

# Shrines of The Free Men



– JOSEPH WILLRICH LUTALO

# Shrines of the Free Men

A novel by

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## **SYNOPSIS**

A boy has just completed his bachelor's degree in Industrial Chemistry and is returning to his home village having been away for a couple years. However, while on this trip, he meets and falls in love with an apprentice in Cwezi spirituality. Before long, forces beyond both of them drag him onto a dark, but exhilarating path of indulgence and initiation into the never before exposed universe of Cwezi spirituality and parapsychology. His true calling? To modernise African Spirituality.

## **DEDICATION**

*With love, to you my children Karungi Shona Abwoli, Theo R. Akiiki, Rwemera, Weira and Cwa. Yes, and to the rest of you my family, friends and students.*

# Table of Contents

<b>SYNOPSIS</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>SECTION 1: DAY OF CHANGES</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter I</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter II</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Chapter III</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>SECTION 2: NIGHT OF LUST</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>Chapter IV</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Chapter V</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Chapter VI</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>CHAPTER VII</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>SECTION 3: THE BLACK SHRINE</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>CHAPTER VIII</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>CHAPTER IX</b>	<b>151</b>
<b>Chapter X</b>	<b>165</b>
<b>Chapter XI</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>Chapter XII</b>	<b>196</b>
<b>Chapter XIII</b>	<b>227</b>
<b>Chapter XIV</b>	<b>248</b>
<b>SECTION 4: CWEZI INITIATION RITUALS</b>	<b>268</b>
<b>Chapter XV</b>	<b>269</b>
<b>Chapter XVI</b>	<b>283</b>
<b>Chapter XVII</b>	<b>316</b>
<b>Chapter XVIII</b>	<b>337</b>
<b>Chapter XIX</b>	<b>354</b>
<b>SECTION 5: THE AFTERMATH: THE NEW CWEZI</b>	<b>385</b>
<b>Chapter XX</b>	<b>386</b>
<b>Chapter XXI</b>	<b>403</b>
<b>∞ DEDICATION</b>	<b>408</b>

# SECTION 1: DAY OF CHANGES

In a single day  
Dwells all of eternity;  
The birth  
The dying  
The death  
And immortality.

In a single day  
Dwells all of time;  
There is no past  
There is no future  
Only the present day exists  
And it all dwells in the here and now.

Today,  
Right now,  
Is the only day that truly is  
The only day there has ever been  
The only day there shall ever be.

In a single day  
That is no miracle  
That is no accident  
Enkya ya Enkya  
Manifests in the here and now,  
As all that is.

# Chapter I

“Mmm oooh, I have to go.”

“Go?”

“Oh yes, it’s almost 7:00, and I have a paper at 8:00 at JICA, remember?”

“I know... but JICA is just a walking distance from here. I mean, you could just take a shower, have something to eat and walk there, right?”

“Oh no, I didn’t carry my examination card.”

“Call Ritah. I have some credit on my other phone.”

She smiled while yawning at the same time. In a coy manner, Moses drew her back into his embrace, just as she had started pushing away the bed cover to get the tiny feature phone.

I had been peeking at them from under the covers, eavesdropping on their romance almost all night! I had gotten used to her visits, but they never tried anything exciting while I was in the room, and especially, not while I was visibly awake. When she spent the nights around, I would be most hopeful, although over time, my expectations for even a little surprise had almost dwindled. Of all his other girlfriends, she was the one.

But, Moses and I were done with our final papers, and would be leaving university the next day. On that last night, I was not disappointed at all as whatever exhibitionism I had missed all those other days, was finally unveiled before that last dawn on Makerere hill. School had not been a very joyful experience for me, but I could hardly say the same for Moses and his girl Achen. And somehow, my better moments relied on feeding off their more joyful ones.

I had suggested that since it was our final night at school, it would be a great idea to hang out all night, and then just pack our belongings the next day.

“We can take the hangovers home, right?” I had teased. Moses had liked the idea, and when he spoke to Achen about it, she bought the idea right away. I also talked to Loyce about it – she was the girl from the Mass Communication faculty. I invited her to join us, knowing she was the kind that wouldn’t frown upon even a Monday-night drink-up as far as I know. We had been dating for a while, and it had not gotten any rosy yet. But it

was my final night at school, and I was convinced she would honour the invite, and, perhaps, even do something more.

“You’re leaving me sweet pie?” she had asked on the phone.

“I’m done Loyce, and I’ll be going home tomorrow.”

“I’ll definitely have to make it! Please call me back tonight!”

I was all happy and excited, as at last, I would have the moment I had been waiting for all along! I sat my last paper with much zeal, occasionally losing focus, while fantasising about what I believed and felt would be a memorable night for us all.

\* \* \* \* \*

We returned to my hall of residence at 1:00am. It was quiet almost everywhere, except for Achen and Moses, who were staggering and laughing hysterically behind me as we walked down into Livingstone Hall. My own *bodaboda* had dropped me off a little ahead of them, and I had walked on without waiting.

“Be Calm, Gentlemen. Walk a lady with grace”, read a large blue sticker above the entrance into that hall that Makerere University tradition considers to be the home of the “most cultured gents.” Livingstone is also the most cherished and most well-maintained men’s residence within the university.

However, reading that meme as I entered the hall at that late hour, part of me felt I had pushed the tradition a little too far. Feeling rejected, fighting to keep calm and composed all night, Loyce’s failure to show up ate at me from within, and I was afraid my anxiety-cum-rage would give me away anytime. I had been beaten that way before - it was very typical of varsity girls to act that way, but damn! I had not expected that to happen on my final night. I hated her...

*Sowry Ig.*

*I’m not feeling well n so won’t be able 2 make it 2 the K’ 2nyt.*

*Best wishes though, n happy journeys back home.*

*Maybe we’ll meet again some other day.*

That was the SMS that had eaten at my heart all night. While at the bar, I had excused myself from the table, walked over to the loos and read it once more, not even bothering to feign a wee. I could not believe it, I would not accept it! I dialed her first number, hoping I could get further details from



her. It rang on the other side for a while, then the auto-responder chimed in; I cut it off, expecting an automated lie.

“Why didn’t she tell me earlier on? Why?” I wondered.

I couldn’t find an answer, so I tried her other line – the MTN one. I knew I would blast her if she tried giving me any nonsense, I was too furious.

“The telephone number you have called does not exist on the MTN network. Please...”

“Damn fucking bots!” I swore, putting the phone back into my pocket and punching the toilet wall one more time!

“That number fucking exists! That’s where the SMS came from,” I shouted. But as so happens in those situations, I could only blame the telco systems for their daftness. Loyce was my real foe, and I boiled inside at the thought of her. I contained it though – I had to. Moses had promised to cover all the night’s bills since he owed me some money.

“And I wish to see you have your best evening with her. For sure!” he had promised me.

I returned to the table cold and expressionless, and just drank whatever was served. Maybe they read me?

A while later, as I cuddled another bottle of Guinness, Moses looked at me with that sly expression, and remarked:

“Bro, it’s our last night you know... If Loyce won’t come, just join one of those merry girls on the dance floor. You can’t be alone all night!”

“Do you really mean it?”

“Ow sorry!” said Achen, that dark, jovial seductress from the north.

I only smiled back, making sure I was not giving myself away, looking into their probing eyes.

“I’ll be fine,” I assured them, “let’s drink this place empty before the bell rings!”

Achen choked on her drink as she giggled, “That’s my kind of boy!”

Thereafter though, I didn’t actually empty many more. Instead, I kept feeling for the phone in my pocket – doing nothing with it, just making sure it was there and was not ringing or vibrating without my attention. I desired so much for my demise to be overturned.

The night progressed rather slowly – for me at least. Moses and his rib danced to all of the songs I loved so much, but I refused to join them. There was a moment Achen walked over to the table, grabbed me by the hand and pulled me up to dance to some sinfully groovy song by Destra Garcia - a Soca classic of hers, but I only nodded in acknowledgement, and waved her off with a painful plastic smile. I also wanted to avoid infecting Moses,

who was watching us, with my gloom. He kept on grooving, while waiting as she tried to win me over. I refused, and she went back to her boy.

“Fuck life,” I said to myself in a hush tone.

As I sat there lamenting, the DJ dropped the next amazing hit.

Two more bottles of ice-cold Guinness, and I was done. Normally, the brew worked me up into the zone, but as I opened the door into room E9, I doubted whether anything but bitterness had been sealed inside those black bottles. As for my roommates? Wow! They were in the zone and probably, already far beyond..

I overheard Moses assure his girl about all the “naughty things” she must look forward to, as they entered our tiny room, after me. I did not take a shower and neither did they. I sent a sly ‘goodnight’ to them, as I shoved my pitiful self between those neatly tucked in sheets. Only Achen heard me, “Ba bye!” she replied, before turning her full attention to her man. I was envious, but what could that change?

I tried shutting my eyes, my mind and ears off, but damn! They had such a night; I was dying in my bed. First, I slept facing the wall, head under the covers as well, but then somewhere in the middle of all that torture, I decided, *what the heck?* Slowly, I turned in bed, head still under the covers, but with a tiny, but sufficient opening left between the covers and the mattress below - small enough, that I doubt they could notice it. The only light in the room was that seeping in from the corridor, as the window curtains were almost opaque.

My bed had originally been directly opposite his, but in the final semester, with increasing visits from his girls, I had decided to place it on the side of the room, almost adjacent to, but perpendicular to theirs; head away from their bed’s foot. But that didn’t seem to help much, as being confined in the same few square metres of space with them, with no visible partition separating us, I always received the feedback from their actions, no matter what.

\* \* \* \* \*

I looked at the time on my phone’s lockscreen, “8:05am” it read. I was just in time for my final breakfast at the hall. My two roommates had stayed behind, as it was not customary for visitors, albeit girls, to join their hosts

in the mess for meals – actually, it was frowned upon. There was still a pint of Jesa milk in the fridge, and that's all they feasted on. Being my last day with them, I felt I had to get used to being away from them pretty soon, and so, was not bothered to leave them behind.

I was prepared to go home to my father in the village, spend a couple of weeks with him, as well as my siblings. I would then return to Kampala, ready to start working at a firm that had promised me a vacancy, starting with the second month after university closed. Despite my somewhat uneventful time at school, I had stayed true to the cause - there's not a single paper I had not sat, no lecture I had missed, and no retake in any of the course units, despite the cruelty of some lecturers and professors. And one other thing... it felt so good to know I would finally get rid of that nagging Mathematics teaching assistant.

As I sat there, having my breakfast, in walked a resident friend of mine.

“Hi Ignatius!”

“Hi Kappo!”

“I was passing by your room this morning, and thought I heard more than nightmares causing shrieks and mania from behind that door...”

“Really? Hahahaahaha...”

I laughed hard because I knew exactly what he was referring to. He shook me furiously, grinning, as his other hand held onto some big flask.

“No! No no no,” I pleaded loudly, “you know it wasn't me!”

I spilled some of my tea while laughing, and that is when he excused himself to go get his own. I held onto mine, which was still hot and nearly full, while waiting for him to return so we could chat and laugh some more. I knew him as “Counsel Mathias Kato”, and I knew that he was in the third year of his bachelor of laws. We had joined as undergrads at the same time, resided on the same block during the first two years, but only became friends in the second semester of our sophomore year. At that time, during a riot at the university, he was the one that came knocking door-to-door, shouting assuringly at us, in a funny Luganda-Indian accent that, “If you stay in bed, don't ask us if you wake up dead! Let's go!”

It was the second day of a four-day-long student riot. The riots, which had become more of a culture than an anomaly or reaction – especially at Makerere and Kyambogo universities, were mostly the result of a failure of the administration to dialogue with students about their concerns; and the lower administration sort of encouraged it always. It was the second

such riot during that academic year, and it was also the one in which the most havoc had been wrecked on infrastructure and unsuspecting folk. It spanned not just Makerere hill, but even neighbouring Katanga, Kikoni and LDC areas. The media really had interesting, action-packed field trips during those four days.

Kato, and many other law students, who so much loved campus politics and the chaos that came with them, was supposedly exercising his “legal duty towards fellow gentlemen”, as he would later tell me. He had kept knocking on our door, room D13 at the time, until I angrily stood up from my reading desk and went to confront him in the corridor. However, what I found made me crack-up like a maniac instead; brandishing blue-elephant pyjamas in the middle of day, his face painted with stripes of red and black, the man held two large placards made from box cut-outs, and one of them boldly claimed, “*ENJOVU TERYA NSWA! ASSA SHOULD REMAIN FAITHFUL TO THEIR MEN!*”

He urged me to abandon whatever “less important things” I was doing, and join them. But I disagreed, arguing how “My lecturers are not rioting, boss, and I have assignments to finish. So, maybe go to the next room.” Just about then, another militant chap, dressed in the official, red student gown, joined the confrontation to win me over. He was yelling “*Tugende! Abaami Let's Go! Tugende! Gents Let's Go...*”, as though it were a mantra left on auto-play, while his brains were on holiday. But it was hard to overcome their charisma and persistence, and so, at last, I surrendered to the hysterical culture and joined in.

“You are either with us or with them,” explained Kato, as he cheered in unison with the rest of the mob, already moving on to other doors and floors.

“It's never easy converting these aging sloths!” shouted one of them, making everyone laugh. I promised them, I would be outside in a short while.

Like him, many of those holding placards had something to say about “the enemy”, who during that particular riot, was the Academic Staff Association – sarcastically abbreviated “ASSA” or “ASS-a” by most. I recall one message that stayed with me for long, and it was written on the T-shirt of a girl in the mob. It read:

*If you don't fight for the petty rights of your feeble life as a student,  
You will likely be a slave of the system the rest of your adult life.*

That message was enough to give me a reason to join the rebellion, during which I made a couple friends, of whom Kato was the closest.

Kato returned to the table with such a big cup, it seemed better suited for porridge than tea – but, I did not drop the punchline. He sat opposite me, and after tasting some of the hot stuff, turned his attention to me.

“So, tell me chief, you are leaving today?” he asked, as he sat down at the same table with me.

“Yes, I’m done with papers - did my last one yesterday, and so, really must be leaving soon.”

“Wow! Man that’s been fast!”

“What? The emptying of my cup?”

“Well, maybe that as well, but I’m talking about how fast time has flown by...”

“Yeah right. I too look back to my freshman year; those first days as a clueless, ambitious boy loitering the place during orientation week, and I can’t believe I’m finally done!”

“It’s the grand delusion,” he concluded, nodding his head contemplatively.

“Grand delusion?” I asked, wondering what he meant, “I don’t follow...”

He smiled, and then put his big cup down; the flask, definitely full, was still waiting, right next to the cup.

“Forgive me sir,” he began, “You see, it’s so easy to assume that life goes on forever, or that tomorrow is too far. In many instances though, that belief is comforting and gives weight to the excuse for procrastinating. But, ultimately, it’s still an illusion.”

“True, true...” I admitted, trusting that he was more sobre than I was that morning. He was not done...

“And then, when you take a step back every now and then, and look at things,” he was tracing one finger round-and-round the rim of his cup, and my attention was focused there instead, though I was listening. “You realise that from conception to death, it’s but something like a day!”

I thought he was getting emotional, and so looked up to reassure myself, but no, he was not. He was just looking at me, smiling.

“There you go!” I said, “But yes, I couldn't agree more. Though, I also tend to believe that it’s better to concern ourselves with the here and now, and less with the past or future – which are more illusory.”

“That’s your philosophy,” he added, “and if you prefer to use the present as your basis for making decisions or evaluating life, not even Dada can stop you!”

The one thing that amused me about Kato was that, despite being obsessively rhetorical, when you sat down to talk or debate with him about something, especially at a meal, you would soon realise that although he did most of the talking, you would be the one utterly distracted. And so, I only realised later, that he had long finished his breakfast, while I still drooled over mine, enjoying our philosophical chit-chat. I adored him, as he was only one of few chaps at the university with whom I seemed to resonate on ideology. Sitting there, drinking my last cup of tea with him, I wondered what would become of him later in life; whether there would ever be a chance for us to meet again.

"I'll be on the bus by midmorning," I said, remembering that I had a schedule to adhere to. I emptied my remaining tea in one huge gulp, seeing as it had already turned cold.

