimura was no more, so was her business. She would lose everything, even her life maybe. Her legacy, her work, her other stars... everything she had struggled to build would vanish before her eyes. Maseso shuddered to imagine life outside the protected zones where violence and poverty were rampant as the government and businesses focused their attention on locations with children.

Maseso retreated to her office at the front of the building, sat down and made herself a cup of coffee. The hour that passed felt like a minute when Ego bounced into the office, her beaded braids swinging and clicking with every step. She didn’t appreciate her assistant’s flamboyant style, but Ego came highly recommended when the assistant she had poached from the hospital had to leave Abuja. While she was capable, Ego’s behaviour often irritated Maseso. She entered the office and her bubbly, colorful appearance contrasted starkly against the pristine monochrome of the office.

“Good morning doctor, how are you?” Ego didn’t wait for a response before continuing. “You won’t believe what happened yesterday; me and my friends went to this party and can you imagine one of those kids selling drugs, the ones they claim can get you pregnant right, he came up to me and he was trying to chat me up.”

Ego chattered on, not caring that Maseso was staring blankly down at her still full cup. Ego had made herself comfortable on her desk before she noticed.

“Dr. M are you okay?”

Maseso couldn’t say a word, she just pointed in the direction of the lab.

Ego had a slight frown on her face as she left for the calabash room. Barely a minute later, she rushed back into the office.

“It’s the Senator’s child isn’t it?”

Maseso nodded. “I don’t know what to do.”

Ego scoffed. “Ha! I knew it! It’s that his juju. It’s reached this lab; we should’ve never taken him. I told you my Aunt warned me when we saw the forums online.”

“Don’t even start that,” Maseso said, flicking her hand in dismissal. She found it odd the way Ego could retain superstition in her mind while working in the field of reproductive sciences. She was always talking about dark magic, even at the oddest moments. She’d told Maseso during a routine fertilization that online gossip was that the Senator had made an evil pact with a water spirit, exchanging his firstborn child for wealth and status.

“I’m telling you!” Ego insisted.

At that Maseso rolled her eyes. “I should have listened to you I guess but it’s too late.”

“No, it’s not too late,” Ego laughed. “Come help me, let’s put that baby in the incubator.”

“That will be pointless,” Maseso said, shuddering. She had no intention of touching it.

But she followed Ego into the calabash room. Both women looked down at the unmoving form that could have been a doll. Xamidimura was a star that didn’t get the chance to be fully born into this world. Maseso had been so close and now, all her efforts had gone to dust. Her stomach heaved, causing Maseso to cover her mouth with both hands. Ego efficiently tossed a scarf over the dead star, the colourful piece of fabric jarring against the still greys and chromes of the room. She wrapped Xamidimura and went upstairs to the incubation room. When she returned, Maseso was back in the front office.

“Contact the Senator,” Maseso directed. “The sooner we get this over with, the better.”

“No,” Ego said. “My Aunt will be able to help us.”

Maseso frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Juju for juju.” Ego replied. “We’ll get her to come and do something, my Aunt is powerful in that.”

“Seriously?” Maseso clicked her tongue.

“You really want your business to end, eh? I guess you’re not that desperate then!” Ego took her seat.

“I have told you never to—” Maseso was interrupted by a low thrumming that sounded through the entire building. A call was coming in.

Ego accepted the call with a flick of her wrist and greeted. “Good morning, ma.”

“Good morning,” the young Maimuna’s voice surrounded them. “How



are you? Is business going well? How about doctor?"

The usual greetings felt torturous as she trailed towards the issue at hand.

"I'm calling to confirm my bonding time."

"Bonding time," Maseso was surprised at the hoarseness in her own voice. It was pointless to do so but she found herself reaching for her table to check the cameras positioned around the outside of the building, as though Hajia Maimuna would be there already.

"Yes," the woman sounded unsure. "It is supposed to be tomorrow. Is everything fine?"

As Maseso struggled for words to say, she was struck with the absurd feeling that Maimuna knew something. Even in an external womb, bonds could be formed, there were even reports of women's abdomens swelling in time with the growth of their fetuses. Two years ago, Hajia's tears had irked Maseso as they consulted with her. It was their first failure, still marginally possible but not unique. Maimuna had shouted things about not wanting to try again, lamenting the stress of getting her hopes up only to have them dashed and Maseso wanted to grab her by her slender shoulders and shake her. Outside there were women begging for even a chance to have their own baby. In the past weeks, Maimuna grudgingly sang and read to Xamidimura during bond times.

"Everything is fine," Ego chimed in. The frown on Maseso's face deepened, her assistant was so insolent.

"Hajia, there's something I would like to discuss with you tomorrow," Maseso said firmly.

"Okay," there was a lilt in Maimuna's voice that made the word sound like a question.

"See you tomorrow," Maseso clicked her fingers, putting an end to the call before Maimuna asked for details or Ego said something unexpected again.

Her assistant pouted. "What will you tell her?"

"The truth!" Maseso stood up and walked to the window, looking up at the blue, cloudless sky.

"Ah! But I thought you said senator juju threatened to shut this place down last time."

"Yes, he did. And if that's what he chooses to do, then so be it," Maseso gritted her teeth.

She didn't really mean it of course. Barely an hour later, Maseso asked the younger woman to mind the lab while she went out. Her destination was Jabi where one of her former colleagues from the National Hospital had set up a private lab like hers. It required leaving Maitama which meant wasting time at various police and army checkpoints. The government

considered it dangerous for people from within the child-present zones to visit other areas and between Guzape and Maitama were areas considered unsafe. There were frequent reports of people being kidnapped and for ransom, their child. On the outside, there was an assumption that everyone in the zones had children and even if they didn't, they had the money or ability to have one created. The transition from the area that had kids and didn't was depressing. The atmosphere seemed gloomier, there were no colourful buildings representing schools and labs, often no electricity or water. It was just a stream of older faces counting down their days to death. The last of the naturally born people were slightly younger than Maseso.

Maseso sat in the back row of the armoured coach that ferried her from Maitama to Jabi. It was a relatively short ride and the presence of two armed officers provided additional security. She hopped off at the Jabi transit station and noted that she had an hour before the return coach arrived. Doctor Ubong was not expecting Maseso but welcomed her, nonetheless. Having been in the business for longer, Ubong's lab was larger with multiple calabash rooms and lab technicians weaving in between them. They sat on a balcony that offered a superb view of the lake and its surrounding greenery.

