

THE HAND OF MENES CHAPTERS 1-4

THE HAND OF MENES
BOOK 1

M. H. APPLETON



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INTRODUCTION

This is a SAMPLE of a work of fiction written for YOU. It is a captivating thriller that goes against the grain of what precedes it.

It is written from the multiple points of view of characters you will either love or hate yet are quite identifiable depending on your character trait.

With that said, please enjoy this disruptive literary experience while you are either travelling or at home and do let me know what you think via my contact details at X (formerly Twitter) left below.

Thank you for keeping reading fun and relevant.

Sincerely,

M.H. Appleton

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PROLOGUE

45 Years Earlier

The hand on her shoulder slowly turned her in the opposite direction towards the car. With legs heavy, she was struck by how identical the men were the closer she inched towards them. She had seen twins before, but not like this. Their hair and goatees seemed to have the same count of grey, almost like seeing the reflection in water. They were of similar height, a head shorter than she was and were dressed in dark purple three-piece suits, wearing similar pairs of dark glasses.

After coming to a stop before them, one of the twins tied her hands behind her back. She screamed for help when the other man opened the back door of the car and forced her in. The leather seat held the heat of the sun, but her skin could bear the discomfort while her heart struggled to cope. A salty aftertaste of tears streaked over her thick lips and dripped from her chin. She twisted her body and knelt in the backseat, screaming for

help through the rear windshield, but her parents were unmoved. They stood watching with relief painted across their faces.

Adanech wailed at her mother and father until the growing distance left them as little more than specs on the horizon.

The ash-grey all-wheel drive was well-kept, and the aroma of leather was superseded by an uneasy silence during the journey from Kananga. Neither of the men spoke or acknowledged her as they travelled north, keeping on the outskirts of the many lakes that blanketed the country's eastern border. Adanech had never been this far, but she knew the African landscape from the maps she'd secretly studied. The terrain was uneven, and the jarring bounce of the vehicle propelled her upwards, slamming the top of her head into the roof of the car. She peered at the gazelles, zebras, and kudus, some of which stared back at her with cautious curiosity. The lioness sprawled out with cubs and pride in the shade of an acacia. They seemed so happy, so free. If only she could be like them. Why couldn't her parents accept her like the lioness that accepted and loved her cubs? The spirit inside her stirred with a fiery determination to be anything but human. She wanted to be the wind, the sun, the trees, the cub. She wanted to be wild and free.

She was shaken from her thoughts when the car came to a sudden stop outside Lake Rutanzige, one of the blue shapes on the map. By then, the moon had taken the place of the sun as the night creatures sprang to life, making melodic sounds that warmed with familiarity. Where did the time go? With her heart pounding in her ears and throat, she searched the terrain on either side of her for other landmarks, but it was too dark. No sooner had she settled back in her seat than the man on the

passenger side turned towards her and forced a black sack over her head.

I will cry no more. I no longer have anyone to cry to.

The car lurched forward before she drifted into unconsciousness.

Hours later, a thundering sound hitting the bonnet of the car shook her awake. Her chest heaved in rapid succession as her lungs begged for more air, but the sound remained, getting more deafening as the car inched forward. When the sound became more familiar, her heaving chest slowed, and her lungs relaxed after the vehicle completed its crawl through the waterfall before slowing to a stop. She could still hear the thundering roar of the water exploding on the rocks below.

When the front car door opened, she knew the journey was over. Adanech scurried her skinny frame from one side of the car seat to the next and recoiled, not knowing from which side the attack would come. Bloodcurdling stories of human trafficking from the village elders flooded her brain. Were her parents human traffickers? Her mouth dried, and her chest tightened.

Is this how an animal felt when the other boys and I were hunting it?

She screamed as loud as she could and threw herself towards the other end of the backseat when the left side of the rear door opened.

Despite her thrashing and kicking, she was pulled out of the car with more care than she'd anticipated. The air outside was damp and musty with a slight chill to it.

"Where am I? What do you want with me?" she asked.

Beneath the black hood, tears flowed, betraying her promise to cry no more, but knowing that children who were trafficked were either used for sex or for their

organs proved a more powerful force than any affirmation of bravery.

The twins were on either side of her, each gripping an upper arm as they guided her forward. She tried to memorise the many twists and turns as they navigated the rugged terrain of what felt like the inside of a cave. Sensing an opportunity, Adanech tried to trip herself on one of the rocks to throw them off balance. But they reacted by hoisting her over the jagged stone and back on her feet in one smooth motion.

The thunderous crescendo of the waterfall faded with each stride, and after a count of 153 paces, the path underfoot became flat and less treacherous. After a further 37 paces, the added pressure on her upper arms was a signal for her to stop.

Despite the chill, she sweated through every pore in her body, forming streams that flowed down her back and from her armpits.