"So, what of your luggage? Are you going with it on the bus?" he asked, pushing his cup aside, and clasping his arms before me.

"No. I normally would be returning it to my uncle's place in Luzira, but this time round, I've called him to come pick only the heavier stuff to his place. So I shall only carry a few clothes, some books and a handful of things I wish to buy for my folk in the village. I intend to travel light."

He nodded in agreement, "Finally, you want to go pay homage to your man," he said in a rather funny way.

"Yes. My dad's in Masindi, together with my big brother and little sister. I wish to escape the hustles of town, and spend some time preparing for the next phase of life from there."

"Like a true philosopher, seeking the countryside for clarity of mind," he concluded, and I just smiled back at him, nodding in total acknowledgment.

He looked me in the eye and asked, "So, about this 'next phase', have you any plans for working somewhere or starting up your own thing?"

I thought about it for a while, thinking of the options I had before me. I did have a vague plan, and I told him about it...

"I would be worried if I still had no plans by now. But, sometime during the start of this semester, I saw this advertisement in the papers, calling for qualified lab assistants to apply for a vacancy at some special clinic in Kampala."

"A lab assistant you said?"

"Sure. It wasn't a job I was qualified to do, but the mention of a lab is what really piqued my interest and caused me to run for it. They actually stressed that applications would only be considered for those with the

necessary experience or qualifications. Radiology was one of those requirements. I felt I had none of that, but again, I was too curious to see what would happen if I applied as well.”

He was smiling and shaking his head in awe. I continued to share my tale... “I didn’t write an application letter. Instead, I went to their advertised premises and asked to meet the person in charge myself.”

At that point, he dropped a parody that made me glee;

“Ignatius of Loyola is here people, where’s the Chief Alchemist of this lab?” We both guffawed as he proceeded to accompany his joke with even funnier caricatures, trying to depict how I should have looked and sounded back then. He was really funny, but no, that is not how I had presented myself to those prospective employers.

“No.” I said. “The receptionist inquired who exactly I was there to meet, and then asked if I had an appointment.”

“Same standard protocol everywhere.... damn!”

“Yes. And so, I explained to her that I was there to apply for the role of lab assistant, but that my case required that I talk to the recruiter directly. She then asked to see my ID, which I then passed on. She asked which course I was studying at the university, and I told her...”

“Rocket Science ma'am, Rocket Science, that’s how specific I can get.” Kato interrupted me, to throw in yet another joke.

“I doubt she’d have gotten the ‘Rocket Science’ joke if I’d used it,” I assured him, “but, she did seem a little bit overwhelmed when I told her I was from the ‘Mathematics and Chemistry Department at Makerere University.’”

“Did she move her legs below the table?”

“Unfortunately, I couldn’t tell that from where I stood. There was a huge and opaque counter desk between us.”

He laughed some more.

“So, did you get the job?”

“I met the director, pleaded with him to allow me to volunteer at their labs until I would be capable of doing paid work. He too asked me what I was studying, and I gave him a more genuine breakdown of what I’d actually covered at school. He didn’t seem very excited, but did express interest in me. He told me about some local pharmaceutical that specialised in refining extracts from local herbs, and how they were short of professional and passionate staff ‘of my kind’. He then gave me a card, and said that even though he wouldn’t offer me a vacancy at his clinic, he would help me obtain placement and a fair starter package at his friend’s firm.”

“Wow! That must have made you fly! How come you’ve never mentioned any of this to your counsel?”

“Well, I didn’t see any trouble coming, and so, didn’t want to pay another bill just for telling my lawyer about it.” He laughed, and then asked, “So, what happened at the said firm?”

“I did contact the firm that very day, and after a week of waiting, met the lead chemist at their premises. He is an aging man in his mid-seventies. He challenged and probed me for almost two hours, claiming that today’s education system is a ‘total fiasco’, given the quality of graduates and professionals it’s ‘cloning’, as he called it.”

Kato nodded, and likewise added, “It is ‘rotten everywhere’, they claim.”

“However, during those two hours, he also quizzed me on more general things than just knowledge of chemistry and other technical subjects. He probed for my ideas concerning medicine in general; on whether I even knew the history of chemistry or if I had any personal, informed opinions concerning the state of sustainable, holistic healing in Africa today.”

“Man, was he like some professor or alchemist in his youth?”

I laughed so loudly at his remark and the way he expressed it, that some folks sharing the table with us gave me that awkward look. But Kato was right, as I had felt just the same, back then.

“Probably.” I replied. “But when I mentioned what I knew of those ancient Arabian chemists and their alchemy or ‘Al-Kimiya’, as he loved to correct me, the old man was visibly enraptured, telling me he’d toyed with that ‘noble’ field for almost twice my age!”

Kato applauded me, and then he said, “And then, they say Makerere no longer produces prodigies...”

I was not sure that sort of people were conventionally regarded as such, but I shared in his sentiment, plus, I knew he was very fond of the school.

“Anyway, the man asked me to report the following week, claiming I possessed ‘too much interesting theory, but less of relevant practical knowledge’. He told me he’d make me an apprentice at his lab, alongside a few others he had specifically hand-picked from all over the region.”

“So, are you currently working there?” asked my friend, his eyes bulging from their sockets.

“Not much,” I said. “After a short, sporadic apprenticeship that spanned two months, mostly covering basic technical knowledge and the ethics of their practice, I was paid and asked to report for a permanent role two months after school.”

“Why the break?” he asked.

“The old chemist claimed that without a detachment and break from the routines of campus life, I wouldn’t be ready to work reliably at their lab.



He emphasised how their work requires not just physical presence, but getting 'mentally and spiritually immersed' in it."

I looked up at Kato, wondering what he thought of that sort of rigor, and then added the last bit I recalled the man telling me; "It's the only way to really benefit from and master the secrets of chemistry', so he said."

"You surely met your kind!"

And he was not wrong. I was very excited about working at that small, but queer lab, and couldn't wait for the said time to come around.

"Man, you'll be late for your trip! Wish we could talk more, but I also have to attend to something by around 9:30am."

"Counsel, you have my number, right? I have you on Hangouts and WhatsApp as well, so we'll definitely stay in touch, hopefully."

"We shall. We ought to!"

We stood, and walked out of the mess together. I bid him farewell, along with some other friends who had just arrived for breakfast, and then walked back to the room to finish packing my stuff.

\* \* \* \* \*

By 9:00am, I had finished packing my things and was only waiting for my uncle to arrive. Achen had left for her exam, and Moses had gone away to Kikoni, to fetch an old laptop of his from a classmate. I sat alone in the room I used to call "ours" and wondered what I should be doing during those final moments at school.

I was thinking of those days back in primary and secondary school, when, on the final day at school or during those last days before one left the school for good, many kids loved to leave behind some sort of "I was here" mementos. I recall doing it myself, at the end of my primary school. On that last day, after the last exam - which had been Social Studies - I got a huge, black piece of charcoal I had picked from the kitchen earlier that day, and after all the kids had deserted the classroom, embarked upon my graffiti mission. I got the teacher's table, placed his chair on top of it, and then, climbing both, reached an ideal location, above the chalkboard, where I then wrote in thick, black, irregular letters:

## NEVE 4GET, I IGGY.

As would happen for someone who started rubbing shoulders with authorities early in life, just as I was climbing down from the chair, Ddumba, our class monitor, entered the classroom, and we looked at each other as though I had just committed the biggest crime ever! He walked over to me with a serious, rigid face, that in many ways looked more comical than not. But, I was not sure what his intentions were, especially as he continued pacing towards me. I was about to voice my apologies, when he reached the table, looked up at what I had just written and nearly caused me to topple to the ground, when he abruptly exploded with laughter!

“I can see that you’ve indeed chosen to be remembered,” he said, “But as a breaker of rules, I doubt your teachers will agree.” I was not getting him yet... My heart raced inside me, and I was thinking to myself: “What? He’s going to make an example of me, for this?” However, he picked a tiny piece of chalk and threw it where I’d just written, guiding my attention to the egoistic blabber.

Then I saw what he actually meant – I had forgotten to add the “R” to the first word.

“The grammar rules? Is that what you meant?”

He laughed and confirmed it, “Yes, your grammar would make your English language teacher beat you to death, but now that you are free, I won’t alert him.”

Adamantly, I refused to correct it, thinking of the possibility of yet a bigger authority walking into the class and finding me still engrossed in creating memories of a pathetic self. I put the chair back where it had been, hurriedly wiped both chair and table of my shoeprints and ran out of the class real fast.

“However, that was me those days,” so I thought. “There’s no way it’ll help me, if I leave a mark of the sort on these immaculate walls.” Perhaps, if it had been Nkrumah, Nsibirwa, “Micho” [actually “Mitchell”] or Lumumba, I wouldn’t have minded it. I dismissed those thoughts as uncle’s call came through. The time was 9:15am sharp.

“Hello Ignatius, are you out already?”

“Morning uncle! Yeah, I’m more than ready, though not outside yet.”

“You asked me to keep time.”

“Yes, I’m all packed, but just needed some help getting the things out there. I’ll be at the gate in a while...”

I rushed out into the quadrangle to summon some kids who normally helped us whenever the time to shift things came. Two boys started walking towards me before I had even signalled to them. I just gave them the thumbs-up, and walked back into the corridor as they rushed in from behind, all excited. In the room, I asked one to lift the large suitcase with mostly my books and clothes, then another held the mattress, and then a bag with the bedsheets and blanket. I held my backpack and another box of books, and with the boys walking ahead of me, took the things out to the Ipsum waiting outside the gate.

“Oh, you’ve grown thin man! Was it all those books?” inquired my uncle, as he stepped out of the car to help the boys place the things in the boot.

“Really? Friends are telling me I have gained weight instead!”

“Unless if those ‘friends’ are girls, I doubt they meant you any good with that,” he said.

We laughed as he took the box away from me, stashed it on the back-seat, and then turned to give me a big hug, after which he took my right hand and shook it fervently.

“Congs man!”

“Thank you uncle, it’s not been easy!” I assured him, while shaking my head end to end, “But yeah! I’ve made it to the final day!”

He shook my hand some more, then reached inside the car for something. It was the glove compartment. He opened it and retrieved a khaki envelope.

“Here. This has been waiting for when you make it to this day...”

“Oh really?” I could not believe it! “Thanks! *Oba* what could it be?” I asked, as I got the envelope, and without opening it, held it up to the morning sun to try and see what was inside of it...

“You’d need to borrow a pair of eyes from Superman, in order to do that!” he joked.

“Who knows,” I replied, all delighted, “you never know what it is that Professor Xavier has been teaching us late at night!”

The gesture really warmed me up and I felt more loved and lucky than ever before. I put the envelope inside my backpack and told him there were a few other things to bring to the car. We went together to my room

as he had never been there before. I had originally planned to use a taxi to take me to the bus park, but he had asked me not to.

“There’s an appointment I had to cancel in order to make it to this place. But then, it also means I have the entire morning free. I will drop you at the bus terminal or somewhere near, before heading out to my other errands...”

“That’ll save me the hustle, thanks!”

I really loved my uncle. I had stayed at his place in Luzira for the final two years of campus. Before that, I had had to leave my things locked in the hall’s store when going for holidays in Masindi. But seeing how much of a hustle that was every end of semester, he offered to keep my things during the school breaks, and further suggested to my father that I stay at his place since it was “nearer campus and the city”. He argued this would help me stay in touch with the sort of people that could help me seek and win good job and study opportunities.

During those holidays at his place, I would mostly spend time reading his many books on science, especially those on computers and the Internet. He was not a fan of philosophy, unlike me, but as for all things science, we deeply shared the passion. He owned miniaturised models of telescopes, microscopes, a gyroscope, many thermometers and other nifty geeky dolls and toys, which he used to decorate the shelves where he kept his most cherished books. We had a tradition of picking a book at random, from the shelves, on some of the nights when he was not very busy with his work, and then, picking yet a random chapter from that book, would proceed to “dissect it thoroughly”.

Sometimes, we both got stuck while trying to decipher a chapter on a subject that was impenetrable without having read the preceding ones, but he would insist that “though essential, looking back in time is cheating, and is thus breaking the rules of this game.” He loved being challenged and cherished novelty, and he nurtured me to love the same. “It’ll make you become more intelligent,” he used to say. So we would try to make up all sorts of theories of why something seemed to be the way it was, or conceive of what a certain formula would mean if certain assumptions and a priori conditions were true. It was a tough game, but very rewarding.

Sometimes we played chess though he was not as good at it as I was – even though it was him that had first taught me the game! “Have fun knocking

yourself out,” he would say, pleading with me to let him quit the game so he could just watch me assume both sides and play it to completion.

Other times, we took long walks in his neighborhood as he insisted it was good for keeping the mind “in touch with things that matter.” We would return from those walks all tired and panting, and would sit in the compound to cool down. I often ran straight for the showers, but not him. He claimed it was not proper for the body to just “haphazardly shift between extremes... as it wears the system quicker!” My uncle? He was a man who loved his science and its principles, and during my stay at his place, he would reinforce many of my own biases, as well as teaching me a lot of things I would never have learnt.

\* \* \* \* \*

We used the Old Kampala route via Makerere, anticipating that there might be jam somewhere if we used the Bombo Road route instead. However, we still did not escape it entirely. Since we had reached Kibuli though, and the bus park was just a few minutes away, I decided it would be better for me to disembark and let him drive on.

“I can grab a *bodaboda* from here.”

“You sure? With all your stuff?”

“But what stuff really... it’s just my backpack, and the little box of books.”

“And what of the other things? You aren’t taking them with you?”

“No. Not now at least...”

“Ah okay. So, I park around here then?”

“It’s fine. Anywhere around here will do.”

“Oh, one thing before you disappear. I was supposed to give you some money to take with you for Muzeyi, but you’ll tell him that I’ll instead send that via mobile money, as I forgot to withdraw the cash from the ATM this morning.”

“No problem. I’ll explain to him.”

“Okay my boy. I have to drive on before it gets bad once more...”

“Thanks uncle. Thanks for everything!”

“Don’t mention it! Keep in touch, and try to make the most of your stay in the village. I believe there’s much more exciting stuff awaiting you there than here in the city right now.”

“Really? I doubt it. I will miss the Internet though... not sure there’s any reliable data reception at Mzee’s. It was bad when I last was there, not sure if the telcos have made things any better now.”

“There’s oil, don’t forget that.”

“Yeah! Hope I’ll have a chance to visit those oil fields indeed.”

“Okay bye. Greetings to all, including Iguru! And safe journey.”

“Thanks.”

He patted me as I stepped out of the car, and he immediately drove off to join the slowly progressing queue of cars once more.

There was a *bodaboda* cyclist waiting near where I had been dropped off. I walked over to him and asked him the fare to the bus terminals. “*Kasa budo zoka,*” he responded, igniting the bike before we had even agreed on the fare. I asked him to place the box with the books at the front where the fuel tank is, and then I sat behind him, making sure my backpack was well-fastened and strapped to my back.

“*Oja kumpisako wali kw’Owino, waliwo byenjagala wo,*” I said, requesting he first passes by Owino market so I could buy a few things, before heading over to the bus park.

“*Tewali buzibu boss. Naye arwo ojakwongeramu ekido.*”

(Indicating how that would accrue an extra Shs500 to the Shs1,500 he’d asked for earlier on!)

“*Tugende tugende,*” I told him as we rode towards the market.

We soon reached the new, modern market complex, which looked nothing like the original “Owino” we had grown up seeing. The ‘original Owino’, where most campus and school students bought most of their “*veh*” – clothes, had since been replaced by a swanky supermarket, and a dizzying, slapdash collection of boutiques, salons and stalls of everything wearable and not. I got off the bike, rushed into the newly-established supermarket facing the street, and leaving my backpack with the security desk at the entrance, rushed inside to grab a couple of things.

I picked a red plastic basket from near the first rack I approached, and then proceeded to throw in a box of soap, a three-litre bottle of cooking oil and a 5Kg pack of Kinyara sugar - that last item, making me smile, because, adding it to the list was ironic, as that particular brand of sugar was manufactured in Masindi. I chose to shop it there, because I had my doubts about the prices back home, and whether such quality was available in our village shops. Plus, I did not want to have to look around for things in Masindi town, especially since it was not going to be my final destination during the trip.