"It's been happening elsewhere," Ubong said after hearing Maseso out.

This was a surprise to Maseso, though it brought with it some relief. "Is it a contaminated batch of nutrients?"

Ubong shook her head. "It doesn't seem to be. Several reported cases used multiple vendors."

In the silence that followed, Maseso also realized that if any of the tools they used were expired, contaminated or otherwise faulty, it would affect all the other foetuses. The problems would appear in batches, not isolated cases. She still had no answers but at least, Maseso now had something with which begin an explanation to the Senator. Perhaps get his support to fund an investigation and study.

"Let me show you something from the Ministry," Ubong said, excusing herself.

From the open balcony, Maseso watched her rummage through her desk. Ubong returned with her tablet, she sat down and looked over her shoulder and around before handing it to Maseso. What Maseso saw there couldn't be real. A star with brownish-grey skin and darkened eyes. Maseso squinted, then zoomed into the picture. On the side of its neck were three slits that resembled gills.

"Is it alive?" she gasped.

"Yes," Ubong said as she reached for the tablet and switched it off quickly. "Keep your voice down."

"Is this a mutation?" she whispered.

"Possibly," Ubong said, unaffected. "I have sent some samples for

cytogenetic karyotyping and should get the results soon.”

“How did the parents react?”

Ubong leaned closer. “They don’t know. See, what I’m about to tell you isn’t conventional, but there’s this scibalawo.”

“Ah! Not you too,” Maseso’s expression fell. This was the kind of talk that Ego lived for. Always going on about the Aunt, that everyone called a scibalawo. The Aunt that specialised in cases where the supernatural influenced the technological or scientific. Any problem could be healed. Whether it was a haunted smart home system, An AI companion turned abusive lover or online games possessing young children and teenagers. All stories that were unreal to Maseso so it was shocking to hear an accomplished colleague like Ubong speak of them.

“Listen, I can’t explain it either,” Ubong shrugged. “But what works *works*. And I have just shown you evidence that it works. If these clients are difficult, you have a way out.”

Scratching at her chin, Maseso asked. “Is the hospital also working with her?”

“I can’t say for certain that the higher-ups are aware, but she’s slowly becoming an open secret in this business.”

“If this gets out, the country will be in ruins.”

“So far it’s still just a few unborn here and there but rumours are going around that the numbers are rising and more unborn will be affected.”

Ubong continued, “If numbers increase and this reaches the public, at least the government will do something about it. We can conduct a formal study. In the meantime though, we need to deal with difficult couples ourselves.”

Maseso sunk deeply into the chair longing to be awakened from this nightmare. She declined when Ubong offered to add her to a group of their colleagues dealing with the same issue. Maseso thanked her before making her way back to Heavenly Babies and Mothers. She went through the motions, guiding her clients through their bonding times while ignoring the still unmoving ball in the incubator upstairs. Maseso moved with a sense of finality, knowing that if the Senator made good on his threat, her days of being in business were numbered. He could easily have her license withdrawn overnight. As night fell, Maseso climbed up to the stairs. She wiped her sweaty palms on her coat as she approached the room where incubators were kept. Oddly enough, the first thought that crossed her mind in the room was how much money she had spent on each unit. Then, she noticed that Xamidimura wasn’t where Ego had placed it that morning. The colourful wax print scarf was also gone.

Bewildered, Maseso rushed to the office, questioning her mind. Ego wasn’t there so she looked at the camera feeds, verbally commanding the AI to replay the days recording. When she saw the confirmation she was

searching for, Maseso groaned and leaned against her desk. The urgent sounds of people talking reached her from outside. Maseso dragged her feet to the back entrance where a paved path cut through a small garden leading to her living quarters. She saw Ego huddled next to an older woman, they both stood at a spot by the eastern wall.

“Like this?” Ego said.

“Yes.”

That low voice drew goosebumps across Maseso’s flesh, her shock turned to anger as she marched towards them. The strange woman appeared older than Ego but younger than Maseso. She was dressed reasonably enough in a pair of jeans and a flowing top but even before Ego made the introductions, Maseso knew.

“Ah, there’s my madam,” Ego started.

“Can I speak with you?” Maseso tilted her head away with the intent of warning Ego sternly. But then she saw the freshly dug hole in the ground and Xamidimura floating in brown water. The dirt at odds with the sterile environment Maseso maintained. She screamed as she flew towards the hole wanting nothing but to get it out of there, but Ego held her back firmly.

“How dare you!” Maseso shouted, every vein in her bulged.

“I promise, she can help.”

Maseso wasn’t backing down and it seemed Ego wasn’t going to either. They talked over each other with voices getting louder with each passing word.

“You will tell me who is the boss here.”

“I have seen this woman grow a baby.”

“You’re fired!”

“Ehn! But let me save your business first!”

Maseso huffed, she hated being the one to first give in, but she was tired. The emotional turmoil of the day sapped her energy and she crumbled on the grass. It was only then that the Ego let her go. Maseso’s eyes were glued on Xamidimura , speechless.

“You should have told her now,” the woman Ego called Aunt said, amused.

Running a hand over her face, Maseso glared at her, taking in the baubles she wore around her wrists and neck. Maseso clenched her teeth, swallowed the insults that were on the tip of her tongue then looked towards the hole in the ground. The air seemed to stop around her as she paused. Xamidimura had moved. Before she looked away it wasn’t in that position. Her head whipped towards Ego.

“Why are you so stubborn?” Maseso asked. “This is my business, not yours. If any of our clients saw this.”

“I don’t trust Hajia Maimuna,” Ego blurted out. “It’s unfair for this

place to go down because of one couple and their juju, what of all the other stars?"

At least they were having a conversation now, Maseso knew she would have to let Ego go on. Just then, she heard a slight clearing of throat.

"That baby is alive," the scibalawo said. A slight breeze brought the scent of perfume she wore to Maseso's nose. When she looked at the hole again, this time Maseso saw the star's chest move, its little chest rising and falling, limbs twitching.

"This is an illusion," she stuttered.

"No," the scibalawo replied. "What you have here is a spirit child, they need more than your machines to enter this world."

There was silence as Maseso stared on in disbelief.

"You shouldn't be here," Maseso sprang into action, regaining a bit of her composure. "Enough with all of this, Ego escort this woman out and you go ahead with her."