Adanech had never experienced fear, but she suddenly felt like the many animals she hunted, trapped and speared for food.

THE SPACE inside the sack was not as black as before, but the air around her had not changed. The sounds she detected emitted soft ripples of echo. She sniffed the air like an okapi but couldn't detect the scent of plants, nor the musk of wet wood or stench of animal droppings. Instead, her nostrils flared from an unrecognisable and unnatural scent. Whatever it was, it had a calming effect.

Her ears stiffened from the sound of footsteps that didn't belong to the twins—they walked like cats. The one who bought her for sex, or her organs pounded the

earth with every step. His footfall drew closer until his breath passed through the hood. Being blinded while the trafficker was breathing on her face was like a hyena toying with its prey before ripping off its face. She shuddered and jumped backwards, but she could only go as far as the twins would allow. Her body stiffened. Her mind prepared for the knife to rupture her belly in search of a liver, which would be preferable to them touching her down there. Then, without warning, the sack was pulled off her head while the rope that bounded her hands was severed, creating a tingling sensation when the blood rushed back to her fingers.

She rubbed her eyes to adjust to the flood of light before massaging her sore wrists. Not standing a foot away from her was a man about the same age as her father, dressed in traditional tribal attire. He was slightly bent, but standing upright, he would've been taller than her. His face was stern, and he carried the expression of someone inspecting a goat before buying it. His dark brown eyes, however, revealed a depth of strength and determination as he seemed to gaze into her soul. She studied him, preparing to attack if he touched her, but his warm smile and eyes confused her.

“There will be no need for that young one.” His voice made her shudder. “You are right where you should be.”

“Where am I?” The tremor in her subdued voice exposed her unwavering anxiety.

He stepped forward. “What do you see?”

The question was simple but strange.

“What do you see?” he repeated with more force.

Adanech's pulse slowed. *This is a test.* Maybe her parents would finally allow her to become a hunter. “I see we are in a cave. I see that the rocks on the wall

sparkle like a piece of broken glass under the sun. I see the large statues of African warriors that tower above us. I see the Zulu warrior king, Shaka, is one of them. I see a stone table behind you. On that stone table is a hand carved from black onyx, with an acacia tree sprouting from its blood soaked palm. Above the table, I see words I do not recognise. I see the hundreds of candles that light this cave. I see this walkway we stand on is paved while the rest of the structure is not. I see that you are old like my father.”

I'm going to become a hunter. The flutter in her stomach intensified.

“And of the statues, how many do you see?”

“Eleven. Six on the right and five on the left.”

“And how many of us are in this room?”

She jerked her head backwards at the question. There were only the two of them. She saw the twins leave after they cut her free. “Two. Just you and me.”

“Look again.”

Adanech recorded the space with her eyes. “I only see two. You and me,” she said with a hint of finality.

The man’s reply was dismissive. “When you know the answer to that question, you will be ready.”

“I’m ready,” she begged. “I can hunt!”

The man she would soon know as Papa Obatala placed a cool palm on her cheek.

“My child, at 15 years of age, your days of hunting animals are behind you. Now, I must prepare you to hunt men. But first, you must learn to see that which is beyond sight,” said the man who didn’t want her for organs or sex before he turned and motioned for her to follow through a stone door with the inscription THE HAND OF MENES chiselled in bold letters.

JOSHUA

His heart weighed heavy as he stared at her children. Each day that passed was another day that it shattered from the intensity of the pain. Mother's pain. He was both relieved and distraught that he wasn't alive when they came and took her children centuries before his time. He would've fought them. They raped every piece of her that was divided and took all that she had, but that wasn't enough. Like starving vultures, they scrambled and hustled to tear at her flesh and dance on the corpses of her children.

Bearing witness to their current blood lust, he felt powerless in the midst of their feeding frenzy as they licked their hands stained with the blood of children past and present. Their guttural, slurping sounds of gratification still echoed across generations, reminiscent of a time when they were cave dwellers no less feral than the animals they hunted.

But there was still hope, for in her death throes, Mother's plight gave birth to THE HAND OF MENES

(THOM), to fulfil one purpose: liberate Mother and her children.

Joshua lived for the day when he would see them burn for their crimes. It was why all Mother's children under his guidance had to bleed... their bones broken. They had to relinquish all thoughts of the individual for the freedom of the collective. It was the only way to prepare them for the rise of the Mleta Moto.

"Again!" he instructed as the rap of his cane on the laminated floor bounced off the walls of the training room.

Mother's children rushed to formation as their bare feet slapped the sweat-splattered surface. The dampness on the floor glimmered when the sun broke over the horizon, beaming rays of light through the stained-glass window on the east wall.