I walked over to the checkout counter, pulled out two crispy notes of 50K that I had proudly kept for the day, hoping it would suffice. The computer at the checkout indicated the total was “Shs85,000 only”. The lady passed the balance to me, while another packed the groceries into a box – they normally would not do that. They would instead use a polythene bag, but I ensured to smile before these two girls, and then pleaded with them, to “help me have my things packed in the box”. The magic worked.

I walked out, grabbing the box at the front, and the bag on my back. It was 10:30am already, and the bus was supposed to be leaving by 11:00am sharp! I told the *bodaboda* man to hurry, and soon we were at the terminals. I paid him 3K instead. Some boys rushed in to help me take the things to the bus as is the norm. At the bus, which was already getting filled, I paid for my ticket, which cost an exact Shs30,000, asked for my box of books – against the conductor’s will, and then rushed to jump aboard so I could get whatever remaining good “posts” there might be on the shuttle.

\* \* \* \* \*

I hate sitting at the front. But that is where I saw the first few vacant seats when I climbed into the thing. There was an old woman seated near the entrance, who looked at me as I entered the bus; she shifted in her seat, as though to indicate it was okay to sit next to her. I only smiled at her and moved on. “Not with an old woman,” I told myself.

Somewhere, there were two kids fighting for a pack of biscuits as their mother looked on, then there was a nun seated next to a very fat, dark-skinned woman in an untidy *gomesi* that made her sagging breasts reproachable even with all the mess of cloth covering her chest. I hated sitting near clerics, and did not fancy fat people either, so I moved on. There was a vacant seat, two somewhere else, but the windows near them did not seem operable, so I advanced further towards the rear.

Then, as I debated between sitting in the very last row and the one immediately before it, while still standing in the aisle, someone behind me requested to pass.

“Excuse me please!”

I decided to assume the seat to my left, shoving in the box first, and then repositioning, so I could sit right next to the window. However, before taking the seat, I made sure I turn to see who it was that had asked to “be

excused”, because, the tone had sounded a bit too harsh for a mere excuse. It was some lady dressed in an oversized *kitenge*. She wore glasses and carried a fat, brown bag adorned with fake jewels. I chose to ignore her, after all, she had found her peace.

A tall man, possibly a Muhima from the way he looked, walked in and occupied the seat immediately in front of me. There was a curtain obscuring the window adjacent to him, and he furiously drew it back. “Mmmm, people are in a bad mood on this bus,” I thought to myself. I did not want to catch the plague, and so I immediately reached into the backpack, and pulled out both my phone and earphones. *There is no better way to start a journey of this sort.* As I browsed the playlist, earpieces plugged in tightly, but with no sound yet, I heard a man shouting to his kids to rush onto the bus. “What should I really be listening to this time?” I wondered. A rooster crowed on the bus, and then some woman came in to share the seat with the tall man to my front. She was sweating profusely, and used her hankie to wipe and fan herself. Then she reached out – without asking or greeting the man, and pushed the sliding window further up. The man turned to look at her and expressed genuinely, though with visible disgust, “Let me help you.”

I checked my own window, and then realised it was only partially open. I pushed it a bit, but it was not moving past a certain point. “These buses are fake!” the lady said, complaining to the man who had offered to help her. However, it seems she was right, because I tried moving my own window upwards, but it would not shift much. “Oh, it’s going to get hot in here!” I was thinking ahead to what could happen if the sun was to scorch the side I was on – I normally kept that in mind when choosing seats in taxis and any vehicles ahead of long journeys. Realising that the sun was actually bound to shine more on my side, I figured it would be wiser to switch the seat before the entire bus filled up.

I stood, looked about me. There were more vacant seats around me; two opposite where I had been sitting, and more in some of the rows ahead and behind me. “I can’t sit anywhere else,” I quietly assured myself, focusing on the seats in the very last row. But then I turned to see if there might be a chance to get a better seat elsewhere. As I surveyed the rows towards the front, I caught the attention of this girl who was also surveying the seats – about four rows from where I was, except she was still carrying her luggage, and was obstructing some other people behind her, who



seemed too impatient to move past her. She was in the same mix I was in.

She was holding her hair in a ponytail, wore shades with silvery rims, and then had a brief, black jean jacket on top of her top. It was hot in the bus, and it had been hotter outside, but she looked all calm and cool!

“*Mwisiki, tuhe omuhanda,*” a woman behind her requested impatiently as the girl was moving forward rather undecidedly. Then, I realised I was fixated on her! She must have seen me gazing at her, or so I noticed, and so, quickly, I focused elsewhere. And then, almost subconsciously, failed to sit just when I was about to, instead, stepping back into the aisle as well!

“I should sit at the back,” I thought, as I moved into the very last row, the only other person seated on the row being the woman who had asked to be excused. I did not look at her; I stashed the box of books under the seat, and then moved in to sit right next to the window opposite hers. It was already pushed all the way to the middle - the max it could slide and I felt relief at last.

The girl. She went and sat right where I had been sitting. It seemed as though she had been praying for me to quit the seat. I put my earphones back on, pulled out the phone and pressed the play button. *It will be a shuffle*, a thought crossed my mind. There was enough music on there to last a whole day. The first song to chime in was *I gotta feeling*, a David Guetta’s remix of The Black Eyed Peas. Next was “2000 B.C” by Canibus. “Awesome start!” I murmured, not hearing myself speak though. I stretched, shook my head a bit and was really ready for the trip.

I adjusted the volume a bit lower. Some man had come to sit next to the girl, but he seemed to be concerned about something and was explaining himself or something of the sort. I needed to hear what it is he was saying to her.

“Do you mind if I sit next to the window? I often get problems on these long trips, and it sometimes helps if I’m close to a window...”

The girl looked up at the man. He could have been her father’s age judging by her looks and size.

“It’s okay, though I also needed the window.”

The man pushed back into the aisle so she could come out. He was all smiles, but showing pity at the same time. The girl was not smiling though.

“There’s a vacant seat here,” I chimed in, “and I could offer you the window as well.” They both looked at me questionably, but my gaze was focused on the man, and it was pretty obvious I intended for him to take my seat. But instead the girl somewhat “misread” the message and responded coldly, “Thanks, but I’ll be fine here.”

*But I wasn’t meaning you girl!* However, I did not utter it, as I definitely would not mind her taking my seat.

No, he was not going to come to my seat so it seemed. The girl pushed aside slightly, and the sickly man moved into my former seat, right beside the girl. *That’s the third person to sit in that spot within less than 10 minutes!* I was thinking about it, and it somehow amused me. Then, interrupting my flow of thought and the music, I heard the soft voice of the girl inquire... about a seat.

“Excuse me,” I said, rushing to unplug my ears so I could hear her well.

“Is someone going to sit here?” she asked, looking me in the eye as though I might say otherwise?

“No. No, there’s no one here but me.”

She was holding a backpack as well, a smaller one though. There was enough room for two more people on our row despite there being only one other seat left, and I pushed further towards the window as she moved in to sit next to me. As though she had read my gesture, she shoved her backpack in-between us, and rested her arm on it as I moved my attention back to the playlist on my phone. I was listening to the music, but my eyes were out the window, scanning the busy, messy streets on my side of the bus. People were selling things, others were pushing things, others were carrying them, and still, others were talking about things. As I sat there looking outside, only one thing seemed to dominate my thoughts; I could not think of anything else but her.

I clicked forward on some song of Blink 182, and then skipped an Alex Mukulu song. For some reason, I only wanted to listen to electronic music while on the trip... “It tastes better with speed,” a friend of mine at campus had once testified, as we talked about the kinds of music that are ideal under various circumstances.

I would filter to the electronic genres only, as I had enough of it to last the entire journey and possibly beyond. I toggled the tab to “Genre”, and scrolled down to “Electronic”, and then touched the “Party Shuffle” icon.

The first song on the playlist was one I rarely listened to, but as though the algorithm had read my thoughts, it picked the most appropriate song for the moment...

*Girl*  
*Girl*

*Who's that girl?*  
*'Cause she is driving me insane*  
*Who's that girl?*  
*I'd like to know her name*

Opened the lyrics to the groovy, otherwise repetitive song. *Who's that girl?* I felt the one next to me shift closer to me as the last person to enter the bus walked in to sit in the only vacant seat left. Another huge woman. "You're the only man on this row, and that's a lot of responsibility for a man." It was some naughty voice inside my head...

"11:32am" read the time on the lock-screen of my phone as the bus engines kicked in and the bus started to roll. I closed my eyes as Lasgo's song played on...

*Who's that girl?*  
*I'd like to know her name...*

Meanwhile, the voice inside my head was screaming in the background of all that music... "Loyce! Fuck, that girl had almost driven me insane at the very last moment... I hate you."

## Chapter II

It was approaching 12:15pm, and the bus was just wheezing past shops along Kawempe-Mbogo Road. Soon, it would turn right onto Bombo Road, and would then have to keep left until Masindi Town. The driver was doing something like 50Km/h when the bus approached Kawempe Police Station, and for Ignatius, the journey had not yet picked the anticipated momentum he craved so much for.

Gazing at the receding scenes outside his window, there were those men, many in their twenties, who manned the numerous *kikomando-chapati* stalls along the road. It was a bit too early for the ladies doing local fries and chicken – you know, the ones smelling of over-used, unhealthy oil? Then there were kids dressed in yellow, pink and white uniforms, returning home from nursery school. One particular group caught his attention; it was three kids - a boy and two girls; walking on the wrong side of the road, almost getting knocked by a rushing *bodaboda* cyclist riding on the fringes of the road. Ignatius saw it coming, and he held his breath, as the eyes bulged in anticipation of what was about to happen. Fortunately, it did not happen... It would have made an awful scene.

However, he was not the only one who had seen it come. A lady selling watermelons near the road almost made it worse, when she scared the kids by screaming in angst at their careless meandering as the *bodaboda* approached. One of the kids, caught unawares, was about to fall right onto the path of the bike, which had changed course to avoid hitting them. But luckily, the cyclist, also seeing the danger ahead of him, steered further away, and did it just in time to avoid knocking the kid. It was more drama for all who were watching the farce because, in trying to avoid the kids, the biker almost got hit by a speeding Renault approaching from behind. The spectators on the streets and some on the bus shouted and jeered as though his near-death was a much more welcome sight.

As the bus raced by all this, Ignatius turned in his seat, as did many of those seated on his side of the bus. Everyone wanted to see what had become of the kids and the *bodaboda* man. However, a while later, they had gotten way past the scene, and many on the bus, though oblivious of what had actually

happened, continued talking among themselves about the near catastrophe. Someone even shouted hilariously about how the sight would have been worth featuring on *Agataliko Nfufu* – a popular version of dramatised local newscast.

Trudy, the girl seated next to him, had missed these events while busy texting on her phone. Naturally, she turned to Ignatius for an explanation of what had happened. Ignatius found her tardy concern amusing because she had not seemed to care until a long while after they had passed the scene. Anyway, he told her about the ordeal, and further revealed that it had taken him by surprise, “while trying to kill boredom, by gazing out the window.” After sharing the tale with her, she assured him how the “surprise” was actually “his message”. He did not decode her remark, and so he asked her what she meant by “your message”.

“Why are you being cryptic?” he asked her.

But she only indicated that it “might not matter anyways.” Ignatius, thinking to himself that she must be ‘high’ or something of the sort, decided to ignore her. He smiled, muttered something under his breath, and then returned to the fleeting scenery out the window. She too abandoned him and went back to her phone without saying a thing more.

Ignatius settled back into his passive state, forwarded a couple of songs, turned down the volume and reached into his backpack for a book. Out came a small, worn title by Paul Coelho. He turned the little volume over as though to inspect whether its other side were in a better state than the cover. He inspected the synopsis for a while, and after being sold to the plot, turned back to the front to start munching the little book. But he was uneasy or just plain exhausted; he would start reading the book, and then a while later, would put it aside to gaze out the window for no apparent reason. And then, he would return to the book, try focusing on the story once more, but not for long either.

He turned the playlist from “Electronic” - which was a little too fast for his liking while reading the book, to the slower, mellower genre called “Chillout”. The song *Crystallize* by Lindsey Stirling, was the first to play, and as it slowly progressed, with its enchanting melodies and syncopating basslines, his wandering mind slowly calmed down, and the first episodes of drowsiness set in. He had already lowered the hand with the book (his left) onto his lap, and though it was partially open at the same page he had been stuck at for a while, had abandoned trying to read it anymore. He just would not let go of the page though.

Three songs later, not only was his head leaning back in total surrender, but his eyelids had steadily grown heavy, and sleep finally overpowered him. The music was still playing, but was akin to a sedative offered an otherwise already drunk man. In a way, he was paying for transgressing against sleep the night before. He had not slept well, and when the rocking motions of the bus conspired with the sedative tunes on his playlist, the result was an indisputable relapse into grayspace.

Meanwhile, Trudy was equally preoccupied with the unceasing stream of chit-chat filling the WhatsApp group in which she had recently enrolled. Occasionally, three to five members of the group would type and submit messages almost instantaneously. As happens in crowds, the flow of thoughts and sentiments was a little haphazard. Though, Trudy being a little too fast and keen on following no less than two conversations at a time, kept punching in a response to someone, and then would immediately turn to another person. It is a skill or vice she had picked up from a friend of hers called Rosette - whose friends loved to refer to her as the "Textress" of the school, the same school Trudy attended for her diploma programme.

The atmosphere in the chatroom was one of confusion, much *LOLing*, and spontaneous, seemingly shocking responses to many wrongfully addressed questions. The title of the group (which group contained 103 members - three more than the original limit allowed on the platform), was a puzzling "+ChalkResilience-Ice". The group, which had been started by Trudy's OGs and OBs from her A-Level school, had since expanded to contain many of their friends and their friends from other related groups originally on Facebook. Trudy would occasionally smile, frown, sigh, then furiously type once more, and to the lady seated next to her, it was something akin to sprouting insanity, though she did not try to express her concern in any manner. Ignatius, on the other hand, had no chance to even voice an opinion - he was dozing!

### +ChalkResilience-Ice

**Mwai:** *damn, u faik!*

**Ron:** *bwahaaha...*

**Senga:** *Hy, moreen!!*

**+265773341023:** *Otulo 8-)*

**TrueD:** *@Mwai, m serious - 4 rl*

**Mr.MR:** *When shall we all meat?*

**Ron:** *Boring!*

**TrueD:** *Some1 will need some Hxriyo Nutixp ;-)*

**SlowDay:** *Nawe totukoya*

**S33kr:** *What's that Trudy?*

**Poopi:** *He's stuck in Kalerwe... "mbu"*

**0704776465:** *Whts for lunch guys?*

**Edna:** *Mulokoni*

**TrueD:** *[http://tiny.cc/cry\\_dept#scrt...](http://tiny.cc/cry_dept#scrt...)*

**BabyGyal:** *Munange Sammie fell sic*

**Moze:** *did he get the money? I sent it!*

**Lol:** *yea he! I miss u Senga*

**Margie:** *WtF?*

**+08845363129:** *flks, get a lyf 4 +xs sk!*

**TrueD:** *dang! jus PM me now...*

(It was crazy...)

She was engrossed in her thing, when something hit her toe, sending an unanticipated jolt of pain to her head, before dropping flat and raising a little dust in the process. Her lack of attention to what was going on around her, made her bump into the lady to her left, as the shock gripped her, causing her to nearly drop the phone. That jerky reaction only partially disturbed the sloth to her right though – he was possibly too far off to notice he had finally let go of the little book. Trudy faced the lady she had unnerved and shyly excused herself. Then as though she had gotten the go-ahead from her, slightly bent over and picked up the little, orangeish book. For some reason though, she did not hand it over to its sleeping owner; she held onto it.

Trudy, who also loved reading, immediately went to the first page of the little volume, without even bothering to check the synopsis as its rightful owner had. She skimmed through the preface, turned a couple pages into the book, and then, thrilled by its contents, closed it, then went to the back to check out the synopsis as she must have originally done.

“Wow, this is so cool...” she said, as she mulled over the summarized plot.

Her phone vibrated and she first let go of the book to see if it might be a call. It was not. The screen was locked, and in place of the IM screen was a beautiful landscape as lock-screen wallpaper, upon which bounced a couple of red, screaming counters, indicating the growing number of

distractions she ought to quickly turn back to. She thought better than to unlock the screen, and instead turned-off the vibrator with a quick bottom-to-top swipe, after which she ignored all-else, and returned to the little book.