She watched them leave and when she looked at Xamidimura again, it was still enough for her to be sure that it was devoid of life...until its mouth opened and shut. She didn't want to touch it now, even to retrieve it from that hole. As Maseso rushed to ask Ego to return, she was baffled by her own actions. She found both of them at the end of the street waiting for the shuttle bus. Maseso coaxed them back to her property.

At Maseso's suggestion, Ego brought out an empty calabash from the store. From a pouch she carried, the scibalawo placed clay within it, then water.

"Where is the fluid from?" Maseso couldn't help asking.

"It is from the river goddess," the scibalawo replied curtly. She lifted the tiny foetus without flinching and placed it in the calabash.

"You know, when our ancestors had premature babies," she said as she worked. "They would sometimes put them in the earth. The clay has special properties. Every tool I use is special."

Maseso watched as Ego and the scibalawo carried the calabash to the hole they'd dug earlier. It felt like someone else had taken her place and she was observing from afar. Maseso would never have pictured this kind of activity happening in her lab. More clay was slathered over the calabash before the scibalawo began to sing in prayer.

"Ego, would you power up the calabash?" Maseso asked, unwilling to leave the garden just yet.

When Ego returned after powering it up, Maseso found that she could check all Xamidimura's vitals remotely. She breathed in relief as finally, the scibalawo swirled a shot of gin in her mouth and sprayed it from between her lips onto the submerged calabash.

"It is done."

Ego clapped in glee. "Thank you, Aunty!"

Maseso's thanks came out more subdued. She was still in disbelief, unsure of what she had witnessed.

For months, in the corner of the garden was a mound resembling one meant for burial and within it, Xamidimura. No idea why this one preferred dirt to the sanitised fluid the others did. But in the earth, it breathed and thrived, waiting to be born.

# LEKKI LEKKI

By

Mame Bougouma Diene

(with special thanks to [Baaba Maal](#) and [Double Servo](#))

The back of her hand glided under her red and yellow head wrap, wiping the beads of sweat receding into her midnight skin in the shade of the giant tree.

Wind rustled through the leaves and whistled through holes in the trunk, to the shrieking of bats buried in the crevices, bothered in their sleep.

Djoulede dipped her painted fingers in a wooden bowl, relishing the fresh feel of water. She sprinkled droplets on the roots digging deep into the cracked and dusty soil, sucking her fingers for a fleeting taste and repeated, singing a light melody under her breath.

[Sukaabe e mawbe ngare niehen...](#)

She knew the tree could hear her, and know her love. At times it felt as the trunk pulsed like a wayward heart, that somewhere in the calcified bark the memory of sap bled pungent dreams.

...Goto e men fof yo aw lekki...

The behemoth rose above and around her, branches long as it was tall, like twenty men or more. Wide enough to dance and spin on, though Cheikh never wanted to.

*Children and grownups, come with me...*

There was so much it had seen. So many secrets through the centuries of patience and sheer will for life, so much she would share with it soon, that the whole village would share.

...*May every one of us plant a tree...*

“Still singing that old song?”

Cheikh's gritty voice irked her sometimes.

“Why are you always so bitter?” she asked, dusting her hands on her dress and rising.

He looked into the large oval hole in the trunk, large enough for a tall man to step into its caves.

“It is old.” He snapped. “What does it mean now? What is there left to plant? Maybe it made sense to someone two thousand years ago... someone stupid...”

“It makes sense to me...”

“I didn’t mean you, I meant...”

Cheikh didn’t finish his thought, and Djoulde wasn’t sure she wanted to hear it.

He picked up her bowl and walked back towards the village together. She hadn’t seen time fly as she cared for the old bokki. Twilight was dying on the edge of the earth, the village lights blinking the stars out one at a time.

The call to prayer rang from the minarets. Djoulde saw other villagers hurrying home before the protective dome rose against the evening storms, green, blue and multicolored dots against the broken night, and sighed. Perhaps Cheikh would understand one day.

The combined blaring of her father’s call and the whooshing of the giant turbines blowing away the dunes delivered with tender fury by the storm, tore Djoulde out of her slumber.

The sun wouldn’t shine through the dusty vortex until the turbines had worked their magic but cattle always knew, the three cows in the yard bleating for water.

She pulled a rough blue dress over her head and tied her braids in a bun before leaving her room. She clapped her hands and the air conditioner went out, the whiplash of desert heat finishing the job of waking her. Her head was still cloudy with the flames of her dream.

She yawned as she walked into the kitchen.

“You took your time this morning.” He father said, gulping down a cold glass of bohe juice. “Grab yourself some breakfast; we’re taking the cows out soon as the dome is lifted.”

She sat at the large round table. Her mother handed her a plate of whitish-brown fried bohe bread and a glass of juice. The thick, sweet liquid clashed bitter cold against her teeth. She bit into the bread.

“Today? Isn’t it Hamady’s turn?” she said, spitting little bits of crumbs, and wiping her mouth.

Hamady laughed, sitting across from her. He stood up, wearing his light blue worker’s boubou.

“Not today, sis.” He said pointing at his uniform, “Working the Engines in case you can’t tell.”



“At least you’ll be nice and cool in the forest... Yerim, then?”

“He’s on maintenance duty at the solar plant today. He’s been gone for hours.” Her mother said, picking up her father’s glass. “You can’t sing to the trees every damned day. Gidelam,” she told her father, “I’m not your maid; you’ll find your plates waiting when you come back.”

Her father barked a laugh. Something both her brothers had picked up from him.

“Get married, they said. It’ll make your life that much better... Duly noted my love. Djoulde, you done?”

Djoulde finished her glass.

“If no one else will...”

The expanse of long, thin grass stretched ahead and around Djoulde. A green sea full of whimsical currents drawn by the winds. She couldn’t tell where the grasslands ended from where she stood now, the three thin, white cows grazing quietly, their long horns leaving furrows in the meadow. She had walked the length of the plain as a child, to the sands lost on the horizon, a desert so vast it swallowed the world whole.

She had seen it burn and turn to glass in her dream. The flames crackling through the grass until they licked away at the millennial trees. The bokki’s branches flaying in panic, the defiant roar of bark about to split and burst. She slept in its bosom, reveling in the warmth until her hair caught fire...