The children, future askari of THOM and victims of a white-dominated world, repeated the performance of the kata. They were all orphans; lost souls being trained to reclaim Mother's greatness. With each day that passed, she became weaker, her children more subjugated, destitute and hopeless.

The search for the Mleta Moto had never felt more urgent. Yet, with four billion children, most were oblivious to her past glory and current pain. In their misguided desire to pursue selfish ambitions, the children turned away from Mother and looked instead to her subjugators for deliverance.

Another thud from the cane on the hard floor. "*Mikono ya kifo!*" (death hands).

The children heeded Joshua's instruction and performed the martial arts kata. Their full black karategi flapped around their arms, emitting joyous memories of

the Angolan flag slapping the night air above THOM's Luanda Chapter.

He was like them once, youthful and energetic. Muscles aching after each training session. Sweat flowed until his body had no more to give. He, too, bled and suffered fractured limbs and a broken nose. Yet training to become an askari, a soldier, for Mother was the happiest time of his life. He had a purpose back then and rose all the way to the 13th level until his dream of fighting for her died.

Joshua observed their performance of the kata and scowled. He wanted them to succeed, but they seemed soft, unworthy to be askaris. Yet he knew they could not fail. Must never fail. For, in his condition, only through them could he experience the thrill and honour of being a freedom fighter. He had to do whatever it took to fulfil his true purpose before he departed this world—even if that meant they had to cry from exhaustion or endure the pain of shattered bones. But, at the end of it all, they would become the deadliest fighting machines.

“*Mkondo kimya!*” (silent stream). The final kata before the break.

He shifted his gaze from the children, but he could still hear their shouts with every punch and thrust.

The sun's rays shifted a few degrees across the glass, and his lips curled into a smile. A sad smile. He was uncertain how many more sunrises he would see. At 43, it seemed unlikely he would survive the illness long enough to bear witness to the rise of the Mleta Moto. The thought of being alive to enjoy the euphoria of seeing Africa free of foreign control united under one flag with one super army, was too emotional for a man known for his self-control. So he swallowed the lump in

his throat and wiped the tears from his eyes, careful to prevent his attendant and students from noticing.

Why have the ancestors punished him? All he wanted was a life of meaning, purpose, even if that meant dying for Mother in combat.

His ears got hot, and his hands became numb from squeezing the cane.

How could you be so stupid? his internal voice raged, cursing his deceased mother for agreeing to the vaccine trial. A concoction created by Europe and tested in Angola. Her not knowing a life was taking shape within her womb did not calm his anger.

The children's last shout brought him back to the present.

"Break, 15 minutes!" he announced.

Half the children staggered over to the water cooler at the back of the room, hands resting on their waists. Others lay sprawled on the floor, chests heaving.

With a flick of his head, the attendant scurried over to mop the sweat from the floor.

Joshua observed the children. He had little faith in this generation of trainees.

The handmade cedar stool became tiresome, and getting to his feet was difficult, even with the help of his cane. The stick offered adequate support, aiding his walk to the opposite wall from where the children gathered. Their giggling and chatting reminded him that none was older than 14. They were all babies.

Was it cruel to subject them to this level of relentless training? To teach them the truth at such a tender age? To mould their frail minds and bodies into hard, cold killers? Am I no better than the brutal world that subdued them?

Joshua dismissed the thought since the alternative was not an option.

He reached the wall and rested his back against the bare-bricked surface, taking in the room like a man who knew he was seeing the sun for the last time. It was a big area, the size of a basketball gymnasium, but without the modern comforts, despite the vast wealth accumulated by THOM over the centuries. There were no painted walls, just raw brick. No heating. No air-conditioning. The body and mind of an askari must be able to withstand all climatic conditions. During the cold New York months, the children called it the igloo. But in the summer heat that day, they should have felt like they were in the pits of hell.

All these wretched souls passing through his academy became his new purpose, bestowed upon him by THOM.

After falling ill, the only role available to him was a director, so he became a trained warrior consigned to the position of a babysitter.

He glanced at the clock on the wall, 4:45 p.m. "Trainees. Attend!"

His pupils scrambled to the centre of the floor, closer to him.

"Victor, Mishel," Joshua called.

Victor, a boy of 14 and the oldest among his 20 students took his position with the stealth of a panther. A former street child from The Gambia, he was a victim of attempted organ trafficking. The other victims said during his kidnapping, he screamed for help every chance he got while they huddled and remained silent in fear. He was beaten, threatened and gagged. None of it deterred his determination to be free. He kicked and

thrashed against the traffickers like a wild animal caught in a trap. To shut him up, his captors took his tongue.

Mishel moved to the centre with more vigour. She had become more of a parent to the other children, despite the average size of their karategi being twice the size of hers. Though she was no match for Victor in hand-to-hand combat, she had what he didn't: natural leadership abilities.