She had fallen in love with it, and wondered silently, why its owner could not just wake up and read! She was not sure though, if, when he had woken up, he would let her read on. "Could he possibly let me read it? Should I even bother to ask?" she mused. Finally, she turned towards him as though to make a request, but then resolved to keep mum, and instead read on. But something was not resolved inside her, so after a while, she turned to him again, and decided she would wake him, and ask for the favour...

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh damn! Have I been dozing on the bus?"

"I'm sorry, but this might be your book, sir?"

"My book?"

"Oh yeah, that's mine!"

"*Hahaha*, not so quick... I just picked it up for you."

"Damn, sure? I must have been deep in thought when it dropped..."

"Deep thought? That must have been some truly great thoughts! You were sleeping, perhaps!"

Her remark made me laugh dismissively, as I knew I had made up a terribly naked excuse. She was bold and humorous; when I tried to prompt her to return my book, she hesitated as though she would comply, and then just refused to hand it over, smiling and laughing lightly all the while. I was wondering...so why did she even bother to wake me up then? I was still tired and somewhat felt a bit shy and a little bullied by her confidence. But I pushed all that aside once I realized she seemed seriously interested in the book as well. She was checking its back cover, and was she reading it or just pretending?

"You like it?" I asked her.

"Mmm maybe?"

"Well, if you don't, you could just pass it back."

"I hope you're done with it... ah, for now? Because I wish to skim through it a little longer... if you don't mind?"

*Hahaha*... "You are funny."



“Oh, I’m serious.”

“Okay fine. Please go ahead and read. Though, I doubt you’ll finish it on this one trip...”

She fell silent for a while, as I adjusted in my seat to win my sobriety back. She did not seem to be reading though; she was skimming through as she had indeed asked. *She’s probably too impatient to read, or so I thought. It is a common illness of the young and old alike, since the advent of modern social media and the explosion of online content... people just cannot sit and read anymore! Perhaps, she thinks this is some other fast-food treat? But she should read this book... it is just too amazing!* I did not want to really distract her, and thought, if she wanted to, she should read the damn book!

“You don’t have to rush,” I assured her in a soft tone, “never know I might give it to you for good.”

“Oh really? I don’t like favours that fast.”

“I thought you’re the one who did ask for that favor?”

She fell silent again, settled on a page and probably read a thing or two.

“Excuse me,” she asked, “what’s your name you said?”

*Has she just asked for my name? Oh, this girl’s a big pretender...*

“Ignatius”

She laughed, passed the book back to me and then replied, “Ignatius whooo?” – stretching the “who” as though it were a name I needed to further expound upon.

“I offered you my book, added a name to it, and you haven’t even told me yours. See? Who’s in bigger debt now?”

“Oh, you really should have asked!”

She turned to face the other side, as though something would remind her of the name from hence.

“Mabel. Just call me ‘Mabel’”

And then she smiled...

“You really can act,” was my reply, and in mind, was only thinking, “God, she really can act.” I was fully awake, and as the bus raced on, the wind blowing in my face from the outside, I realized, my favorite part of the journey had started. Occasionally, I would turn to face the breeze; seeing tiny gardens of maize or plantains here, hills of dirty green there, scattered

houses with tin roofs, someone on a bike, a shop painted yellow with a big “Y’ello” across and much more. We were in the countryside.

“Isn’t travelling really awesome?” I asked, turning to check if Mabel was enjoying the ride as well, or whether she was just lost somewhere else.

“Mmm, maybe... but I wouldn’t say this particular journey has anything worthwhile.”

“Well, maybe you just haven’t taken the time to experience it...” I turned away from her and closed my eyes for a while. I realized the music had gone silent in the one earphone I still had plugged into my ear. I pulled out the phone from the bag and checked the playlist; there was an error with one of the “.ogg” files, and the player had suspended playback. Damn bugs!

“How often do you travel?” Mabel asked me in a rather hesitant tone.

“I guess daily? Do you mean travelling to the village?” *That’s what she means, or?*

She only nodded.

“Rarely. I used to do it often, back when I was in secondary school, but this is the first time I’m returning to the village in two years.”

The bus was probably moving at close to 80 or so km/h. The lady seated in front of me had turned to check the window behind her, for about the third time, and I knew what she was trying to imply - “Shut the fucking window son!” I drew the pane lower to about a quarter of the height. “If she doesn’t like it this way, she’d better be the one to shut the fuck up,” so I thought.

“You’re the prodigal son then?”

“Not really, it’s been school that did it. I was residing at my uncle’s during the final years of campus, not wanting to keep travelling to-and-fro.”

“I see...”

“What do you see?” I wondered, but didn’t ask her; instead, she probed...

“So, who are you going to meet in Masindi? Your family?”

“Sure. It’s my dad and a few siblings staying home.”

“That’s enough,” a voice assured me. It was my turn to ask...

“And you? Is your family in Masindi as well?”

She was starting to answer, then hesitated and seemed unsure. I pretended not to have noticed the hesitation – I looked down as though to discern something...

“No.” she finally replied. “It’s a bit of a long story, but the shorter version is that I just stay with my grandmother and mum.”

*Long story...* I wondered what it might be.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a checked lavender and black scarf – it looked charming. She wrapped a bit of it around her neck and left the rest of it to conceal what had been visible of her cleavage. I guess it was the cold from the wind, *but she had not seemed to mind it earlier on?*

“I could pull it lower if that’ll make you feel better,” I suggested, turning to draw the window pane even further down.

“No, it’s totally fine. I’ll be fine here, plus we do need the air anyways...”

“It can get cold, especially when the sun is being covered by clouds as it’s been for a while now,” I said, as I looked out into the distance, noticing rolling hills with grayish skies touching the horizon. There stood erect, a prominent cell-tower upon one, and everywhere else were mostly pine trees and seemingly untamed bushes and meadows. It looked scenic, but would have been much better with clearer skies, or so I thought.

My attention turned away from the outside. I felt I wanted to know more about her. Maybe she could be good company the rest of the trip? Give it a try... she is not that bad...the inner me urged. I was hesitant to engage her further, but knew it was better to try than not. I removed my other earplug as well, but instead opened the Gmail app. She could be a better option than Loyce... There were five unread messages; two were notifications from LinkedIn - more like spam than meaningful messages for me, and so I just deleted them without even bothering to check. One was a reply from a coursemate, Odeke, who I had asked to share with me a link to a certain e-Book on “advanced industrial stoichiometry”, by one of our own faculty members at Makerere. One was a reminder from Google Calendar and the other was just an old message that I had previously read, but chosen to mark as unread, so I could tackle it later - a response to an application I had sent to ILK, concerning sponsorships for graduate programmes.

“What have you been studying at the university?” Mabel asked, as I distracted myself from her, with the phone. “She’s trying to break into you,” I thought! I didn’t turn to face her, instead, I held the phone lower, and looked towards the front of the bus. I had anticipated the question, and I definitely had an answer.

“Chemistry and Mathematics.”

It felt good answering that question... I always love answering that question!

"Mmm nice!"

I did not want to read whatever expression had accompanied that remark, instead, I used the opportunity to get in on her as well...

"And you my dear?"

"I'm not yet done with school, but I'm doing my first year of Psychology."

"Psychology? Wow! That's really cool!"

"I doubt that."

"Why? I mean, you guys know everything we think of before we ever utter a word!"

She chuckled and tightened the scarf around her neck, before adjusting the bag between us - no, she did not move it, only adjusted it a bit. Then she went on talking. I had turned to face her, but was not exactly looking at her.

"That's a misconception, I believe. However, I wasn't always interested in the subject, only switched to it after doing a year in Education and getting bored with it."

She was going to be a teacher? The question crossed my mind almost subconsciously.

She added, "I guess the university also kind of bored me."

"You mean you switched universities as well as programs?"

"Yes. Originally, I'd gone to Nkumba University, and was studying Educ from there. But after the first year, someone offered to sponsor me, if and only if I would switch to something more worthwhile. I chose Psychology."

"And which university did you choose to study it from?"

"Kyambogo. I could have done MUK, but my benefactor couldn't afford it, and so, that's where I've been since last year."

Strange.

"That's not common though," I said, looking into her eyes, "for someone to prematurely switch courses, as well as universities."

"I've liked it thus far, and think I should have done it the very first time."

"Nice! It's definitely very important to put your time where your passion is; gives lesser chance to future regrets and dreading school generally."

I knew what I was saying because I had personally witnessed peers who were totally unmotivated, some hating the courses they had been offered at university. Most of these cases were as a result of lack of career guidance or just side-effects of following peer and family pressure. I dreaded such paths myself, and felt happy for her. She was not looking at me, but the

countryside views beyond me. I withdrew my attention from her, but not from what she had just said.

Psychology. I had encountered a bit of it while reading books of philosophy. There were those debates concerning the question of reality and how we came to know it, using just the mind and our unreliable senses. There were still moments when I believed it was impossible for the mind and senses to tell us anything about the world with certainty. I had read somewhere concerning the possibility of life being just one grand, never ending-dream, from which only few ever managed to awaken. I'd tried seeking out what this "awakening" might be, but never really found such a concept discussed with clarity anywhere. I did not totally believe there was such a distinct state as "awakened", and mostly considered it a metaphor.

My interests in psychology were not entirely orthodox either. The things I read caused me to ask such questions as, "What if all this were just a dream?" Descartes had influenced me the most. I often asked myself the question, especially as I walked to class or as I looked at the reflection of myself in the mirror. "The mind," so one author had said, "is where the ultimate answers are." And that is what caused me to cherish psychology most times.

I had posed these questions to one of my lecturers once, and his only response had been, "We are in the business of chemistry not counselling." I never dared to share my sentiments concerning these matters with any other faculty member ever again – but that did not purge these concerns out of me entirely. So when Mabel claimed to be a student of the subject, I felt I had a chance to pose the questions to someone possibly "in-the-know." But I also hesitated to engage her for a while, as sometimes I felt, dragging most folk into such dialogue, made me seem like a nagging, pretentious nerd. She was only a first-year student... *How much might she really know? How much of this stuff concerns their psychology anyways?* Finally, I decided I would talk... I did not.

There was a long pause. She was busy with her phone once more, and was listening to music via a seemingly brand-new pair of white Samsung earplugs – her phone was some overused Techno though! She noticed me looking at her phone, and probably read my mind?

"It's my real phone, if you intend to question it."

I laughed, and then reassured her, "It's not bad! Long as it gets the job done..."

We both laughed, as she wiped the screen of the phone with the tip of her jacket. Then she spoke...

“Tell me, so what do you guys do with the math and chemistry?”

*That is a tough one, I thought, that bit is rarely asked.*

“The math? I can't say there's been much we've used it for, thus far. I'm just a minor in mathematics though, so I might not be able to speak well of its full potential at undergraduate level, unlike those who major.”

She did not seem convinced, or her expression was just blank. I went on...

“Normally, studying mathematics is meant to prepare you or equip you with the advanced skills you would need to engage in the more advanced kinds of science and engineering, if not proper mathematical thinking – applicable anywhere.”

She nodded long, as though some illuminating blurb had just escaped my lips. I paused a bit, then shared more...

“The more useful thing has been the chemistry though. I was majoring in that subject for the last two years of my course, and at least, we've learnt much practical knowledge related to applying chemistry in many domains; from making drugs, to testing the composition of specimens at crime scenes.”

She lit up as though that last bit contained some spark she had been looking for. However, I doubt whether she realized the little lie embedded in that last claim of mine – I had sort of lied about the extent of what it is we had actually covered in chemistry, but somehow felt it did not really matter that I had made it up.

“That's quite a lot of stuff you've mastered I believe.”

I wanted to believe she was being sarcastic, but I ignored it.

“It's an exciting field indeed,” I said, “but the more serious stuff starts at graduate level, which I hope to upgrade to someday.”

She did not respond to that. “You are intimidating her,” a voice in my head said. I fell silent, noticing that the tall man sitting next to the lady in front of us was snoring. I let that occupy us for a while.

She was listening to her music from the left ear alone, and so I took that to mean we could still chat some more. I wanted us to steer away from the academic stuff; I wanted to talk to her about the village...

She must know lots of interesting things about Masindi since she seems to have been there more often than I.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Excuse me Mabel, tell me about your village please. Where exactly do you live?”

She eased the scarf a bit, the sun had returned in full swing, and there was much of it all about us.

“You might not know the particular village, but it’s somewhere in Kibiro.”  
“Kibiro? Isn’t that in the rift valley, right next to Lake *Mwitanzige*?” I asked, having recalled the name from my Geography secondary school days, and the legends of Bunyoro-Kitara and its majestic, ancient salt-works in that area. I was excited!

“Yes! Kibiro, the famous home of the Cwezi salt-works and hot springs,” she said as she nodded her head with pride. She unlocked her phone screen, tapped a few icons and then passed the phone to me, without unplugging her music though. It was a gallery of pics, possibly of her village?

“Is this it?” I asked, swiping through the scenes, one amazing shot after another.

“Yes. It’s just a few that I took the last time I was there. Have you ever gone there?” She was looking at me.

“No. I’ve read about it, but somehow, never gotten the chance to go there.”  
“But you know where it is, right? Just about an hour from Masindi, if you take the Hoima road.” *But it is not in Masindi.*

In one of the photos, I saw three old ladies carrying huge blocks of the processed salt in baskets. They were definitely posing for the photo, and all were donning such big smiles, you could count their teeth if you wished to. Another photo showed Mabel washing hands in what might be the hot springs, as a little kid looked on, a short distance from her. In another shot, it was a very foggy view of Lake *Mwitanzige* from the shores of what *must* be her village.

“I’m not going straight home,” she declared. “There’s another grandmother of mine who stays in a village not far from Masindi town. That’s where I’ll spend a couple of days, before heading out to Kibiro.”

“So, you still have both grandmothers?”

“Oh yes and no. I’m lucky to have three of my grandmothers still alive,”

“Wow! Three?”

“But, I only stay with one of them; the one in Masindi. It’s my mother who stays in Kibiro, but I prefer to stay with my grandmother mostly.”

I didn’t ask her why; I had another question instead...

“Does your grandmother stay alone or with your other relatives?”

“Mostly alone.”

*I can relate...*

“But occasionally my aunt visits and stays for a while, and the home is not as isolated from the others as is typical of most villages, and so she often has company, even when we are not there.”

She projected her neck towards me, to look at a picture I had been studying for a while – it was the last of about seven photos in the folder. In it, there was a relatively big hut judging by my experience of typical rural homes. There were no peculiarities about it as such, except that towards its base, on what must have been mud-plastered walls, were painted certain patterns, or symbols, which seemed to be familiar, but which I could not remember having seen anywhere on a home before. It also did not look like any of the other homes I had seen in the other photos. She noticed my fascination with it and challenged me first...

“You’ve probably never seen such beautiful huts before, have you?”

*Duh, it’s not even the beauty, it’s the...*

“Well, not really. What’s the hut used for?” I definitely had no clue.

She giggled silently, then took back the phone from me, and looked at the interesting hut herself, as though she had not already seen it many times before.

“I just took a photo of it while walking back from Kibiro that day. I too don’t really know what it’s used for, but I guess it could be home to some ‘lucky’ granny.”

I laughed because her answer did not convince me at all. I felt the hut must have some other significance, but I did not push my inquiry any further.

I was getting hot from the sun hitting directly at me, and yet had no other space to run to. I did a couple passes with my left palm, over my right arm, in hopes of soothing the heat eating at my skin. Meanwhile, I noticed we had approached a big trading centre, and I could see typical ‘Ugandan life’ roaming the roads and streets on either side of the highway. The bus was not slowing down though, so I understood that the town must be small. I



imagined we would just quickly ride through it without needing to slow down.

“Do you know where we are?” I asked Mabel, my eyes scouting the wide range of activities that engaged the people in the area.

“Luweero”, she told me.

“We’ve reached Luweero already? It’s a big town if I remember correctly, right?”

“It’s a district actually. But yes, the town is somewhat big.”

“So, there’s more to see ahead...” I thought.