Her father’s cane slapping the cows’ buttocks brought reality back, and the softness of the grass on her sandaled toes.

“Do you think there’s anybody else out there?”

Her father cleared his throat and spit in the grass.

“You’ve asked me that five times now. Today, when you were six, nine, eleven and fourteen. Took you almost four years this time.”

“But you never gave me a real answer.”

He shrugged in his black boubou, looking up at the sun settling at noon.

“The last recorded newcomers go back almost five or six hundred years, not quite sure. You can check the archives if you want but... I don’t know, somewhere on the other side of the oceans maybe, or the other side of the universe. Maybe they’re asking themselves the same thing, maybe they’re all dead... Happy?”

It was her turn to shrug.

Other herders were scheduled for grazing this morning. All with the same emaciated cows. Goats had gone extinct with good riddance. Goats were a plague on the grass.

She turned towards the forest. The Soul Engines, installed inside the bokki, vibrating and rumbling in the distance.

“It doesn’t matter, I guess. We’re all going back to the earth anyway.”

“I guess so.” Her father replied.

“Then why bother with the cows everyday if that’s how you feel? We get our food from the trees, our water from the roots. We hardly eat any meat at all, we barely use the milk for ceremonies. We won’t be here much longer. But you get up every morning, you wash them, walk them all the way out here every day. What’s the point of dancing by yourself?”

Her father smiled.

“You and your mother... It’s who we are Djoulde. We herded cattle before the world knew we existed. When other people flew, some of us herded cattle. When the world crumbled, and the towers fell we herded cattle. Two thousand years later we herd cattle. It doesn’t matter where we’re going. It doesn’t matter where we came from, it doesn’t matter if we’re here or on the moon Djoulde. We herd cattle, it’s our traditions...And that’s why I take you all in turn with me in the morning. To remind you of that... Speaking of tradition, how are things going with Cheikh? You getting along?”

“It’s alright.” She said, she didn’t know how she felt about Cheikh. She had expected to feel differently. “He’s just always so cynical. He doesn’t believe in anything, I don’t know...”

“Can you blame him?”

She took off her sandals and dug her feet in the ground. It felt so firm, so real, but it wasn’t. It was a dream. When the generators crashed it would wither, dry, and fade to the sands. The dome would never rise again and the trees and the village would disappear. Perhaps that was why her father really kept the cows, to forget that none of it was real.

She shook her head.

“Good. Then maybe you should spend some time together this afternoon. If you’re gonna be married you need to know each other.”

“But baaba, I was...”

“You heard your mother. Someone else will daydream in the trees for you today.” He handed her his stick. “Round up the herd. I could use some lunch.”

“How can you say that?”

“Say what Djoulde? That a halfcocked plan to transfer people into the roots of monstrous trees and live on like that is crazy? You wanna know what I think? I think Chief Tenguela, the Council of Elders, the whole lot of them, want to kill us. Or a lot of us. There’s too many of us, we’re all freaking related. Even our marriage is based on an algorithm. How long do you think we can last like this? Do you even think at all?”

There it was again, that spite for the sake of jabbing her. Couldn’t they just talk? Just once?

He reached across the bed and caught her hand, but she pulled back.

Sitting on his bed, his parents' prayers making their way through the door, she wanted to grab Cheikh by the braids and throw him into the desert.

"Do you have faith in anything? Don't you want anything better than this?"

"I don't mean it like that..."

"You never do... What if it works? What if we could live on? One with the earth?"

"What if we could?"

"We'd be a planet with a conscience. A planet that could guide life instead of suffering from it. When a new people are born to this world they won't be blind like us humans were. Ravenous like we were. They will learn. From us."

"Yeah because we're such a sensible bunch. Look, what happens if it doesn't work and you die? You wouldn't even know. I was with the crew that removed Oumar Bayal's body from the pod and buried it. Remember the test run?"

"Of course I do. The Elders said it worked."

"Maybe. Maybe his soul is really in the roots. Maybe he's just dead. Worse than dead. I've seen dead people. This guy wasn't dead, he was just an empty sheet of skin, the wind could have blown it away. Look. I get it, you want it to be true. But I haven't heard the old man since, have you? Didn't think so."

"I hate you..."

"Then don't marry me. What bloody difference does it make?"

She didn't answer. Cheikh smiled.

"Let me guess, your mom gave you the talk too, huh?" he asked, poking her waist with his elbow.

Djoulde shook her head and laughed. He wasn't always bad.

"Was my dad..."

Cheikh laughed in turn and took her hand.

"What are we without tradition, right?"

Djoulde rolled Cheikh's heavy arm from her shoulder as she opened her eyes to the call to prayer, the sheets still humid with sweat. She couldn't sleep, who could have? The only way she'd found to exhaust herself was...The one thing they seemed to get along doing.

A nervous shudder rocked her body. Delirious excitement clashed with sheer terror. Cheikh snored. The Soul Engine trials were today. They were still of two minds on that. Three months into their marriage.

Cheikh stretched and yawned.

"We're not scheduled until noon. It's barely fadjar. Go back to sleep."

"I'll make some breakfast." Djoulde answered, rising.

She reached for the towel sitting on the chair by the bed, and wrapped it

around her waist.

She wasn't going back to bed, the trees called her, they would be one soon.

They would all be one.

The overlapping waves of light drew sly rictus on the trees, grinning deep shadows where there were none, while dizzied steps carried her closer to the heart of the forest.

It was the first time she had wandered this deep. The pulsing glow of the engines, overwhelming now was invisible outside. In the daytime, the sun drowned it out and at night, the storms blinded everything. She wasn't alone, guided with Cheikh and the hundred more scheduled for the day's trials by a tall dark woman in a white dress stained at the ankles with dust and dirt, but to her it felt like they weren't really there. That she was marching amongst ghosts.

Djoulde wondered if the others felt the same, that they had crossed a threshold into the forest that connected all worlds, that in an infinity they were none, that a step into the shadows was a step into oblivion. Maybe they didn't feel anything at all.

Her eyes adjusted to the light just as her body shivered from mechanic rumbling.

"We're here." the tall woman said as they all stopped.

"Where else could we be?" Cheikh mumbled.

The trees before them and beyond glowed with a reflective light, trunks and branches laced with slick metal, connected across the soil by slithering black cables to large grey cubes vibrating with a collective hum like the voices of a million bugs calling to be born.