Victor and Mishel turned to face each other before Mishel shifted her gaze back to Joshua.

Why is she so desperate for my approval? Joshua sighed and wished Mishel hadn't taken her eyes off the Gambian.

"Begin!" Joshua shouted. But he knew shouting 'end' would've been more appropriate. He'd seen Victor do it many times. He confused his opponents before moving in for the kill. But the others kept falling for it.

The other children were silent, which was customary during a sparring battle.

Mishel returned her attention to her opponent, but he was nowhere to be seen. She spun 180 degrees to look behind her, and there was Victor in his martial arts stance without trousers. Joshua knew Mishel's gaping mouth was all the signal Victor needed. He hit her in the throat with his palm. Mishel doubled back and bent over, coughing and struggling for breath.

By the time she regained her posture, Victor had his trousers on but no shirt. Joshua saw Mishel's eyes widen. She seemed dazed and confused. She tried to make a show of her resolve, but it was too late. The roundhouse kick to her temple told Joshua all he needed to know.

Combat training was over.

Joshua limped towards Mishel, with Victor kneeling over her, sobbing.

He motioned to the attendant, who rushed over and knelt by Mishel with a doctor's urgency. He cradled her head on his thighs and flashed a white substance across her nostrils, yanking her out of her concussed state.

Joshua was sick of Victor crying whenever he hurt Mishel and wondered when he would find a child with rage, anger and an unapologetic killer's instinct.

Once Mishel could stand, he gathered the children in a horizontal line and walked from one end to the other.

Sweat dripped from their faces, and their black uniform darkened with perspiration. He could see their exhaustion, and it pleased him. Streams of moisture flowed down to the tips of their fingers, only to land with a splash on the floor. Some blinked to flush the salty liquid from their stinging eyes.

He smiled, for in that moment, they displayed the militancy and discipline expected of an askari.

He reached the end of the line and doubled back, stopping at the centre. The odour of their sweat was the stench of purpose, destiny.

"Learn this lesson and learn it well. Your enemy is not only in front of you; he's also all around you. Sometimes he *is* you," he said, locking eyes with Mishel.

He laid a finger on one of his temples. "Know thyself. Only when you learn to defeat yourself will you unlock your true potential."

He backed two feet away and raised his voice. "We continue tomorrow at the same time. Now speak the words!"

"*Watu waliotawala hawafai kutawaliwa,*" they shouted while saluting with their right fists on their left breasts.

“*Watu waliotawala hawafai kutawaliwa,*” Joshua replied.

A people who ruled must never be ruled.

OYA

It was a dreary and bitter place. No love. No warmth. A home that was not a home. Staring at the raindrops streaking down the window, she recalled memories the others shared of being tucked in bed while they listened to the soothing voices of their moms or dads reading bedtime stories. They shared memories of the hot chocolate and marshmallows they sipped while snuggling up to their mom or dad. They recounted the excitement of waking up to the sweet smell of gingerbread biscuits and the thrill of unwrapping presents at Christmas time. Then, later in the evening, other family members visited. Their Christmas tables had all types of food: chicken, turkey, beef, pizza, pasta, and everyone's favourite... chocolate cake.

Oya would have given all her supper for a year to have parents. While the others shared precious memories, she could only listen, for hers was seeped in mystery and, according to the nuns who avoided her, devilry. It made her sad. She learnt that the best way to keep away the sadness was to imagine the stories told by

the other girls as fantasies and that the nuns ignored her because they didn't *see* her.

Sometimes, she prayed to be adopted. She stopped when she realised that girls whose skin was as dark as hers had fewer chances. And her chances were the worst of all. Unlike the others, social services didn't place her at the orphanage, nor was there a knock on the door by a distraught teenage mother handing her over to the nun. Instead, she was found by the night watchman in the cemetery behind the orphanage, smeared in blood, cooing and giggling as if playing with an unseen presence. From that day onwards, the nuns referred to her as a devil child.

Oya became shy and withdrawn. She spent most of the time alone and in parts of the orphanage that the children stayed away from. The vent was one of her favourite hideaways, where she could listen to conversations she had no business listening to. She learnt a lot being in the vent and hiding in the shadows, such as the preference would-be parents had for white and light-skinned girls. Her heart broke that day, and her pillow was soaked that night. Those like her were described as 'good helpers around the house', collectively referred to as 'darkies' in private.

But there were good times as well. Like sneaking out the third-floor window some nights to sleep in the cemetery, the only place she felt alive and connected. Sometimes, when the sisters allowed them to go wild on the manicured lawn, she loved running barefoot under the summer sun and playing hide-and-seek with her only two friends. Nika, a slightly plump, light-skinned girl who loved reading books and dreamed of writing romance novels. Then there was Temi, a fiery, fine-boned Jamaican, whom the nuns considered to be 'very

beautiful for a darkie'. Despite having both Jamaican and American passports, Temi described herself as Jamaican. She was only interested in computers and anything electronic.