I was starting to recognize some of the buildings; a church, a mosque there, a catholic school, the market... I started to recollect memories of what I had seen while passing along this same highway in the past. I had seen the town many times before, though I sometimes forgot it was it, while still in the outskirts. It did not seem like an interesting place though; besides the many jackfruit stalls lining my side of the road – possibly targeting those travelling back to Kampala, there was not much difference from the other towns along the highway.

“It’s not a very interesting place,” I said, even though I had actually never lived there to know with certainty.

“I have a friend who stays behind that petrol station,” said Mabel. I turned to check out the MoGAS station as we drove by. She pointed to a house with shiny blue sheets and a very tall hedge. “That’s where they live.”

I knew some rather funny stories about Luweero though, from the jokes some guy at campus used to make of those who come from Luweero, Nakasongola, Kiboga and those other intermediate areas along the Kampala-Gulu highway. I thought it would be fun to share some of them with her.

“Have you heard of the zombie stories of this district?” I began. She turned, smiling and shaking her head.

“No. What about them?”

“There’s this friend of mine who once told me that folk in Luweero typically plant a banana plant in their compound just so it can deter night-dancers from trespassing and stalking them at night.” I laughed as I retold that possibly fake tale, and as I did so, looked out the window for any evidence or instances of such practices in any of the homes we might see along the road. I was particularly interested in any home with plantains

right in front of the house. I thought I saw some, but they did not look like they were exactly “in” the compound as I had anticipated. Rather, they were more like “beside” the compound. I was also wondering what she thought of the tale, as she had not reacted to it yet, apart from joining me in the search.

She spoke, without turning to face me; “Many things happen in this country though, so I doubt it’s all a lie.”

I switched to inspecting the scenes to our left, just to see if I might be more successful in finding evidence on her side of the view.

“But anyways, I doubt this stuff is legitimate. This guy just liked to tell many dark jokes concerning these places. And, perhaps, he’d never lived here or just knew someone who did.” I did not believe the stories that much though, so I was somewhat content with there being no evidence of such to see.

She abandoned the search, and adjusted in her seat to get comfy once more. “I’ve actually heard more disturbing tales about Masindi and the other places of Bunyoro than those about Luweero.” She paused, and then added, “And there’s more to these stories, if only you used to visit the village more often. Many are connected to areas along this road, and they typically have some level of truth in them.”

*So she definitely has stories to tell.* I was liking it...

“Please share...” I pleaded, eager to hear her version of the creepy fibs.

The tales she told me next, blew my mind, and also left me with many questions. However, you would need to hear them yourself, to figure out, on your own, what you would make of them...

\* \* \* \* \*

There are things I used to laugh about as a kid, but which I have since learned to take very serious. Of those things, is the fate of the sick, the pain of the poor and the mysteries of life.

One time, at the Catholic girls-only school in Masindi called “Nyamigisa Girls” – a school that I was attending at the time - was this girl called Mihanda Noeline, who it was claimed often suffered traumatic attacks at

the hands of their bitter family spirits. She was nearly my age, though one class below me. She was a very beautiful and charming girl, and many of us really adored and tried to befriend her. But she was unfortunate as well, in that, whatever disturbed her, also seemed to prevent her from having any meaningful relationships with anyone.

She often suffered these attacks at home – away from what was a day-and-boarding school. With the rest of us, day-scholars, she often walked to and from school, five days a week. But one particular day; the first day of training ahead of our school's Music Dance and Drama Day, scheduled for a week thereafter; upon command from the school administration, it was required of each student to participate in one of the scheduled activities. Normally, each class was assigned a set-piece to perform; others also had a play, and most had one or more traditional dances to perform as well. Noeline, who was in S.2 at the time, had refused to participate in any of the activities, but would not give her teachers a reason why.

Then, one of the 'masters', upon learning of her refusal to participate in any of the activities, sent Noeline's classmates to summon her to his office. Two girls went to fetch her, one of them the class monitor. It is said, she, Noeline, had been hiding in the bathrooms, waiting for the time to go home – which would soon arrive, as the rehearsals always happened in the late afternoon. Against her will, the class monitor and friend, forcefully dragged her to the office. I did not like the class monitor either, a certain girl called Milly. She was generally cruel, and only friendly to the teachers.

At the office, the master, together with the teacher on duty that week, proceeded to quiz Noeline regarding why she felt she was "special". However, the only thing Noeline told them was that her parents had hindered her from participating in any cultural activities while at school. But the teacher on duty, who was also the school's assistant chaplain, simply laughed it off, and insisted she attends the training, asserting, "Whether you like it or would rather die, you must join the others."

It is said, Noeline deliberately kept silent thereafter, deciding to go sit outside the office, without remorse nor saying a thing else to any of them. She was known to act heady sometimes.

The master, witnessing her defiant reaction, walked out of the office with a big cane, and beat Noeline with so much anger, while insisting and commanding that she go for the training no matter what. He even made it

worse for her, because he forcefully dragged her to one of the harder, more native performances, of which I was also taking part. Noeline, crying and screaming for the teacher to let go of her, had her woes falling on deaf ears. The lady who was leading the training in our group only laughed and begged that the teacher let her be, but he did not. I remember him claiming boisterously in Runyoro, "*Titukwenda emyoyo yawe eyebisuba kuturagiira ekyokura hanu!*" He then abandoned Noeline where we were, and said he would return to check on her "progress" soon. Some of us really felt concerned, but the trainer insisted everyone return their attention to the rehearsal. We did.

And so we continued listening to Madam Sandra's instructions as we practised the drills she demonstrated. Meanwhile, Noeline, seated on bare grass not far from where we were, and still crying, was mostly ignored by everyone. However, at some point – as we started rehearsing the actual dance with drums and other instruments added, Noeline started shouting and screaming at the top of her voice, "*Mundeke Mundeke Mundeke...*" and this is when all the dance turned chaotic.

I cannot recall much of what happened thereafter as I also fell victim to the 'attack'. But it is claimed, from stories of those who witnessed the bizarre event, that as though her torments had summoned an entire army of malevolent spirits, almost every one of us participating in that particular group, with the exception of the teacher, got into a mad frenzy and either ran about screaming, crying or laughing uncontrollably. Others just fell to the ground unconscious. The rehearsal was abandoned; everything where we had been practising from descended into madness and horror.

It is said, when this happened, Noeline exhibited her "typical" manic episodes as well, though, because of lack of prior experience with handling her, almost no one, not even the school chaplain – from whom many sought help and an explanation - could handle the situation. The entire ordeal is said to have lasted close to thirty minutes, until when Noeline's caretakers arrived at the school. It is further claimed that no one had actually called or informed them; they just happened to appear at the scene in time! It was Noeline's mother and, possibly, her big brother who showed up, and only them that helped restore sanity to the embattled girl.

For the rest of us, after Noeline had been calmed down, we were all gathered in the school compound, as teachers and students alike tried to help those who had collapsed, to regain consciousness, with whatever

methods they could muster. Some prayed, others only had friends and teachers soothe and encourage with adhoc first-aid – yes, some had gotten wounded. All sought sanity and calmness. For most of the school population though, it was not safe to walk to that unfortunate spot right then, and so, many merely watched from a ‘safe distance’ – behind closed doors and via classroom windows, at what had become the greatest horror story in all the school’s history.

Later, the chaplain claimed Noeline had been possessed by “The Devil”, though her bitter parents went on to curse both the chaplain and the teachers who had tortured their daughter, asserting, “*Nainywe mujakuzara, kiribahikaho.*” Such a terrible curse! The headmistress, a nun, after hearing about the tale - she’d not been at the school that day, requested Noeline to go “try a safer school.”

The MDD training was halted for the next two days, with many students fearing to participate or even walk in the school compound anymore in the aftermath of that ghastly scene. Eventually, life returned to normal, and though D-day for the presentations finally arrived, they were recalled at the very last moment, after one of the resident nuns explained, “There is a serious problem with that song, especially the drumming accompanying it, thus it shall be left out today.” I recall watching the others perform, and I personally felt much relieved of the burdensome, suspect performance as well.

However, since that time, we never heard of Noeline again, and no one really seems to know what had exactly happened on the fateful day. Personally, it was one of my first encounters with the peculiar side of our culture and of human existence!

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time she finished that story, I was both scared and fascinated by her experience. However, I knew of a similar story I had one time heard being retold by one of my friends during A-level. Though his tale wasn't as spectacular as hers, it did not seem so distant from it either. I felt I could give her a plausible explanation for the “mystery” she had lived through. There had to be a natural explanation, right?

“Wow, that was some traumatic experience my dear! Wow!”

“You can't possibly understand... but just know, it left us all shaken for like the rest of the term.”

“But, you say no one has ever been able to explain what happened?”

“I said, only the school chaplain tried to offer an answer. ‘The Devil’, he'd said. But many of us didn't seem to understand or agree with his answer, though we had no alternatives,” she replied.

Like most of the story, she spoke of these things in a very low, but firm tone. I was too excited though, I forgot we had been talking low, and instead challenged her reluctance to dig into the matter, rather loudly...

“No no! I think I know of one possible explanation.” She turned to look around, possibly wondering if any of the other folks was listening in on our bizarre conversation, but it did not seem like it. I realised I was shouting, and so lowered my voice as well...

“There's this phenomenon,” I argued, “You must have already heard about it, in psychology. It's called ‘contagion’.”

*It's possible she has...*

“Contagion? No, I've not heard of it,” she said that with a face that indicated she barely knew about it. I had to explain...

“The person who told me about it, claimed it had something to do with the rare, but possible manner in which thoughts, emotions and behaviour could spread from one person to the next in a group, as though it were some contagious disease. He assured me that scientists had documented many such cases, and knew how to handle them using modern psychological methods.” I did not recall many of the details of the theory though, and she possibly picked up the hesitation in my tone.

She was looking at her reflection in the blackened screen of her phone, and then assured me, “I doubt it. I've read of hysteria in one of the introductory units, but it didn't seem like what we experienced. Sometimes, you need to have been at the scene to really know what is talked about.”

*So, she is doubting science?* I wondered.

She went on, “But in any case, it seems like science has its limitations when it comes to explaining many psychological phenomena.”

I did not agree with her. “I doubt it Mabel. I might not be an expert in these matters, but I believe scientists have studied many of these things by now, and possibly, you'll find a rational explanation someday.”

“Someday? I hope.”

She checked the time on her phone as I thought about the story she had just shared. And then she turned back to me with yet another story...

“You’ve probably heard this one before, about how night-dancers terrorise people in *Butiaba*?”

I knew of Butiaba, another one of those feared areas in Masindi, but not the intricacies of its dark tales. *She loves story-telling*, I thought to myself.

I listened earnestly, occasionally laughing, as she told me of those outre people we natively refer to as ‘*abasezi*’ – a noun loosely used to refer to “those who dance at night”. Mind you, it has nothing to do with night clubbing, house parties or street jams, but a lot with nightmares and things only attributed to the closely-named ‘*Abaswezi*’, as her tales would reveal...

\* \* \* \* \*

A certain maid, who was working at one of the homes I was staying at while in Kampala, once told us of tales of how on her village, called “Mabanda”, which is in Butiaba, had a certain night-dancer who stalked them almost every night for about a year.

When I asked her how she knew that it was a night-dancer, she told me of the kind of nightmares they had had to endure for most of that year, until one local healer gave them a particular herb to plant around their home.

She told me that on those nights when the stalker would come, she would be in deep sleep, and sometimes would even be dreaming. And then, out of nowhere, she would wake up, as though someone or something had violently shaken her out of sleep. The worst thing about those experiences, she said, was that they occurred on different days, and at different hours of the night, and so were very hard to predict.

Whenever it happened, you’d suddenly wake up, your entire body feeling very weak, too weak to even twitch a muscle, blink or even raise a finger – you just felt as though your entire body had been paralysed and stoned. The very disturbing bit was that despite all this, you felt there was something trying to grab or drag you out of bed, or that something was trying to kill or strangle you. And so you would scream, kick and fight back with all your might, trying to regain sanity and escape the horror, except that, no matter what you did, you were unable to shake even a toe or utter

a whisper, despite what effort and will you might engage. It would be very horrifying!

This experience would happen very spontaneously and would vanish as quickly as it had come. But on really bad nights, it would almost last up to 10 minutes. Regardless of the duration though, it always left you feeling very weak, frightened to near-death and you could hardly return to sleep for the rest of the night, for fear that the bizarre experience would recur.

Funnily, the next day you would talk to other members of the household about your experience, and either they would not have heard even a single thing, or once in a while, someone might affirm that about the same time you were having your horrors, they either experienced the same thing or heard something outside the house. When something was “heard” she said, “It normally would be in the form of running footsteps, cats meowing or if you had any domestic animals near the house, you would hear them being disturbed.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Damn, you have creepy stories Mabel!” I was almost at the edge of my seat by the time she finished that one, and I had all these images of weird men running about our home, causing us to have weird dreams! I turned to look at her, and she did not seem the least bit concerned or afraid of what she had just been saying. She smiled, and I smiled back.

“Do you believe these things are real?” I quizzed her, looking her deep in the eye.

She shied away, or just did not want to hold my gaze.

“It’s not about believing Ignatius; it’s about trusting the testimony of those who have lived through these things.”

*Huh, she is speaking like a pastor...so I felt.*

“Okay, I understand what you mean, but then people have said all sorts of things concerning us Africans. I see even scarier things in movies, but I definitely know many of these things are exaggerated or most are not even real!” She shook her head in disbelief, as if to imply I was being obstinate or just a pain-in-the-arse.



“You are probably either too naïve, or just pretending to not know about these things.” She made the accusation without facing me; however, I would not take it lightly...She had just called me *naïve*!

“Really? I doubt you know what you are talking about!” I was raising my voice once more, but did not realise it. “It’s not really being naïve, but I prefer to not accept anything until there’s sufficient evidence for it. You are a scientist just as I am, and so I believe you know the principles?” There was a trace of bitterness in my voice, I could sense it myself.

“You don’t have to be defensive about these things actually,” she said. “Like I’ve already said, if you had the chance to experience something first-hand, even though you didn’t really understand it, you might start to appreciate what’s been said about it elsewhere.” She was getting a bit serious as well... I did not like making her tense.

“I’m sorry Mabel. I just thought...”

“It’s Okay. I’ve had similar reactions when I tried to share some of these stories with peers at school. Many just laugh at them, but a few do acknowledge them later.”

*Maybe I will? I doubt it though. If science cannot explain it, then it is often just a hoax.* But I did not want to rub her the wrong way, and so I kept this opinion to myself.

Reflecting about the things she had just told me, and how she reacted to my remarks, I felt she was kind of too superstitious, gullible perhaps. She reminded me of one of my relatives, who was such a spiritual devout you could consider her credulous. Once, she knelt and prayed before a statue of “Mary of Africa” the whole damn night. The next day, she set off on a pilgrimage to some hill called *Bukalango*, and the day after that, to yet another one, called *Kiwamirembe*! Both are locally famous sites for the charismatic and Marian faiths – their so-called “prayer mountains”. At those venues, very untraditional catholicism is the de facto mode of practice, and the youths and adults alike, have really been converted to this madness. My biggest concern with such places and the devout who frequent them, however, is more to do with what the results are; besides tales of tiresome but jubilant prayer, lots of boring, repetitive testimonies, feigned miracles, and though most never mention it – emptied wallets, there’s not much credibility or verifiable advantage in adopting such religious practices I regard extremist. And in my opinion, the female believers are the most vulnerable, most gullible, in these mostly male-dominated neo-christian cults. It’s pathetic!

I was thinking of finally letting go of her and her tales, when I stumbled upon a neatly written blog-post about the concept of “sleep-paralysis”. It was the fourth result, after querying the Yandex search engine online. My query had been “Sleep disorders and paralysis nightmares in Africa.” The article’s author explained that there was this phenomenon called “sleep-paralysis”, in which, either slightly before falling into sleep, or before waking up, one could be trapped in a state where the mind is awake or conscious, but where the body was in a state of sleep – so that, one would be aware that they are awake, but yet they could not control or direct their “sleeping body”. He further explained that though it occurred naturally and spontaneously for most people, that some people could directly or indirectly induce it themselves. He did not explain or share any of those techniques though. I wanted to show Mabel the article, which I was reading on my phone, but something prevented me. Instead, armed with two counter-theories, to both stories she had shared thus far, I felt I wanted to hear yet another mystery tale from her, to see if I might be able to resolve all of them with basic science. Would she say anything more? I thought so...