A flurry of scientists in white dresses and boubou busied around them. Maintenance workers in blue tended to individual trees and power sources. Perhaps Hamady was one of them, but there were so many trees so far ahead she wouldn't see him even if he was.

Cheikh spat on the ground beside her.

"Look at all this wasted energy. I'm telling you th..."

"Men, follow Oulay here." The woman said pointing at a colleague settling next to her. "Women come with me, I'm Ayida Boucoum."

Djoulde exhaled relief at not having to answer Cheikh.

"See you later." She said. "Don't make a fool of yourself."

Cheikh grunted and followed the others.

Ayida led them deeper into the woods. Chrome reflected on chrome, projecting their reflection flowing from trunk to trunk and back. She caught herself facing herself and walking away in two directions all at once.

She stumbled and rested her hand against the nearest trunk.

"It's ok." Ayida said, helping her straighten. "I thought I would lose my

mind after weeks in here. You'll be fine, we've arrived."

Two women slid between the trunks to meet them.

"Thanks Ayida. We'll take it from here. Ladies. Welcome to the Soul Engines. We will brief you on the procedure and have you take the trials. We know this is overwhelming, believe me. I'm Sokhna Boiro, some of you know me, some of you don't. And this is Khady Ndione."

"Same story." Khady said.

Djoulde caught a glimpse inside the hollowed trunks, lined with open pods, of the same shiny metal that coated the trees, tall enough to fit a person, with what looked like red cushioning inside.

"Intriguing isn't it?" Sokhna asked catching her glance. "I know they say a lot of things in the village many of them scary, most of them untrue. Let us explain. Khady?"

"Sure. The Engines are very complicated but quite simple. The world is a network, everything is interconnected. We all evolved from the same original organism. Billions of years ago. Down to our DNA. We are one with the earth. One with the wind. And yes, one with the cows we herd in the morning." We laughed as she caught her breath. "The trees and plants around us too. And they communicate. Organically. They know who we are and fear us when we wish them harm, and love us when we give them love and they let the others know, through their roots, through their spores and sap. We have mapped these networks and now, we can connect to them more directly through the Soul Engines. These engines parse out our human consciousnesses and pulse them into the network, mimicking the bokki's own bio-chemical signals, those signals are transmitted into the roots of the trees and conducted into the earth where they become one with the planet. Growing with new saplings, spreading through open spores. Our way of life is no longer sustainable, if we want to survive we have to adjust to the world, adapt and embrace it. For thousands of years humanity has tried to shape the world in its image. We failed and did so much damage to the world in the process. Now, we pay it back."

Djoulde could barely breathe. They worked on the engines when she was a child. When her parents were children. She hadn't thought she would see the day. But it was here. Almost here.

"You'll be scanned and fitted into a transmission pod for testing. Today and on the day of. Don't worry, it's painless. We just need to verify a few things. Many of you are married women, we need to check that you are not with child before we can try the machines. We must also ensure that your own brainwaves are compatible with the bio-chemical network matrix. Is everybody with me?"

They all nodded agreement, some slower than others. Djoulde pictured Cheikh snickering in the manner of men.

Khady smiled.

“You are brave, and strong. You will do the earth honor. We all will, I’m sure. Alright, the following come with me, the others with Sokhna. Nani Sow. Djoulde Diallo...”

Djoulde came to in midafternoon warmth, the forest a few hundred feet behind her, Cheikh shaking her by the shoulders.

How she got there was as clear as his lips moving soundlessly to droplets of spit.

It was real. All of it.

The pods had slid shut, and the red cushion squeezed her warmly into darkness. Not sleep, not quite sleep, fully at rest yet aware of herself, and she heard him. Late Oumar Bayal calling her name, unsure she could hear him. *Djoulde*. He had asked. *Djoulde, are you there?*

She hadn’t said a word but she felt his relief at her presence, a smile and mischief.

“Watch...” he whispered.

She’d sunk deeper into the darkness, her head bursting through the soil into sunlight. A city gleaming in the distance where the desert stood now, a river streaming through it to a sky of deep blue abysses. In a flash she stood fifty feet above in another a hundred, and as she grew the city shrunk, her arms impossibly long and stiff, until there was nothing but dust swirling woolly death to the horizon.

And all the while a murmur, soft with radiant energy calling her into its roots...

“Djoulde! Djoulde dammit wake up!”

“Cheikh!” she screamed throwing her arms around him, her head on his chest. “Did you hear? Did you see? Don’t you see now? It’s real, all of it!”

Cheikh pushed her back and turned around.

“I didn’t hear anything... I’m not going...”

Cheikh downed a glass and poured himself another. His fifth today. Takussan, afternoon prayer, was still hours away.

“The pitcher’s empty.” He snapped, waving it at her.

Fode Dem had walked into the desert this morning. Fatima Kane, Ibrahim Dia and Pape Mor Sylla yesterday. Twelve-year-old Adama Ba two days ago and Friday had seen a record of thirty that she knew of. They had finished praying and wandered off into the desert.

A week since the trials ended, two more before they left.

Djoulde grabbed the pitcher from his hand. Cheikh was meaner drunk than usual, but at least he was still here.

She filled the pitcher from a bottle of fermented bohe and handed it to him reaching for his shoulder. He grabbed her hand and pulled her.

“Is that what you want for me? Leaving me to die with the others?”

Someone else would walk into the desert and never come back before nightfall. Thousands more would follow.

He was mean. Bitter and mean but wouldn't she if she'd been told she couldn't go? If her mother and father were left behind too? In spite of all the spite, deep down, he'd wanted to go.

She pulled her arm away, grabbed his face and kissed him. Could she leave her husband behind? Should she?

Yes.

Yes, she would.

Until then they could do the one thing they were good at together, and kissed him deeper.

Djoulede's dress slipped from Cheikh's hand, but stayed caught in the door sliding shut behind her.

There was nothing to it. Between Cheikh crying, screaming and begging, and the excited buzz of the throngs of people she hadn't had thought of what to wear.

What did it matter? They were almost there.

Her parents and brothers waited for her outside, catching her stumble as her dress ripped in the doorframe.

"Took long enough!" Hamady laughed as he helped her stand.

Her mother hugged her.

"How are you?" she asked.

She had no idea.

"And how is Cheikh?"

"Who cares?" Yerim said. "Guy's a goat."