Oya wiped away the teardrop that landed on the back of her hand but smiled with thoughts of Temi. Sitting on the window ledge of her communal bedroom, she was preparing to run away. She missed Temi. In her eight years at the orphanage, Oya had never seen a white couple adopt a darkie, except for Temi, whose warm honey skin was considered beautiful.

That rainy night, only days after Temi was taken to her new home, Oya decided to follow her friend's lead and leave the only home she'd ever known.

"Oya, what are you doing? Why are you dressed like that?" a voice whispered in the darkness.

Oya slid off the ledge and tiptoed past the other bunks, pausing at each to make sure the others were still asleep. She was going to send Nika a postcard afterwards, but now that she was up, she may have to tell her.

"Go back to sleep, Nika."

"No, not until you tell me what you're doing."

Oya was back at the window, standing with her back to Nika, who was still on her top bunk. Both friends kept their voices to a whisper.

"I miss Temi," Oya said, feeling the tears flowing like the rain on the glass.

"I miss her too, but you don't see me dressing weird at bedtime. Please go back to bed. You know we have adoption day tomorrow, and we need to look our best."

"Nika... I... I'm leaving," Oya said, still facing the outside, watching the rain lash against the windowpane like tiny rock pellets. She couldn't let Nika see her crying.

“What did you say?”

Oya turned to look at her friend. “I can’t stay here anymore, Nika. I’m leaving... tonight.”

“No, you’re not. I’m ten, and you’re eight, so you should listen to me.”

Oya smiled, remembering that Nika had always been the big sister to her and Temi, who was also ten years old but a few months younger. She crept over to the double bunk and threw her tiny arms around Nika’s waist, who, by now, was standing on the concrete floor in her nightgown crying.

“I love you, Nika,” Oya whispered, squeezing her friend tighter. “I always will.”

“I love you too, Oya. Please don’t leave me.”

Oya broke from their embrace. “Come with me,” she said, holding Nika’s hands in hers. “We can survive together and find Temi, and we can be friends forever.”

“I... I can’t,” Nika stammered. “I’m not brave like you and Temi, and I really want to be adopted. I want a home. I want to have parents again. I just can’t.”

After one last hug, Oya slung on her backpack. The breeze and rain rushed in when she opened the window, causing other children to stir in their beds. Climbing to the outer ledge, she looked back at Nika for the last time. Her friend stood motionless, sobbing and wiping snot from her face.

“Goodbye, Nika. I hope you find a good family like what you, me and Temi were.”

Oya leapt from the window into the tree. She was leaving a beautiful friendship behind but looking forward to what lay ahead.

OYA

It had been eight months since Oya ran away. Life outside was much harder than she thought. She knew they would be looking for her. So, she learned to live in the shadows, staying off the streets during the day and hunting for food at night. The derelict warehouse she called home had rats that would eat her food if she didn't eat it first. There were skinny stray cats and dogs that were going bald. All around her were men and women of different ages whose stench made her nauseous. At least they kept to themselves after piercing their arms with needles that littered the floor.

She became skilled at scavenging for food and knew when to walk like a cat, using the night shadows as her shield. Her meal was taken from garbage bins behind restaurants, bakeries and cafes that threw out perfectly good food. Every day, it got easier, more familiar. Happier.

On the morning before her ninth birthday, Oya rose with a surge of energy and excitement, remembering how the children at St. Mary's described their birthdays

with their first parents. She wanted that feeling. She wanted happy memories of her own, so she decided to have a party, and everyone was invited. She hoped to find enough food for everyone in the building. The homeless people. The stray cats and dogs, even the rats.

As the sunset shadows crept across New York, she prepared to go on her shopping spree. She asked each of her ‘friends’ what they wanted at the party. No one had any special request, apart from Ralph, a former veteran in the Iraq war who wanted a DJ. And Mary, the teacher who lost her job, asked for cake and pastries.

It was just past midnight when Oya left the building, making it officially her birthday.

Shopping should take no more than three hours.

She was always successful at scavenging. Only this time, she would have to go to more than one restaurant. She kept to the shadows, darting through the back alleys unnoticed, gathering food from each restaurant. She put the food in her rucksack, which was heavier than normal.

Next stop was Orville’s, a Jamaican restaurant and one of her favourites, not only for the food but because it reminded her of Temi. As she was about to remove the lid from the bin, she froze when the locks on the back door clicked. This was unusual.

No one ever comes outside after throwing out the leftover food.