“Okay, forgive me for being silly and nagging, but could you tell me one more experience that you think is totally bonkers or hard to believe? I really would love to share these stories with my siblings when I get home.” I was not being fair though, but she probably did care.

“I’ve told you more than a stranger can share...” she smiled, and then went back to her phone.

“Please...” I pleaded, “I swear, just one more tale, and that’s it.”

The man who had been snoring in the seat in front of us had woken up, and was reading a local newspaper called *Bukedde*, though he seemed to be more fascinated by the large pin-up picture of some licentious girl on one of the inside pages. The lady seated next to him was looking at the picture too, and, perhaps, I overheard her curse or mutter something obscene in reaction.

We had long passed Luweero, and were possibly in Nakasongola. Most of the landscape on either side of the road was almost semi-arid, almost devoid of human occupation, and deficient of any prominent landmarks. It was generally flat, with a few hills near the horizons. Every once in a while, another bus or a cargo truck would whizz by us towards Kampala. At some point, a swanky Range Rover overtook us, and it commanded my

gaze until it vanished in the distance ahead of us. They must have been doing something close to 180Km/h or more, because we were really racing as well, but could not catch-up. I envied them...

“I'll tell you one more story. Mostly because many of my friends seem to believe it is credible, including the ones who normally want to argue for the sake of arguing.”

I laughed loudly, believing the last reference was geared at me. I assured her, “No, I'm not one of those arguing for the sake of it though!”

I listened attentively, as she drew my attention back to her.

\* \* \* \* \*

This story is of a woman on the very village where I am going. She is an old woman, but also a very wise and reserved one. I have grown up seeing her, and have even talked to her on a number of occasions. She currently stays with her two children, having lost three of her other children in a catastrophic event.

We normally do not call her by name, and instead, use her pet name, Atwoki, which she prefers. On the village, almost everyone knows Atwoki, and many speak of her marvels and tales as passed down over the years by those who saw her in her heydays especially. It is claimed she used to be a “maiden of the craft”, before her children passed away, but that, even after she stopped practising, she retained many of her original mystical powers and skills.

Of these powers attributed to her, is one particular one that I have witnessed myself on many occasions. Apparently, Atwoki has this amazing ability to be able to tell you what the weather is in distant places or wherever you had been before coming to her, without even stepping outside of her hut to study the skies. It might not seem glamorous, but when she opens up to you, she can demonstrate to you her more amazing feats.

On various occasions after my grandmother had introduced me to her, she managed to bedazzle me. She repeatedly demonstrated that she could accurately predict, not only what the weather would be like almost three days in advance, but sometimes would predict which day it would rain

almost one or two weeks ahead. And though I never witnessed it, some claimed she could even tell you the hour of the day when it would rain!

My grandmother once told me that in her hey days, Atwoki and her children would sometimes be consulted or summoned by the *Omukama*, the king, and that after performing certain rituals, it would rain at a day and time as would have been requested! It is said she was part of a long lineage of rain-makers and traditional diviners, but that, unfortunately, her astounding knowledge and skills were destined to die with her; she failed or refused to teach her art to her remaining children or anyone else, after her other three children got struck by lightning while attempting to perform some ritual without her supervision one day.

Now, I know Atwoki very well, and trust the testimony and judgement of my grandmother. And, despite my training in school and especially, in psychology, have not found anything that would make me think any of her feats are gross exaggerations or mere sleight of mind. I have witnessed her genius one-on-one. But then again, you are free to think otherwise concerning any of this, or you can hope that someday you shall experience these things or meet these kinds of people yourself. Well, hoping they do not all die out sooner, as much of this esoteric knowledge is either being ignored, attacked or is not documented anywhere, but in the minds of a few, especially in these modern, but “ignorant” times of ours.

\* \* \* \* \*

I did not totally believe her, but then could not doubt that some people, just like skilled and experienced meteorologists, ought to be able to predict the weather with an accuracy most untrained minds would deem magical or superhuman. However, I could not immediately buy the idea about using a ritual to induce rain...Something just did not add up. But, almost sub-consciously, I applauded and expressed earnest appreciation of her zealous story-telling. Possibly in fear of driving her mad, or just seeking perfect rapport at last.

“Oh yeah, I’ve heard such powerful feats myself!” I lied, “I’ve not met anyone who can really do that kind of thing, but I’ve read about such skilled people in tales about the Chinese and their sorcery.”

She seemed happy at last!

“See? Now you have testimony as well!”

“For that one with the weather, yes, I think if machines can predict the weather, or if humans can use math to do it, then some very gifted people can do it on their own as well.” I was certain about that bit though...

“And the rain-making? Do you think it’s possible?” She was really excited about the topic.

“Hmm, I’m not sure, but who knows, if someone is good enough to predict weather, maybe they also know how to manipulate it?”

She just laughed and said, “Ignatius is one unbelieving believer!”

We both laughed at that one.

Interestingly though, I had once read about some concept called “Ionisation”, and how some clever scientists in the Arab Emirates were inclined on leveraging that physics concept, to “seed clouds” and induce artificial rain, in the desert moreover. I did not have the facts right at the moment though, and did not want to waterdown Mabel’s story with yet another web search. I just let her enjoy her music as I watched the video of “*Why Does My Heart Feel So Bad*”, by Moby. I was not really feeling bad, but somehow was not enjoying the journey that much, especially not after the disturbing tales Mabel had just shared with me.

It was exactly 1:00pm, when we passed a small school with kids playing soccer in one, unfairly tiny pitch – despite the vastness of unused land lying all around. I thought, *that’s probably their means of dragging through the misery of an ‘absent lunch’*. I eased my head backwards, upon the synthetic cotton headrest, pushed the window pane a little lower, and let myself enjoy the rest of the trip...

# Chapter III

Nakasongola town was behind us by no more than 10 minutes, when it happened; otherwise moving normally, there was a sudden “baaaang!” from the side of the bus to my left. It must have been really loud, because even with my earplugs on, I still experienced it with such a tremendous force! In the moment, my head jerked away in shock, narrowly saving me from getting hit in the jaw by Mabel’s elbow, as she thrust herself towards me; the fear painted all over her face almost contorted her into a different person. She was screaming, as were many of the ladies on the bus. For a moment after the explosion, the bus swerved slightly, as the driver struggled to slow it down.

“*Oh Bikira Maria!*” a certain dark woman, possibly in her fifties, exclaimed in utter disbelief, as the bus conductor urged us to remain calm. With a false sense of courage, he explained that one of the tyres of the bus had burst unexpectedly, but that all was under control, and so we need not fear. It had definitely taken all of us by surprise. One person, seated near a window close to where the explosion had taken place, shouted in defiance, in reaction to the request to be calm. He screamed, “I swear, there was smoke and dust, and something like a spark as well! You think we can be calm after all that?” He made it seem like we’d just survived a smaller 9/11 attack. There was tension, as many of the passengers shouted at the driver to stop immediately, or risk killing us all. He was braking indeed, and the coach did come to a halt not more than 200 metres from where the incident occurred, much as it seemed like eternity between the fateful event and the stop.

“These people are rather clumsy!” the woman seated next to Mabel began, as people started to disembark upon request from the conductor. “At least we are safe, be grateful ma’am,” an old man assured her as he waited for others to clear the way. The aisle seemed narrower than when people had first boarded the bus – everyone was acting impatient, eager for their turn to get out. I put the book and my phone back into the backpack, as I waited for our turn.

“I was about to jump straight into you!” joked Mabel, as she pushed to my side to let the two ladies beside her get out.

“You actually almost knocked me, but I was in flight mode as well.”

“All the men on this bus are cowards!”

“Really? It's a man who's piloting the beast meanwhile... and it's me who prevented you from falling out the window!” I knew she was trying to intimidate me.

“Oh, you are lucky you had music on, otherwise...”

“But I heard it all!”

“It caught me unawares. If the explosion had been on our side, I guess my heart would have leaped out of me!”

I laughed...

“You are supposed to be bold! Remember you've experienced things worse than this?”

“Duh. That's not funny.”

She laughed cynically as we got off the bus, the last ones to do so.

“Just be glad, not all four burst simultaneously!”

“Nah, stop dreaming Mabel... we are still in Nakasongola.”

“And that should worry you,” a voice added, in my head.

“**Baby Coach, Masindi Express**”, read the big bold letters in graffiti style, across the body of the ‘bullet’ we had just disembarked from.

“It's a new bus, one wouldn't expect such issues,” said I, as we walked towards a small tree whose shade we would definitely need under the scorching sun. People had already started to dash into the bushes, typically to pee – a sight not very uncommon on such long journeys.

“I don't think it's actually new,” replied Mabel, “Didn't you notice the state of its interior?”

I hadn't. “No. What about it?”

“The seats I mean; they didn't look at all like those of a new coach, despite the exterior looking shiny and all.”

“It's possibly a recent repaint then.”

The exterior had a shiny red-orange body, with the words painted upon it in white and black.

“It must.”

\* \* \* \* \*

As we assumed our place under the tree, and continued to chat, many others were already cursing and lamenting about the tormenting heat and the lack of shelter or shops anywhere within sight. “Now where do they expect to get a spare tyre from?” challenged one gentleman in a teal Kaunda suit. Apparently, ignoring common sense or just being plain lousy,

the operators of the bus hardly kept any spare tyres on the bus. One group of women was in a bitter exchange with the driver and his conductor, and at one point, the driver just started walking off. He crossed the road to possibly seek the help of other drivers driving in the opposite direction – there did not seem to be any hope elsewhere besides where we had come from.

“The next petrol station is as far back as Luweero!” one woman lamented. Some folks were laughing at the conductor, and were assuring him they would only pay “a tiny” fraction of the fare if they were delayed or asked to board another bus. Those with kids were seeking shelter under trees, to save their little ones from the blazing heat, and the risk of lounging near the deadly highway. One particular kid had possibly been dying to get outside; soon as they found a spot slightly away from the rest of us, the mother lowered his pants and let him squat and poo right there! The boy looked somewhat close to six or seven, but that did not seem to matter to them anyway. We ignored them as well...

Nakasongola is generally a sparsely-populated region, as are many such areas along that highway, especially beyond Luweero and before Masindi. Native history claims it had not always been that way, but that the mass-butchered and tactical division of the natives during the colonial battles between Kabalega and the British, had left much of the former Bunyoro kingdom severely dispeopled. In more modern times, many of the original natives had migrated away, into small clusters around significant towns mostly elsewhere, and so much of the countryside seemed like it had always been untamed wilderness.

“Would you like some of my soda?” asked Mabel as she reached into her bag for a plastic bottle of 500ml Mirinda Fruity.

“No thanks.” But I was feeling thirsty actually.

“Well, I can’t stand this heat, I’m glad I kept one for later.”

“Enjoy!”

She gulped loudly for a girl, but I sensed she had been very thirsty.

“This place is like being in no man’s land,” I started, and “You can virtually walk for miles without finding any signs of civilization!”

She provocatively raised her drink towards me, all happy as she gestured at me to go ahead and “lose my pride”.

“In situations like this,” she said, “It’s advisable for civility to kick in.”

“What do you mean?”



“Look at those two guys clad in jackets till now; don't you think it would be better for them to learn from me?”

“Oh, I hadn't noticed!” And it was not the Sudanese pair I was referring to, but her!

She had taken off both her scarf and jacket, and now I knew why I had been so mesmerised by her when I first saw her on the bus!

“Ignatius?”

“*Hehehehe*... Sorry, for a moment I was distracted!” I continued laughing as she threatened to walk off.

“I'll pluck out those eyes...” she threatened, in a rather whimsical voice.

Some truck finally stopped; an old Tata without its rear number plate. Our driver and his conductor approached the front, the conductor gesturing to the truck's driver while pointing to the bus. I saw the truck driver pull out a phone and he possibly was reading a number to them or something. Our driver was dialing on his phone. A call was made, and then I saw him disappear behind the truck, still on the phone. A passenger waited for an approaching saloon car to swoosh by, and then he ran across the road to join the three men. I saw him talk first to the conductor, and then he also disappeared behind the truck. A moment later, the truck engines started, and surely, our driver and the passenger too, both boarded the truck. The conductor was still standing there, seemingly exhausted, but impatient with himself. He later crossed the road without looking either side!

I was still tracking the conductor, who had walked over to a group of quarrelsome women, and was loudly assuring them how we would all be back on our journey pretty soon, when it dawned on me that I too wanted to ease myself. I had resisted it, but I felt I could not possibly hold it much longer without causing myself much unwarranted pain.

“Excuse me for a while.” I said, waving to Mable as she looked at me smiling.

“Go blow yourself out...”

“You're fake!” I laughed, walking off the road, towards a little thicket not so far from where we had been standing. As I opened the zipper to do my thing, I wondered if I might accidentally offend someone's sensibilities. *And there could be a snake for example!* another thought crossed my mind. And snakes do hide in shades on very hot days, especially in such savage bushes. I did it fast, though typically I would have enjoyed prolonging the moment, and hurried back, out of the bush.

*She had to remark!*

"That was quick!"

"The sun's taken most of it already..." I pointed to some distant clouds to the west, "there."

"Did you say you have siblings?"

"Yesss." *I already told her, didn't I?*

"They must really miss you."

"I doubt it. Besides me, and my big brother, the others are still just kids, and probably wouldn't care." *"But you know "Nanka" is very fond of you, right?"* a voice haunted me from within.

"If I were your sis, and you went away for that long, I would riot." She finished emptying the bottle and cast it off into the bushes - in the same direction I had just returned from.

"Actually, my youngest is called Maria, but we call her 'Nanka,' and she's the only one I can think of, who might have missed me somewhat. She was very fond of me, mostly because I spent time teaching her how to make dolls with sticks, banana fibre and thread."

"Oh that's so like my uncle!"

"Did he make dolls for you?"

"Not really me, but one of the reasons I so much wished for him to visit, is because he never came home without bringing me a toy of some sort, especially dolls." She seemed to be relishing the memory of him, whoever he was.

"I would be a disappointment to you though, as I don't like buying toys." She looked at me questioningly, and then retorted, "But you said you make them!" She swayed about like a little girl. "That would be even better, especially if I had learnt to make my own."

"I could teach you." I was joking.

"Really?" Her eyes were wide open.

"Nah, I don't think I remember most of it now. It's been a while."

She shrugged her shoulders and pretended to cry, "He doesn't want to teach me..."

*She could make a good actress!* I thought.

I just looked up to the skies and defended myself. "She's too good to be taught!"

She laughed.

Two *bodabodas* arrived from behind the bus, coming to a stop as people increased their murmuring and as some started to applaud our "saviours". They had returned seated on the tiny bike, three men, with the driver on the rear end, holding some tool, and the other bike having just the rider and the large spare tyre.

“How long do you think they’ll take to fix that?” asked Mabel.

“I can’t lie to you that I know, but I don’t think it takes much time.”

She had grown tired of holding the backpack in her hands, and so adjusted its straps, and like me, wore it on her back.

“You know, travelling on this road after dark isn’t wise, many accidents happen, and before you reach Masindi, you really have reasons to fear being out here.”

There she goes with her spooky tales again...I almost screamed!

“In about an hour at most,” I said, contemplating the mechanics while nodding, “We should be gone from here.” I said it with a confidence reminiscent of my statistics teacher. When that man made a claim, he said it with such conviction you would assume he only had facts for opinions.

“If you know the limits, you know all the answers,” so he used to say. But sometimes I felt he was just being too confident of himself, and his statistical methods. However, given his brilliance and demeanour, it was very hard to catch him in error on some matter he made any claim about.

And it turned out, I was right as well – within about 20 minutes of their return, the flawed tyre had been replaced, and after assuring people all was fine, the *bodaboda* men were paid, and people started climbing back onto the shuttle.

“See?” I poked Mabel as she climbed onto the bus ahead of me, “I knew your crazy natives wouldn’t catch us out here.” She turned and made a threatening face at me saying, “Beware! I wouldn’t say that around here.”

\* \* \* \* \*

We had spent almost an hour at that spot, and when we drove off, it was approaching 3:00pm. As though nothing had happened, the driver soon adjusted back to his “favourite” speeds, making some people on the bus complain that “drivers are the most obstinate souls!” I only slid my window further down, because after the accumulated heat dissipated, the wind rushing in, made me get goose pimples. Mabel decided to wear her jacket once more.