"Be quiet." Her father said. "Think of all those who wandered off to die. They weren't all bad people. Leave it all behind son, don't carry that anger where we are going."

They melted into the crowd. She couldn't feel her legs, somehow, she moved forward, the crowd singing a deep joyful yet almost weeping melody.

Lekki ki do lekki,

Aadi nafore waalii ngourdam

*Tree. This tree so useful, has changed our life...*

It was the perfect rhyme for the time. She should have felt happy, excited, nauseous even, instead she floated numb into immortality.

Would Cheikh live? If he died would they find him in the roots? Soon they would be everywhere, surely they would find everyone. Everyone and everything that had ever died. Strata through strata of long-gone life but persistent memory.

Did she leave him to die? Could she forgive herself? Carrying that weight forever? She only had a few minutes to figure it out, the sky already

darkened by branches.

Her heart pounded so fiercely the world around her turned to blinding light, her head spun and she retched on her sandals.

Her brothers laughed.

“You had to leave your mark didn’t you?”

She wiped her mouth on her sleeve as her mother handed her a sip of water and smiled.

“It’s gonna be alright. We’re all gonna be alright.”

They reached the engines and hugged each other. They all did. Family and friends, and people who’d hated each other deeply. She expected to hear sobs but didn’t.

“We’ll see each other soon.” Her father said, beaming as he hugged her last. “Look out for your mother. She might run off.”

“Anything but an eternity with you gidelam. One life was entirely enough...” she kissed his forehead. “I will see you soon...”

They walked off as Djoulde and her mother lined up with the other women. Singing the song, scanners flashing a soft blue as they walked towards their pods, reflections of thousands melting into each other on the trunks of the giant bokki.

Her mother turned to her and smiled as she passed through the scanner. Every wrinkle on her face smoothing, a glimpse of who she had been, of who she saw in the mirror, as she still saw herself. She held out her hand as Djoulde followed her, and the scanner flashed red.

Her mother’s smile dropped, her face aging in a frown, their fingers brushed each other as two women in white approached them and turned to her.

“Salaam Aleikum. Don’t worry. We just need to run a quick test. Please follow us.”

“Wait! That’s my daughter! That’s...”

Two more women approached her mother, smiling.

“It’s fine. She’ll be back in no time. Please. There are other women waiting.”

“I’ll be fine Nene.” Djoulde said, “Just go, ok? We’ll be alright. I’ll see you soon.” She smiled. “On the other side.”

The flood of women didn’t abate, the scanner flashing blue, blue, blue, her mother dissolving in the flow.

“I’m Reyhanna.” One of them asked as they reached the last of the shinning trees. “What’s your name?”

“Djoulde. Djoulde Diallo.”

They stopped and the two women stepped back, arms folded under their breasts.

“We’re sorry, Djoulde. We are very sorry. You are pregnant. You can’t go.”



Djoulde sat on her bed, the air conditioning unit roaring behind her. She had never noticed how loud it was, but in the silence of the empty village it was all she could hear.

Cheikh slept in the kitchen, passed out on the table.

She should have been cold, but the hilt of the knife pressed against her stomach slipped in her sweaty palms.

The tip slid through the threads in her dress, grating against her skin. Just a push. Not even that hard, just a small push.

The life she carried had cost her hers. Had cost her her dream. Her only dream. Her family. How could she ever carry it? Birth it? Love it?! It would be so simple, just a small...

A droplet of blood pearled around the blade and the knife clanged on the floor to a single sob.

She couldn't do it.

Three children played in the grass as Djoulde and Arsike walked passed them towards the forest. They had tied strings to a small post and ran around it until the string tensed, and light as they were, they bounced off their feet and took off spinning to delighted giggles.

Something had changed. The children were inconsolable at first. Their friends gone. Their parents gone. Everyone engrossed in their own misery and no one to guide them. Beside the wailing wind the only sound the village knew for months was infant sorrow. But not for the past few weeks.

Arsike tugged at her arm, eager to join them. Her small hand almost slipped through Djoulde's fingers.

She looked just like her grandmother. She had told her that herself.

"I look like grandma!"

"Who told you that?" Djoulde had asked.

"Grandma!"

She was a bright child, so alive. So happy. She had no fear, an imagination that changed her world with each passing thought. This world was new to her. She didn't know pain. She didn't know loss. Not yet.

"You'll play later. Your father doesn't like to wait."

She nodded hard and pulled closer to her mother.

For two years Djoulde hadn't come near the forest. The thought of leaving the village, of feeling the cool shade on her face froze her very soul. She couldn't walk. Will them though she might, her legs wouldn't move. Her mind would go blank. She would faint. Neighbors would drag her in and she'd wake up in bed, Cheikh looming over her, yelling about embarrassing him.

When Arsike turned three she started asking about the trees. The trees called her she said. She had to see the trees. And so she had. She was

exactly like Djoulde'd been as a child.

"Let's sing, nene!"

She knelt by her daughter and let her start. Hearing her shrill voice she felt the knife against her stomach and shuddered, picking up the melody.

How could she have thought of killing her? She loved her so much.

Arsike giggled, pushing her lips to the trunk as evening prayer rang in the distance. They'd been there for hours.

Hours. Months. Years. It made no difference. She opened herself with all her heart, sang to rip out her throat, every day, and yet, she didn't hear her family or the others. Four years. Four years now.

Cheikh was right.

They had all walked singing to their death.

The door slid open slowly and Djoulde tiptoed inside. Arsike breathing softly on the back of her neck, sleeping as the storm blasted the dome behind them. Cheikh would be out cold, he'd been restless for weeks but too much noise and...

"Sneaking in?" he asked sitting at the kitchen table in the dark. The thin glow breaking in lighting bloodshot, angry eyes over his dark face. He stood up, knocking a glass to the floor, rounding the table towards her. She circled away, the sourness of fermented drink on his breath, wafting vomitous into her nose.

He wouldn't touch Arsike. He never had.

"Think you can keep my daughter from me, do you?" he asked, reaching to grab her and missing. "You try to leave me and now you want to steal my daughter!"

She slipped and almost fell, barely avoiding another lurch.

"Nene?" Arsike asked, yawning against her back. "Nene, where..." she saw her father closing in over her mother's shoulder. "...Baaba? Baaba, no! Not again!"

Her mother hugged her in a field of crops. Cattle by the thousands drifted on the horizon invisible but for the cloud of dust surrounding them.