Slinking into the darkness, she waited with the patience of an alley cat until the person she didn’t recognise finished her cigarette and went back inside. Only when the locks clicked into place did Oya re-emerge into the light. She gathered what food she could find—bread rolls, sweet potatoes, beef patties, some fried dumplings and a whole untouched fruit cake. She was a little shaken for having such a near-miss, espe-

cially thinking she had mastered the art of being unseen.

With the bag weighing her down, she made her way to Sweet Heaven or 'Heaven' for locals, for the best cakes and cookies in the city.

THE STREETS of New York were never safe for young girls during the night. She looked at her wristwatch, which she found a couple of months ago, with no glass to cover the face. It was nearly two in the morning, which meant she would finish earlier than expected.

Oya made a right turn into the dark alleyway and headed towards the bins, keeping close to the walls.

"Goddammit, guys, I gotta take a piss. I can't hold it any longer."

The voice at the top of the short alley stopped her in her tracks as she reached Heaven's back door, where the restaurant bins were. She trusted no one, not even those with whom she shared a home with. It took her two months of watching before she felt comfortable enough to move into the derelict building. Her gut instincts confused her, yet she'd rather have them than be without them.

"You're such a pussy," the other male voice said. "Let's walk through the alley, and you can piss where you like."

She could see them now. Three white men. Each held a can of beer in their hand, stumbling through the alley towards her.

They seemed much older than William, a boy who ran away from foster care to live in her building, so she guessed their ages at around 20.

“For fuck’s sake, Brandon, just piss by the bin. And let’s get outta this shithole.”

“Hey Trent, video me peeing on the door instead,” Brandon replied, laughing.

The third guy laughed. “That should change the name to Rank Heaven.”

They were getting closer. She tried to press her back against the wall to blend with the night, but the backpack wouldn’t allow her to.

Brandon reached the door and froze before reacting. “Holy shit, guys, come have a look at this.”

Oya felt like a wild animal caught in oncoming headlights, not knowing what to do to quiet her pounding heart. She experienced true fear, the likes of which she’d never known. She had encounters before, mostly with other children that looked like her or the ones that adults called Latino. This was different. She’d heard terrible and gruesome stories of what white people did to ‘darkies’.

Without the moonlight, the alley would’ve been blanketed in darkness, giving her more cover. She wanted to move but felt paralysed. She inhaled the familiar scent of rotting garbage; heard the hiss of a cat breaking through the chorus of the distant night traffic.

She saw the other men as they caught up to the one they called Brandon. They stared at her with devilish eyes while she stood motionless.

“Boys, we got ourselves here a little nigger girl,” the third man said with glee.

Oya shivered and started to hyperventilate.

With arms above their heads and swaying side to side, all three started to make monkey sounds. She would’ve laughed, but not today. She felt life in her legs and tried to run. But the man in front of her grabbed her

by the backpack and flung her against the wall, bashing her head. She tried to scream, but the heavy whack from Trent's backhand across her face slashed her lips before she could make a sound. The blood tasted sharp and metallic.

"Hold her down!" the third man snapped.

Her arms thrashed, and her small legs kicked. Oya tried to fight back, but they were too strong for her. She tried to cry for help again, but the hand over her mouth was like a vice crushing her jaw.

"Brandon, hold this bitch down. Trent, get the video ready."

Oya had never faced death before, but she had read stories and listened to the cries of others from the shadows. She once saw a woman stabbed in an alleyway. And weeks later, she was close enough to hear the deathly cry of an unarmed boy being shot by the police.

She prepared her mind to die. *This must be how the woman and the boy felt. At least I'll live in the cemetery again.*

She was dragged back to the present by the forceful removal of her black jeans and underwear. She felt a sharp, tearing pain between her legs as something hard was forced into her. The pain burnt like fire. The man whose name she didn't hear was on top of her, stabbing vigorously with his hips. The weight of his body restricted the air flowing through her lungs while she gasped for breath. He smelled of beer and old sweat that dripped onto her face.

Her body was overwhelmed with pain, and just as she was about to go somewhere safe, she heard Trent, the video-maker, shouting, "Git her, Jeremy, git her. Fuck that black bitch!"

A deep grunt and faint whimper followed Jeremy's

last stab. She felt him get off her. With one eye swollen shut, she saw him fasten his belt and breathing like he'd run a marathon.

Oya was numb and frozen.

It's not real. I will wake up soon. She tried to pull her legs close, but they didn't move.

"Your turn," she heard Jeremy say.

"Way ahead of you, bro," Trent replied, stroking his male appendage.

He knelt over Oya's face, holding the phone in one hand. With the other, he rubbed his penis in a vicious back-and-forth frenzy until she heard the same grunt that Jeremy made. Only this time, it was followed by something gooey with a bitter smell splattering her face and burning her already-swollen eye.