We soon approached Kiboga, that area well-known from days of the “Ebonies” and their “Nakawunde” - a pitifully “raw” village girl from Kiboga, who had found love and a daunting modern life in the city. I recalled being in school holidays one time, threatened by mum; that if I did not cease being troublesome, she would exile me to some terrible

Catholic school in Kiboga. One of those “terrible” schools was renowned for being home to myriad bizarre and mysterious omens, which typically befell the more troublesome students! I generally hated Catholic schools for their conservatism, but then hated more, the idea of a Catholic school stuck in an even more primitive setting, such as Kiboga.

“We are almost home,” declared my neighbour.

“Not so fast,” I replied, paraphrasing her very words from earlier on.

She had pulled out her phone once more, making me envy her, because mine had almost run out of battery, despite being the “smarter” phone of the two. I was thinking of what would happen the rest of that day, and possibly the weekend. I couldn't anticipate much exciting activities besides eating and retelling many of my school tales – which I felt would not be that interesting to them anyway; and possibly, roaming about Masindi; visiting relatives and old friends. *But what of her? Is this all ending on the bus...?* The moment the thought hit me, I could not avoid thinking whether I would ever get a chance to meet her again. It is the nature of most commute encounters; you meet now, seem like eternal friends, but once one jumps off the ride, it all mostly vanishes into thin air! I somewhat felt saddened at the thought of it. She was charming, even though a little weird.

“Hey Mabel, mind if I take your number?” I asked, starting to make plans for continuity of this new-found friendship.

She pretended she had not heard, but I knew she had. I went ahead to unlock mine, and startup the dialpad. I held out the phone to her, and requested once more; “Please, may I have your numbers?”

“Numbers? I have only one.”

“Just give me any that works.”

She started tapping on the keys, “077523...”

“Don't you have an Airtel line?”

She paused the typing, “Do you use Airtel?”

I nodded. She erased what she had been dialing, and then started all over.

“070446...”

After she had punched in the number, she went ahead to dial it. I joked though, “Don't be surprised!” But I knew I had a little credit left, and much “bonus time” as well. Her phone rang and some song by Janelle Monae, *Yoga*, was her ringtone. I was not surprised!

“So, is it possible that we can meet... maybe today?” I knew I was asking for too much already, but I did not know where the confidence had come from.

“Today? We’ve already met, ‘Today,’” she answered, in a threatening tone. She looked at me with brows raised, and her big eyes seemingly dilated.

“Maybe I meant ‘tonight’”

“Mmmm, it’s not possible.”

I was about to interject, when she cut me short...

“It won’t be possible, and that’s because my grannie is a bit too strict.”

“Grannies are not normally strict!” I retorted, not wanting to believe her.

“Maybe not, but mine is, and she’s really tough.”

She said it with such vigor that it seemed like her grannie was speaking to me herself.

I held my phone, punched in her name and saved the new contact as “.Mabel” – the ‘.’ prefix being a little technique I use to keep contacts I want to quickly access, at the very top of the contacts list - since most phones give higher precedence to symbols than numbers or letters. On my list, she was second only to the contact “Bal?” which contact I used to quickly dial the USSD short-code for checking my airtime account balance, without having to redial the boring string every time.

“Okay. So, maybe you can call me when you are free some time during the weekend or next week? We definitely need to meet again.” I was evidently pleading.

“Maybe.”

She looked outside the window, and then settled her gaze on me.

“Where did you say you lived?”

“Kihande.”

She nodded, and then went on, “that might be far from where I’m going, but I’ll let you know if I can make it to town over the weekend.”

*That’s so much better*, I thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

“3:51pm” read my phone as we approached Masindi town. I saw the same town I left behind two years before – with little changes besides the sound of new, louder music blaring from kiosks and bars. Because of the delay in Nakasongola, the bus had not stopped at Kafu, as was the tradition for most vehicles travelling to Masindi and beyond. That made me miss the one final “favourite” experience of the journey – savouring that amazingly delicious white, hot, roasted cassava, sold mostly by Lugbara women, and exclusively at Kafu. It felt bad.

"I'll not be reaching the park, as I have to take a shortcut out of town," said Mabel, preparing to alert the conductor.

"Oh, that's sad." And I felt even sadder that she was leaving prematurely.

"We'll be in touch, don't worry."

I must have looked it.

Before she stood up to walk over to the conductor, she patted my left shoulder, and whispered, "Take care." In a tone more tender than she had used anywhere on the journey.

She was indeed going.

She walked on, the conductor signaling to the driver to stop before she even reached him. I wanted to wave at her, hoping she would turn to look my side one more time, but when the bus stopped, she just proceeded to get off without looking back! "That's rude," I murmured to myself. I could not even see her or where she had walked off to from my side of the bus, and when we drove on, towards town, I kept turning, peering through the glazy glass of the rear windshield, to see if I might see her behind us or whether some *bodaboda* might pass us by, with my Mabel, but it was all but a hopeless wish.

When we reached the park, ours was the only bus in sight, the rest were minibuses, small special-hire taxis and a few vendors and passengers jumping off rides or waiting for their next commute. My phone was almost going off – "5%", read the battery indicator. I summoned some boy to come help me carry my luggage out of the shuttle's cargo pods, and we walked together, with me carrying some of the boxes, towards the nearest *bodaboda* stage, so I could get someone to ride me home.

# SECTION 2: NIGHT OF LUST

Night, gave birth to the day  
As the womb and the earth  
Which are the houses of darkness  
Keep the mystery  
That gives birth to life  
The animal and the plant.

Behold; many sleep at night,  
And then wonder why, they are lifeless  
When the day comes.  
But there are those,  
Who have mastered the mystery;  
Sleeping and dreaming by day,  
So they can wake and create life  
By night.

When night comes  
They all close their eyes  
But many see nothing but darkness  
Where others see a blank slate  
Upon which to paint new lives.

As death gives birth to life  
So those who seek the night  
Give birth to the day.

Therein lies The Great Mystery  
That animates the children of the night.

# Chapter IV

The ride home was dusty, it had not rained in about three weeks, and the road, being the route used by vehicles travelling between Masindi and Hoima, was a really busy one, all year-round. For those on bicycles, all of which were either Roadmaster or Hero brands – road classics in Uganda, and which were often loaded beyond recognition, and for those travelling by foot in either direction, the sight of an oncoming bodaboda, bike, a taxi minivan or one of those Kinyara Sugar works trucks, was met with outrage, often muffled swearing and occasional dashing into the bushes on the roadsides.

The air smelled of dust, and was likewise dry. For those who lived near the fringes of the road, it must have been agonising to sit outside one's house for any considerable time, especially during the day. Looking at the vegetation on either side of the road, I wondered if it were right to still call them plants given they looked more like earth than plants! Even the mangoes on some trees lacked their appeal. I wondered whether it was this bad everywhere in Masindi; *possibly not so in Butiaba*, I thought, *they are near the lake*.

The man riding me knew better; he wore a huge yellow ridge jacket, with a long neck. It had lost most of its allure, due to stains, a couple of patches and a yellow-turned-grimy. But, together with his black helmet, he had all the cover he needed to ride through the worst of it all, for miles and miles if he so wished – and he was riding unnecessarily fast.

“All *bodaboda* cyclists are daredevils; it's like, them and taxi drivers are forged in the same fires of hell. They fear not speed, and dare death with each trip,” so a news reporter once attested while covering a week's tales of bad road accidents in-and-around Kampala on NTV. Typically, when not in a hurry, I insist that if one cannot slow down, I would rather disembark and walk, and often, I add, “Without payment sir.” On this particular occasion though, I could not dare the cyclist, as getting out of the dust was paramount to all else.



“*Otarabaho! Tukutembera ha mukalitunsi ogwo...*” I shouted to the man in Runyakitara, as he could hardly hear me over the noise of the bike and the padding over his skull.

“*Togambirege h’ibiri?*” And he was right, but I could not stand the road anymore...

“*Ego, baitu tukyamire hanu, niho haihi. Tinja kusobora echuchu enu.*”

He nodded in agreement - we would use the shortcut, to get me home.

As we left the road and climbed steadily along a tiny footpath, I noticed that much of the planting of the last rainy season had gone to waste; there were stunted groundnuts and most had dried up, prematurely. There was maize struggling to remain erect, plantains seemed to fair better, but hardly exhibited any fruit. We passed a garden of potatoes that had long-surrendered to weeds and termite hills. I asked the *bodaboda* man jokingly (in Runyoro), but seriously concerned; “Do we have any food left in this land?” He coughed, then laughed,

“Why? This is not the worst. You should have been here about six months back!”

“You mean it was worse than this?”

He nodded, then added, “I thought it was all over the news? We suffered a very bad drought and have been lucky to have received some rain a little while back.”

“Recently? That sounds like a joke... it’s saddeningly dry almost everywhere!”

“Seriously, there better be some food or the stories about night-dancers might come true.” I was thinking of those tales from earlier in the day, and imagining that, if our people were to severely run out of food, in some places at least, it should not be too radical to switch to cannibalism. Heck! Mabel was right, so I thought.

We were approaching home, and I had started to recognise the houses of our neighbours and was waving to some folks, as we rode by their homes. The houses in our area were not like those of Masindi town; many still had mud walls, reinforced with reeds and poles, but most, if not all, had iron-sheet roofs - instead of the more traditional, speargrass-thatched roofs. However, to most locals, even such a neighbourhood as ours was considered pretty urban, and so the man assured me as I signaled for him to take the last turn towards our house, “*Enu tarwuni, timwina basezi.*” – literally meaning, “This is town, you have no night-dancers here.” I believed him – because I wanted to, as most of my life, especially my childhood, I had been taught to fear and never to wish dwelling on the

same village as those folks with uncanny tastes. But what if people run out of food? I abandoned those thoughts though; we had reached the safety of my father's home, finally!

It was about 4:00pm when we reached. Daniel, my big brother, was jubilantly waiting, accompanied by two of my cousins, Sharon and Yussuf, when the *boda* finally parked, a few metres from the house. He patted me on the head as I jumped off the bike, the heavy backpack being eased off of me by Yussuf, who was complaining to his younger sister that she would not manage lifting it, though she was insisting to. I had to pay the bodaboda man Shs3,000 for the trip, but did not have any small denominations left, and neither did he have the change.

“Irumba finally returns! What's the matter, please come right inside!” I could tell that voice apart, even if I were trapped in a cave for a decade! He spoke a dialect of Runyoro I admired but had not ever mastered. Most of us at home, besides my big brother and I, spoke to each other in Runyakitara. Occasionally, someone would throw in some Luganda, a phrase or word of Lugbara or as he often loved to do, my big brother would speak to me in English, in an accent so much like Runyoro! It felt good to be back home!

“Adyeri!” I exclaimed, abandoning the waiting bodaboda man and hurriedly hugging my cousins and big brother, as I rushed to meet and hug dad too. ‘Adyeri’ was his pet-name, the “*empako*”, as we called it locally. It was generally considered polite and respectful to address one's parents, and other elders, by their pet-names than their given names. My dad's given name was Isoke Byabasaijja Augusto, but we all just called him Adyeri. Some older folks on the village, especially his peers and friends, referred to him as ‘Augusto’ instead.

“*Webale kwija!*” he welcomed me as we hugged in the typical traditional manner. He held my shoulders, shook me furiously at arms-distance, and with a comical, gleeful expression typical of him in his jolly mood, assured me, “You have hardly changed!” I raised my eyebrows, shaking my head from side to side in disagreement; “I have! Don't you notice my beard and the tired eyes?” We laughed as he drew me back into his chest and hugged me once more, “No, someone must have been lying to you...” At that time though, my little sister, Joan Karungi, joined us in the hug. She could barely reach my waist, but was all smiles and shouting, “*Igni Igni Igni...*” as

though suddenly, her angel had materialised from nowhere! And yes, we were favourites of each other.

I let go of dad and sweeping her off her feet in one big embrace, hugged her as she wrapped her tiny hands around my neck in a very fragile, but lovely hug. Mum would soon join us from behind the house – she had been in the kitchen.

“Oh Ignatius! Welcome my child!”

But, she did not come to join us in the hugs, instead, the *bodaboda* man, who was complaining that he was being delayed, diverted her attention.

“Is he still demanding anything?” she asked, walking over to the man.

“Sorry, sorry! I totally forgot to say I have to pay him Shs3,000, but I had no change with me.” I said, putting Joan down and reaching for my wallet once more.

“No, no,” said my dad walking back into the house, “we have enough to pay for another trip as well!”

“But Dad!”

He returned after a short while, holding out two notes, a Shs1,000 and Shs2,000, both looking worn out.

He smiled at me as he passed me to go pay the *bodaboda* man. “Old folks always have change, always” he said, to no one in particular. The man took his helmet off, shook dad’s hand, gave him a slight bow, and thanked him, as he accepted the notes without any further complaint.

Joan would not let go of me, she was jumping and pulling me to follow her; “Igni my goat gave birth! My goat gave birth Igni... Igni my...”

“Huh huh uh...” giggled mum, “And don’t forget to tell him about the nodding problems of your little friend.”

“Nodding problems?”

“Yes! Come let me show you...”

She led me, while pulling me, as I tried to keep up with her exuberant pace.

“What’s with the nodding Joan?” I asked as we approached the little shelter where the goats and chicken shared a roof.

“Wait, I’ll show you.”

*She now knows how to open that door?* It was a tricky one, not locked with a padlock, but with a tricky series of knots and a nail.

“Don’t the goats escape at night anymore?”

“No, Isoke keeps them tied to the poles, except my baby.”

She was referring not to my dad, but Isoke Daniel, my big brother, who was the only one that shared a name with dad.

“Oh, that’s good then.”

“There!” she pointed towards the corner on the far left, and I saw it; a little kid of white and brownish fur, possibly tired from too much play.

“She’s really nice!” I assured her, as she fearlessly wedged herself through the partially open door, and ran towards those otherwise resting goats, with a stick she had picked near the entrance.

“So you want to beat your baby instead?”

She gestured a ‘no’ with her fingers, then went ahead and poked the little thing about two times, agitating it from rest, and causing panic amongst nearby goats and the chicken.

“You’ll make them escape Joan!”

“No, she likes it.”

She took a step back as one of the goats, an old buck of gray, attempted to charge at her.

“Careful!” I warned her, while stepping inside myself, to convince her to retreat. But no, she was not going nowhere until I had seen “her trick” work.

“See, Igni see!”

The little kid, instead of panicking and running off, had dashed to its mum, and was busy suckling in a truly hilarious way; it would suckle on the teat for a while, and then would furiously knock into the udder with its head as though the pouch of milk issued some form of *disturbia* along with its food. Sooner, she would abandon the “nodding”, and return to suckling.

“Ghrurrh!!...”

“She’s funny indeed,” I told Joan, who was awash with laughter and wanted to poke the little kid some more.

“Sharon said it has ‘nodding disease’ in its head,” proclaimed Joan, smiling. That cracked me as well...

“People, let the goats rest, there’s time to disturb them all day, tomorrow,” said Dad, peeking into the smelly shelter from behind us.

“Sure sure.”

“Joan, let’s leave the baby to feed. You’ll tell me all about her tomorrow, right?”

“Yes! And mum slaughtered the big black cock for you!”

I giggled, letting her step out of the shelter ahead of me.

“But Joan, you don’t keep any secrets?” That was Rael, my other cousin, about thirteen years old, now in Senior One at Kabalega S.S.

“My dear!” I called out to her as she approached us, still holding her school bag - a cross-bag of denim, with a big silver zip on the side and the words “ABC? Not that Simple!” brightly drawn at the front.

“We thought you had totally deserted us! Bad, bad boy!” she accused me, with a smile and a big embrace awaiting me as she avoided Joan, who was trying to prevent her from reaching me. Unlike all the others, she pecked me when she hugged me. I did the same, and dad just laughed at us, “Teach some of that to us old folks as well...” We laughed, and Joan, having seen Rael do it, instead grabbed my right hand, and taking all of us by surprise, pecked me too! Rael poked her in the ribs, making her chortle, as she proceeded to show her a thumbs-up in approval of what she had just learnt.