Her father and brothers conversed with a man of light skin, sharp eyes and strange, shiny, smooth green and gold clothing, throwing their head back and laughing.

The village was nowhere in sight, the forest neither, but crowds of people congregated throughout the field, some sitting and eating, children playing games and rolling in the grass. They weren't all her people, most weren't but she distinguished a known face in every group she saw.

"My daughter. My first-born. We didn't want to leave you. I didn't know. But we are here. We will help you."

The bruises on Djoulde's cheeks stung at her mother's words.

She pointed to her face.

“This is what you left me to! This is how you help me? You left. You left me. But I don’t need your help. I am not a child anymore. I have one of my own. I won’t let this happen again. She will...”

Her mother’s face hardened.

“What are you whispering to me?”

Djoulde froze; her mother grabbed her by the shoulders, digging nails into her skin.

“Stop whispering to me!”

The field went silent. The thousands of people sitting and talking stood and closed in on her, arms out clawing at her hair and face.

“Stop whispering to me!!”

Djoulde awoke to Cheikh shaking her furiously, screaming at her face while Arsike cried in her bed.

“I won’t walk into the desert! I won’t!” he ran naked out of the bed, climbing over her and into the kitchen his hands on his ears. “Stop whispering to me!”

Djoulde ran to cradle her daughter’s head. The warm wetness of her cheeks slipping against her breast.

“Why is daddy like this?” she asked, words setting Djoulde’s bruised body aflame. “What have we done wrong?”

“You’ve done nothing wrong.” She said; her curly hair caught between her fingers. “We’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Why isn’t Grandma helping us? She promised.”

Djoulde held her at arm’s length.

“What?”

“Grandma mommy, grandma. She was telling me she would help us. Just before daddy started screaming again.”

Cheikh’s voice boomed from the kitchen.

“Stop talking to me!”

Djoulde put Arsike down.

“You stay here. I’ll be right back.”

Cheikh sat in the kitchen, holding his head and banging it on the table in turn.

“Leave me alone!” he screamed and saw Djoulde standing across the table from him. “You.” He snarled, rising slowly. “You. It’s you!”

He charged, but Djoulde didn’t move. She bent down, picked up a shard of broken glass and walked towards him.

“You won’t touch me again.” She slashed the air before her, missing his nose by a breath. “You’ll never.” She sliced again, blood running across his cheek. “Touch me. Again!”

She lunged forward, Cheikh fell back, crawling towards the kitchen

door.

“Leave me alone! All of you leave me alone!”

The door slid open and Cheikh bolted out.

Djoulde stumbled after him. She had never spent much time outside at night. But the dome's faint orange glow, lacerated with gritty static at the onslaught of sand and debris, felt like a reflection of her fractured soul.

“Nene!” Arsike called from a crack in the door. Djoulde picked her up and ran.

Cheikh sped on ahead screaming, lights appearing in windows as he passed.

He didn't slow or stop. Djoulde doubted he could see anything at all.

His head slammed into the dome.

He fell back. Djoulde put her daughter down and reached for him.

He got back up and ran head first into the dome again. And again. All the while screaming to be left alone, for the whispers to stop. Again. And again, and...

Something cracked. He fell back, wrecked with spasms and stopped, the imprint of his face in blood sliding down the dome like raindrops on a window.

Djoulde didn't move. The buzz of bystanders fading. He was gone. She felt no shame at the lightness in her shoulders. At the strength she felt in her legs.

“Thank you grandma.” Arsike said, hugging her thigh.

The wind carried hints of a rain that would never fall. Instead a thin sheen of wet air sprinkled Djoulde and Arsike's faces, as they sat in the shade of the baobab, Arsike sprinkling the roots to soft giggles.

She hadn't let the villagers bury Cheikh in the forest. His body left in the desert for the night's storm to shred to dust.

Arsike didn't seem to care. She sprinkled the roots and listened to something before nodding her head.

“How long have you heard your Grandma?”

Arsike shrugged and lay her head on her lap.

“Since I was in your belly?”

Djoulde's eyes filled with tears.

“Are you talking to her now?”

Arsike nodded.

“I talk to grandpa too sometimes.”

“Can I ask her something?”

“She says you can ask anything you want. Just ask me and she'll hear you.”

Djoulde hesitated.

“She says she's sorry. That she should have waited. She never wanted to

leave you.”

Djoulde waved her hand.

“She doesn’t need to.” She said “There was nothing she could have done. It wasn’t her fault.”

“Do you love me mommy?”

“Of course!”

“Do you forgive me too?”

She pulled her daughter closer.

“There is nothing to forgive, bingelam, nothing.... Can the other children hear her too?”

Arsike nodded.

“Why can’t I?” Even Cheikh had.

“It’s too late for the adults. If you did you would go crazy like daddy.”

“But in the dream I saw all these people and...”

“It was just a dream, mommy.”

Djoulde's breath stayed stuck in her throat, there was something she needed to know but didn’t want to.

“And will... will I ever see you again?”

Arsike looked up at her mother.

“No.”

“No? Not even when I...”

“No.”

Tears ringed Djoulde’s eyelids like pearls.

“Grandma, grandpa, my uncles, none of them will be there forever either, mommy. That’s not how life works. I’ll walk into the engines one day too, and others after me. We were always one with nature” she giggled, “It’s our tradition! Grandpa says.” She laughed some more.

The tears bubbling in her eyes streamed down her cheeks. Arsike wiped one off with her finger.

“Don’t cry, mommy. Grandma says that’s the lesson. The mistake we made all those thousands of years ago. The world cried and we couldn’t hear it, but just because you can’t hear, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t listen...”

Djoulde cleaned her tears, breathing in the dry scent of the trees and nodded.

Arsike caught her hand.

“Come mommy. Let’s sing now.”

Sukaabe e mawbe ngare niehen,

Goto e men fof yo aw lekki...



## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**



**T.L. HUCHU** is a writer whose work has appeared in *Lightspeed*, *Interzone*, *AfroSF*, *The Apex Book of World SF 5*, *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Mystery Weekly*, *The Year's Best Crime and Mystery Stories 2016*, and elsewhere. He is the winner of a Nommo Award for African SFF, and has been shortlisted for the Caine Prize and the Grand Prix de L'Imaginaire. His fantasy novel *The Library of the Dead*, the first in the "Edinburgh Nights" series, will be published by Tor in the US and UK in 2021. Find him @TendaiHuchu.