"Woo-hoo... fuck yeah," Jeremy whooped.

It was Brandon's turn. "Guys, you know I don't do sloppy seconds, so I guess I won't be partaking in the nigger purge tonight."

"Fuck that," Trent said. "We all have to be on the video, so get your fucking pecker out. You're such a goddamn pussy."

"What the fuck do you want me to do with her? I can't yank my chain with you assholes watching."

"Well, you did say you wanted to piss," Jeremy replied, laughing.

Trent seemed to have lost his patience with Brandon. "For fuck's sake, Brandon, get your dick out and piss on her."

Oya closed her good eye as she felt the warmth of urine on her face.

Brandon zipped up his trousers and joined the others in front of the camera phone. "This is JBT, fucking a

nigger bitch at Heaven's Door," she heard Trent announce, followed by their jubilant laughter.

"Wait. Guys, you sure we won't get in trouble for this?" Brandon asked.

"Fuck no!" Trent said. "You know his dad is *the* Senator Lipton, so who the fuck will have the balls to come at us for this. Besides, we all know it's always open season for niggers in America."

"Time to go, boys," Jeremy ordered.

"We should kill her," Trent suggested.

Jeremy laughed. "Nah, it's best to let her kind live with the memory so they know their place. My dad taught me that."

As they walked away, laughing, Oya peered at the night sky, her body numb and aching. Her mind waited to be awakened. In the distance, she heard Jeremy daring Brandon to do something. She heard footsteps running towards her in the dark. When Brandon was close enough, she felt the pointy part of his boot slam into her left temple.

"Woo-hoo, guys, I did it. I fucking did it!" he shouted as he jogged after the others.

Oya slipped from consciousness, thinking how peaceful the cemetery would be if she didn't wake up.

JOSHUA

The pain in his left hip made him wince, but it paled in comparison to the pain he felt for her. Joshua would have allowed himself to cry were it not for the presence of the nurses who busied themselves with the other patients.

A thunderous clap from the heavens grabbed his attention as he looked out the window into the darkness. Bursts of electricity illuminated the property for a second, but long enough for him to see people he lived and worked with rushing to escape the downpour. The storm hurled oversized pellets of rain against the glass with rage.

Mother, even the heavens weep with anger.

His attention flashed back to the heart monitor that beeped confirmation of life.

The patient coughed in her sleep, her face grimacing. Joshua stood over her with a damp cloth and dabbed the dried blood from her swollen face and lacerated lips. He swallowed hard, forcing back the pain and anger that swelled within him. He stared down at her, lying on the

bed, delicate and fragile, with tiny, twig-like limbs, like a broken bird.

“Pardon me, director,” the nurse said.

“Of course.”

Joshua ambled to the other side of the patient’s bed, leaning on his cane. The rubber-tipped cane made a squeaking sound each time it made contact with the white tiles, reminding him of the rats he chased away as a boy.

She replaced an empty IV drip and took the patient’s temperature. When she made a note of the result, she rested a gentle hand on the little girl’s shoulder. “All done.”

“Any improvement?”

“In her temperature, yes, but she’s not there yet,” she said without looking up.

Joshua sighed.

“Don’t worry. If she’s as strong as I think, she’ll pull through. But she’ll need all the help we can give.”

Joshua remained silent and focused on suppressing his fury.

“Beg your pardon, director, but if you’ll allow me to attend to my other—”

“Yes, please go ahead.” Joshua flashed her a feeble smile.

The nurse returned a consoling glance as she walked over to her next patient three beds down, smoothing the hem of her milky white uniform as she went.

Joshua moved closer to the girl’s bed and pulled the thin polka-dotted sheet up to her slender neck. “Rest now, little one,” he whispered before leaving the soft-lit room.

His assistant Rachel met him in the corridor, concern and sadness etched across her youthful face.

“How is she?” Rachel asked as they walked along the narrow passageway of the medical building, passing other medical personnel and patients moving in every direction.

“Her fever broke, but she’s very weak. Do you have the results from the X-ray?”

“Yes.”

“And?” Joshua pressed for more details.

“Apologies. The results have abated your fears. There’s no organ damage from her broken ribs, and the blow to her head didn’t fracture her skull. That’s good news, at least.”

“Indeed. Her body will heal, but as for her psychological state, that’s another matter.”

“I’m surprised you’re so concerned, considering how you are with the others.”

Joshua paused by the glass exit door and looked eyes with Rachel as she readied the umbrella. “I had an older sister, Ayani. Beautiful, smart and the pride of my family. When she got engaged to a French soldier, my entire village celebrated. ‘Ayani got a good one,’ they’d said. Our village elder officiated the ceremony, and my sister migrated to France within months.”

Joshua turned away from Rachel, his vacant gaze piercing the wet, rainy darkness outside.

“Seven months after arriving in France, my mother received a letter from Ayani that wreaked trauma and fear. The ‘good’ husband that we all celebrated passed her around to his friends who were willing to pay. Then he started giving her to his dogs. Her ‘good’ husband answered her protests with vicious beatings for which she received no medical care.”

The director leaned on his cane and walked closer to the

glass door where the tears from the rain offered emotional release. He laid his palm on the pane and was surprised that the knot in his stomach returned after all these years.

Rachel looked at him, her eyes misty with compassion and pity.

“But that’s not what ended Ayani. When my mother replied and told my sister to be a good wife and enjoy the better lifestyle in France, my sister threw herself off the balcony with a simple reply beneath my mother’s signature: *‘I have no one.’* She was 16.”

Rachel gasped, drawing Joshua’s attention as the umbrella fell from her hands.

“Oh my Gods, I’m so sorry. She reminds you of Ayani,” Rachel said. “She looks no more than ten years old. Poor thing. Do you know who she is or where she’s from?”

“Her backpack has the name Oya written inside of it. Apart from that, nothing. But we should be able to get some answers once she’s awake.”

“And what then?” Rachel asked, retrieving the fallen umbrella.

“We cross that bridge when we get to it. But if she is like the others, I’m likely to enrol her.”

They stepped outside and bristled from the lash of the rain as it stung their faces. He nodded to Rachel, prompting them to huddle under the umbrella as they walked towards the executive building.

“Director, we’ve never enrolled anyone that young,” Rachel said loudly, her voice competing with the thunderous downpour. “Besides, I urge you to reconsider. You risk exposing us at the rate at which you’re taking in children.”

Joshua attempted to respond but decided against it.

Certain conversations should be conducted without shouting.

When they reached the executive building, Rachel handed the umbrella to the night watchman, who looked from what was left of it to Rachel and back again.

“Just bin it,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

The elevator ride was silent as Joshua followed Rachel’s lead, brushing the rain droplets from his clothes. It wasn’t until he reached his office door that he paused with a key in hand and thought about the last thing Rachel said: *You risk exposing us at the rate at which you’re taking in children.*

He opened the door and led the way inside, where they continued the conversation in private.

“Director, as I was saying—”

He raised his palm and cut her off. “Doesn’t the sign on the gate of this very institute say we are *The Humanistic Outreach Mission?*” he chided.

“We both know that name is a disguise,” she reminded him.

“What would you have me do? Return her to the streets?”

“Yes... or find her a foster home. I know this is personal for you, but you shouldn’t have brought her here. Why didn’t you call the police or have Denzel drop her at the hospital? He was the one who found her.”

He valued his assistant’s honest counsel, but on this matter, his ego refused to let her question his authority.

“We take care of our own!” he snapped, slamming his hand on the desk. “Who are we if we turn our backs on our children?”

Rachel didn’t flinch. He’d trained her too well. “By your logic, we should round up every at-risk black child

in America and bring them here,” she fired back. “But how would that serve us? No one knows better than you how important our work is. And it requires us to remain hidden.”

Every fibre in his body screamed she was correct, but his heart refused to relent. “It’s late. Let’s discuss this in the morning,” he instructed.

They both rose from their chairs on opposite sides of the desk and performed the THOM salute by placing a fist across their left breast.

“*Watu waliotawala hawafai kutawaliwa,*” they recited before Rachel left the office.

Joshua stayed behind and reflected on their conversation. Rachel was right.

If they were to succeed, he had to control his emotions and refrain from putting their work at risk. For what is the life of one child compared to billions? He knew what must be done and reached for his diary to enter the day’s log and headcount.

The cover of the diary was embossed with an acacia tree sprouting from the bloodied palm of a raven black hand, with the inscription, NEW YORK CHAPTER DIRECTOR 13.

He grabbed his fountain pen and began writing:

15 August 2010: One of Mother’s children was found in an alley unconscious. The child is known to us as Oya. She is being nursed to health in our infirmary, and her body should heal within six to eight weeks. How many must suffer before we find the Mleta Moto? For every one of her children that suffers, Mother weeps. My emotions run deep, yet I must resist the temptation to rescue all of Mother’s children who scream for help.

My assistant has done her duty by providing sound counsel. Enrolment headcount as of this date is 237.

Closing the green diary, Joshua leaned back into his leather chair with clasped hands to his lips. His mind fought to make sense of that feeling that surged within him. There was something peculiar about the girl called Oya.

His stomach churned. His heart pounded. His leg itched. Something was out of balance with that child. Heaving a deep sigh, he reopened his diary and wrote: *Update: 15 August 2010: Enrolment headcount as of this date is 238.*

To Be Continued...

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