**NNEDI OKORAFOR** is the Naijamerican PhD-holding, World Fantasy, Hugo, Nebula, Eisner Award-winning, rudimentary cyborg writer of africanfuturism, africanjuicism & Marvel's Shuri. Her works include *Who Fears Death* (currently in development at HBO into a TV series), the Binti novella trilogy, *The Book of Phoenix*, the Akata books and *Lagoon*. She is the winner of Hugo, Nebula, World Fantasy, Locus and Lodestar Awards, an Eisner Award nominee, and her debut novel *Zahrah the Windseeker* won the prestigious Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature. Nnedi has also written comics for Marvel, including *Black Panther: Long Live the King* and *Wakanda Forever* (featuring the Dora Milaje) and the Shuri series. Her science fiction comic series *LaGuardia* (from Dark horse) is an Eisner and Hugo Award nominee and her memoir *Broken Places & Outer Spaces* is a Locus Award nominee. Nnedi is also creating and cowriter the adaptation of Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* with Viola Davis and Kenyan film director Wanuri Kahiu. Nnedi holds two MAs (literature and journalism ) and a PhD (literature). She lives with her daughter Anyaugo and family in Illinois. Follow Nnedi on twitter (as @Nnedi), Facebook and Instagram. Learn more about Nnedi at [Nnedi.com](http://Nnedi.com).



**DILMAN DILA** is a writer, filmmaker, and author of a critically acclaimed collection of short stories, *A Killing in the Sun*. His works have been listed in several prestigious prizes, including a nomination for the British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) Awards (2019), a long list for BBC International Radio Playwriting Competition (2014), and a short list for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize (2013). Dila's short fiction and non-fiction writings have appeared in several magazines and anthologies, including *Uncanny Magazine*, *A World of Horror*, *AfroSF v3*, and the *Apex Book of World SF 4*. His films have won many awards in major festivals on the African continent.



**TLOTLO TSAMAASE** is a Motswana writer of fiction, poetry, and architectural articles. Her work has appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Terraform*, *Apex Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *The Dark*, and other publications. Her poem "I Will Be Your Grave" was a 2017 Rhysling Award nominee. Her short story, *Virtual Snapshots* was longlisted for the 2017 Nommo Awards. Her novella *The Silence of the Wilting Skin* is out now from Pink Narcisuss Press. You can find her on Twitter at [@tlotlotsamaase](https://twitter.com/tlotlotsamaase) and at [tlotlotsamaase.com](http://tlotlotsamaase.com)



**DEREK LUBANGAKENE** is a Ugandan writer, blogger and screenwriter, whose work has appeared in *Escape Pod*, *Apex Mag*, *Omenana*, *Enkare Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Kalahari Review*, *The Missing Slate* and the *Imagine Africa 500* anthology, among others. Listed as one of *Tor.com*'s new SFF writers to watch, his work has also been shortlisted for the 2019 Nommo Awards - best short story, longlisted for 2017 Writivism Short Story Prize and the 2013 Golden Baobab/ Early Chapter Book Prize.

In 2016, he received the Short Story Day Africa/All About Writing Development Prize. He is currently working on a short story anthology and his first novel. When not writing or reading, Derek spends his days fundraising for a non-profit wildlife conservation organisation. He lives online at [www.dereklubangakene.com](http://www.dereklubangakene.com)



**RAFEEAT ALIYU** is a writer and documentary filmmaker. Her short stories have been published in *Strange Horizons*, *Nightmare*, *Expound* and *Omenana* magazines, as well as *Queer Africa 2* and the *AfroSF Anthology of African Science Fiction* anthology. Rafeeat is a Clarion West Graduate (2018). You can learn more about her on her website [rafeeataliyu.com](http://rafeeataliyu.com)



**MAME BOUGOUMA DIENE** is a Franco –Senegalese American humanitarian and the US/Francophone spokesperson for the African Speculative Fiction Society ([www.africansfs.com](http://www.africansfs.com)). You can find his work in Brittle Paper, Omenana, Galaxies Magazine, Edilivres, Fiyah!, Truancy Magazine, EscapePod and Strange Horizons, and in anthologies such as *AfroSFv2 & V3* (Storytime), *Myriad lands* (Guardbridge Books), *You Left Your Biscuit Behind* (Fox Spirit Books), *This Book Ain't Nuttin to Fuck Wit* (Clash Media), *Sunspot Jungle* (Rosarium Publishing), and *Dominion* (Aurelia Leo). His collection *Dark Moons Rising on a Starless Night* (Clash Books) was nominated for the 2019 Splatterpunk Award.



**MAZI NWONWU** is the pen name of Chiagozie Fred Nwonwu, a Lagos-based journalist and writer. While journalism and its demands take up much of his time, when he can, Mazi Nwonwu writes speculative fiction, which he believes is a vehicle through which he can transport Africa's diverse culture to the future. He is the co-founder of Omenana, a speculative fiction magazine and a Senior Broadcast Journalist with the BBC. His work has appeared in *Lagos 2060* (Nigeria's first science fiction anthology), *Afro.SF* (the first PAN-African Science Fiction Anthology), *Sentinel Nigeria*, *Saraba Magazine* and *It Wasn't Exactly Love*, an anthology on sex and sexuality published by Farafina in 2015.

## ABOUT THE EDITOR



**WOLE TALABI** is a full-time engineer, part-time writer and some-time editor from Nigeria. His stories have appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (F&SF), *Lightspeed*, *Omenana*, *Terraform*, and several *other* places. He edited the anthologies *These Words Expose Us* and *Lights Out: Resurrection* and co-wrote the play *Color Me Man..* His fiction has been nominated for several awards including the Caine Prize for African Writing and the Nommo Award which he won in 2018. His work has also been translated into Spanish, Norwegian, Chinese and French. His collection of stories, *Incomplete Solutions*, is published by Luna Press. He likes scuba diving, elegant equations and oddly shaped things. He currently lives and works in Malaysia. Find him online at [wtalabi.wordpress.com/](http://wtalabi.wordpress.com/) and [@wtalabi](https://twitter.com/wtalabi) on twitter.



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Brittle Paper is Africa's premier online literary brand inspiring readers to explore and celebrate African literary experiences in all its diversity.

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