“We are the generation X, but these kids, are the generation next!” uncle loved to say, commenting about all the exotic, sometimes shocking mannerisms his little kids returned with from school, or what they had adopted from TV shows or films. I did not mind it, though I knew, much of the newly-adopted traits of the youth were alien to our culture, and especially to the older generation, but were otherwise mostly okay.

“I hope, despite all these alien values they are adopting, they grow up to be free men still,” said Dad one time, while talking to me on phone, about my uncle’s kids, who were definitely more alien to him than any he knew back in the village. I never bothered to ask him to explain what the “free men” reference meant though.

\* \* \* \* \*

Our home was deceptively small from the outside, especially the front, which we natively referred to as the “*irembo*”. But, once you walked around it, or when you stepped into it, you would realise it was not really that small. Relative to the size of our family, it did not have enough rooms though; there was the one big room, facing the front-yard, which was our sitting-cum-dining room. Then, there was a small room adjacent to it, where mum, no, my “step-mum”, preferred to keep anything she deemed “unfit” for the sitting room, but which needed to be kept near still. There was one other door out of the sitting room, which led into a narrow corridor leading to the rest of the house; a relatively small room that

served as our parents' bedroom and then two slightly bigger rooms, one for the boys, the other for the girls.

There was one extra room that had been added as an annex during my childhood, it was used by visitors of either gender whenever someone visited and had to spend the night. But unlike all the other rooms, it had no bed in it, and so, depending on who had visited, one would have to be borrowed from either of the children's rooms, or if they were many visitors or "lesser" visitors, a big papyrus mat would be laid out in one of its corners, and there, the "bed" would be laid. Normally though, that room was where things like dad's motorbike, his bicycle and some other personal gadgets - many of them tools from his days as a carpenter, were kept. The store used to be outside, but it was turned into the kitchen, after dad had argued that his things were not safe enough in that external room, so visitors had to bear with sleeping in the same room as his mostly retired or broken tools.

In our "*kisibo*", as my step-mum loved to call the boy's room (which was hardly tidy on any typical day, thanks mostly to Dan's capricious approach to room etiquette), I sat, waiting as Rael prepared some warm water for my bath. I was waiting for that much-needed bath, before I could join the rest of the family for dinner; which was atypical, given we always ate dinner, only when the sun had gone to sleep. But they had been awaiting my arrival, and would not eat, not even the kids, until I had arrived. My brother had gone along with Joan, to fetch the sodas dad had ordered for, all the way from Sande's shop – which is one of the big shops in the village, but which is quite far from home. "It is a special day," Dad had assured us, and indeed it was. I was also glad for it.

Sharon and Akiki were the busy ones in the kitchen, making all the noises with the dishes and pans. They were also responsible for all the savory, distinctive and invading aromas of chicken and whatever else they were cooking. 'Akiki' is the pet-name of my step-mum - whose real name is Mrs. Zorean Nondi Byabasaijja, the 'Byabasaijja' having been adopted from my dad, after they got traditionally married.

Talking of marriages, only the traditional marriage was ever done by my parents. My dad did not really approve of church or legal marriages, claiming, "Our traditions offer the best means of expressing love, and nothing else matters." Commenting on contemporary marriage trends, such as one particular wedding of my aunt in Kampala (and it had even

been televised), he said, “What such ceremonies as you see on TV really offer, is but a chance to further divide us from our rich heritage and more meaningful ceremonies.”

I did not totally understand his ideas about marriage, but I did know that around the time when my mum passed away; I was about seven when she died in a car-accident, while travelling to her parent’s home in Fort-Portal; Dad had yet another wife, called Malita. However, after Mum’s death, he refused to let Malita stay with us at home, though she would occasionally visit and even help in various chores around the home. At the time, one of my paternal aunts took care of us. She was married in a home not far away from ours, and would pass by, to help with some housework when Malita was not around.

However, sometime in my O-Level, I had returned home from boarding school in Kampala, only to find that Dad had acquired yet another wife. Zorean, who was much younger and more beautiful than Malita, also turned out to be a very kind and loving step-mum, unlike her predecessor. I never heard of Malita again, and I am not sure if she ever had any children with Dad – which I highly doubt. My brother and I share a mother, but Joan, our little sister, is Zorean’s.

It took me a while to get used to calling her “Mama”, which is how we addressed our own mother. I actually took a while to adjust to her, despite the fact that she had already moved in unlike Malita, who had been on-and-off. I would sometimes get a “bad” eye from Dad for calling her “Zorean”, as some of her siblings called her when they came to visit us. Eventually, I adapted, and mostly referred to her by her pet name or just “Mama”. Though, like my elder brother, I mostly found it easy to call her “Zorean” – especially when Dad was not around. Luckily, she did not mind it either, and we tried to only use her real name when talking about her in our privy conversations about family, and especially, when I was talking with my brother. Overall, I loved her, everyone seemed to get along with her very well – even some of our very “difficult” neighbours like “Mzee Konde”, joked with her on good days.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Knock nok nok.*

“Your water is ready!”

“Oh, thanks dear. Let me come straightaway!”

I had not unpacked anything, not taken the phone for charging!

“Eeh! Rael, please please!”

“What’s it now?”

“My phone pleeease!”

I had reached the door, but spoke without opening it first. “It’s not charged,” I cried, “and will soon die for sure.” She opened the door before I had, and was standing there, with the steaming, sooty saucepan of boiling water, resting on the floor between us.

“Please, be kind and take this for charging before it’s too dark. I can get it tomorrow morning.”

“2K,” she replied, indicating how much it would cost me.

“They haven’t increased the fee yet?” I asked, smiling, and sure that the price had definitely increased. The last time I had stayed home, I did not own a phone, though, I knew of that home, down the road from ours, where they had electricity, and where most of the folks in the area took their phones for charging. It had been a mere UGX 1,000 the last time I had taken Dad’s phone there. They had definitely increased the fee. I did not have change still, and so just pulled out a UGX 10,000 note, and handed it to her. It was still smelling new, and felt crispy to the touch. I did not feel like handing it over, but I had to.

“Eh *mama!* Can I keep the balance?” she provoked me, as she took the note and examined it admiringly.

“That’s Bank of Uganda money, so, all the balance goes back to its rightful owners...” I grinned as I studied the changing expression on her face.

“We have no banks here, and so, all the balance gets shared amongst us!” she laughed, reaching out with her left hand to take the phone from me.

“2K for the charging, 1K for your transport. Deal?”

“Deal!”

She gave me the thumbs-up, and then hurried off.

I returned to the room, and that was when I realised, I still was wearing dusty shoes and clothes. I undressed, and felt somewhat happier, being naked at home.

I had my towel neatly folded and tucked under my mattress, along with some of my clothes that I could not fit in the small suitcase I always left



home while going to school. There were about four shirts under the mattress, all of a kind I only wore while around home, never when I was walking anywhere beyond the main road. We called such clothes “*ezomunda*”, which would have literally meant “those worn inside”, but which we used to mean “those worn at home.” Such were typically the patched, often stained, but still wearable clothes that one had not totally abandoned. “This, is your real self,” a voice murmured inside me.

I got one of those shirts, picked a pair of sky-blue jeans from the nails on the wall, wrapped the towel around my nude self, and then walked out the room, to go take my first shower in two days! I put the nose to my armpits before starting to shower, and acknowledged the foul, goatish scent that had started to form there. I was lucky I didn't hug Mabel! Would she care? *Possibly.*

As I enjoyed the warm bath, using my brother's red basin, and a brand new tablet of soap I had picked at the supermarket earlier in the day. I could not help but compare the huge difference between what life had been at campus, and what it was like being back home. A trap with no roof, that's what this is! I laughed inside. And yes, it was not much of a “standard” bathroom so to speak. In my childhood, only the adults could use it, the rest of us would wait till near nightfall, and would bathe from the compound, afraid that some night-dancer could be snooping from behind the banana plantations, waiting for darkness to fall so they can come “steal” what “meal” they had seen in us. “Bathe quickly, but thoroughly,” Malita would shout, “Or they will be coming for you tonight.” Out of fear, I learned to bathe well.

Surprisingly, it had remained the norm – the kids having to bathe from outside, until Zorean came along. I recall, that since that holiday, with our new mum dictating most of the new “rules”, things started to get friendlier and more reasonable as well. I was in secondary school at the time, and though my elder brother already used the bathroom made of bamboo logs (yes, the same one with no roof over it), the rest of us knew we were not allowed there. However, the second day after I had returned, Zorean, having seen me bathe from the good, old spot near the avocado tree, the evening before, she assured me, “Please, stop bathing from outside, and use the bathroom whenever you need to.” I would soon establish, that another bathroom; one which was still made of stacked bamboo poles, but which had a roof over it, had been erected by Dad, so it could become theirs, while the rest of us graduated to their former bathroom.

As I recalled all that, bathing and enjoying the moment. I looked to the skies above, and noted that there was no moon in sight, and that the stars were yet to start clearly shining through that majestic dome, high above. "That's the ultimate thrill of bathing outdoors," I consoled myself; you get to share in the naked beauty of the moon and stars! Except, it wasn't the cherished moment yet.

"Chief, did the dust clog your insides or what?"

It was Dan. His voice sometimes sounded a bit like Dad's, though his was not truly husky yet. Mine was a little like a boy pretending to be a man, and sometimes I tried to force it to sound macho, with little success – and I was long past my pubescent years!

"Not really. There was much more dust than usual, but I've washed clean I believe."

"Zorean, she's calling us for supper."

"It's ready you mean?"

"It's been ready even before you arrived. I guess they were just warming things once more."

"I'm done. I've been hungry too much... I'm coming, go tell them."

He'd vanished, by the time I dried myself and walked out the "bathroom".

There was a backdoor to the house, it is the one I used, to avoid bumping into the gathered family, with my suit of innocence. I was donning a short towel around my waist, and had the basin further cover my fore as I walked towards my room. Joan was standing in the corridor when I sneaked into the house, and she smiled as I passed by her, pointing funnily at the basin I was using to hide my otherwise covered crotch. She ran off into the sitting room, hearing as her mother's voice called out to us, claiming the food would start getting cold.

Back in our room, I closed the wooden window, turned up the wick of the lantern hanging on the wall between our beds, and retrieved one of the clothes from under the mattress. It was a purple T-shirt, my favourite. Since I had no flat iron, I chose to try shaking out the creases before wearing it – I must not have done it before setting it out to dry, or because of how I had wringed it, and then later stacked it under the bed for two years, it turned out no better than the others. "You are home *seebo*, just put the damn shirt on, and go on, celebrate your home coming before someone throws a tantrum!" a voice reassured me from inside. I soon

walked out of the room to join the others, excited about the banquet I was already smelling.

\* \* \* \* \*

In my village, as in most of Africa, meals are one of the most important activities in a home; not just because of the instinctive necessity of eating, but also because of the adjunct benefits of eating together. As social animals, the meal serves as one of the key communal events on the daily schedule; helping bring all members of the family together at least once a day, regardless of what divisions or antagonisms there might be in the home.

Traditionally, when a meal was served, there was some protocol to be observed. For example, it was customary for the head of the household – the “*Isemaka*” or “*Nyineka*”, to be provided with a stool or some chair, and a table, even where there was no furniture for all others. He would also be the first to get served, especially when anything meaty had been prepared – chicken being the most important in most homesteads at the time. It was said, in our culture, as with many others of the greater Bunyoro-Kitara, that women were not allowed to eat chicken, eggs, fish and in some really mean villages, even goat’s meat! “Oh, the days of greedy, cunning men are behind us! Amen,” my uncle’s wife in Kampala had once said as she munched a fleshy chicken thigh during dinner. Emancipation?

When kids were present, they normally were not expected to share the same eating space as elders, and if there were women, they typically sat with their children and other women on the mats – never to sit on a chair or stool when men, especially their husbands, were at the same meal, as doing such was considered very impolite. At home, I too used to sit on the mat with Mum and any other kids present. When the number of kids at home increased later on - as when my cousins were around or when we had visitors - more mats would be brought, and sitting would be arranged in clusters, based on “status” by age, gender and for really big events, even social status. Unless there were visiting elders or other men present, only my dad and Dan ever sat on stools while we ate.

But once, while at home during my Senior Five third-term holiday, I was assuming my place on the mat as usual, when Dad remarked; “Since when did the warrior lose his place among the men?” It was a metaphor, which,

given the way he phrased it, in Runyoro, totally skipped my immediate understanding. I did not probe into it either, but a few days later, as we worked the gardens with him, he passively hinted its meaning to me. "If you are a man, and keep your place among girls, you will soon lose your manhood, or will be too comfortable to ever reclaim it. You don't want to be that kind of man." When I asked him what he meant, he only laughed and compelled me to think harder.

The next day, I chose to use a smaller mat, and sat right next to him and my brother at meals. The week after, I returned home from an errand in Masindi town, only to find a freshly made stool drying in the sun. "There, you'll possibly earn your place among men, eventually." I did not wait for the varnish to properly dry; I started using the little stool right away – beginning with dinner that very day!

\* \* \* \* \*

On the night of my home-coming, as I stepped out of the bedroom into the corridor, I was welcomed by such an array of mouth-watering aromas, I felt my hunger spike as I stepped into the dining area.

"There you are!" exclaimed Zorean, a big grin upon her face, as she carefully undid the cooked, hot, banana fiber knots tying some of the food prepared inside banana leaves. My three cousins and little sister were seated on their own mat, directly opposite where Dad and Dan sat on their stools. Mine was awaiting me, strategically fixed between the two smiling men. Dad, pushing aside to let me take my seat, joked; "We were about to send for help, thinking you had passed out in the bathroom!"

"Blame it on our road... I pity those travelling all the way to Hoima!" So, I defended myself.

My brother thought better, "It has become a tradition, to either carry an extra shirt and wear a hat or forget oneself after reaching either end of that road."

"You should have used the shorter route, the *bodaboda* men know it well."

"That's what I actually used," I replied to Dad, as the first plate of food was placed on the little table in front of him.

"Then you didn't suffer. Pity you brother, who sometimes has to ride the bike to and from Hoima, sometimes multiple times a day!"

I turned to Dan, to pity him, “Oh, you should have become a *mujungu* by now!”

“Ask to see one of my selfies sometime,” he replied, “you will definitely disown me.”

“Rael? How do you survive the dust to and from school these days?” I asked my cousin, seated with the others, opposite us.

“Ask her what she uses the water in her drinking bottle for...” interjected Zorean, laughing at her.

“No, I gave up on the washing!” Rael replied, shaking her head in desperation. “Sometimes, you reach school all soiled, and when you attempt to wash off the dust, you just end up looking comical – the legs and arms pale, and the uniform so-not-white anymore.”

“But you always wear a sweater! I doubt your uniform gets messed like mine,” said Sharon, looking at her sister as though she had lied about it all.

“Ah Sharon, don't blame anyone for not having one, you exchanged yours for simsim balls!”

The seriousness with which Zorean made that accusation on poor Sharon, made all of us burst out laughing, including the accused.

“Mama don't lie! I haven't had a sweater since first term.”

“Oh! So you made the deal last year...” Dan added, nodding as though all of it were actually true.

Meanwhile, food got served; I got a wide tray, with a plate beaming full of steamed rice, pieces of yam, some sweet-potato and a generous ration of various steamed greens. Wow! *Where could all this have possibly come from?* And it was not just the plate; I had been given two small bowls as well; one holding the chicken broth that had flattered my imagination long before it was ever served; the other held two generous pieces of chicken, and one small, immature egg. Dan noticed the expression on my face, and rightfully commented, “You might as well call it a birthday of sorts!”

“Very much like it!” I assured them to dad's amusement, who was already enjoying his favourite, de facto part of chicken – the thigh - which had been cut in such a way that it extended all the way to the back!

At such meals, there was hardly any talking done - not until all the food had either vanished, or when one of the elders wished to get more soup or pass on some of their food – often, as a token of gratitude or friendship to someone else present; it is called “*akabego*”, and when offered to you, regardless of how small it is, or how satiated you are, it is never to be rejected. I'd had my fill and was very sure I would not finish the remaining piece of chicken. I chose to tear it into two smaller pieces, gave one to my

little sister, who was well-known for her insatiable love for chicken, and the other to Mum, with the praise, “The chicken was so tasty, I can still feel it jubilate in my stomach!” That cracked up Rael, who was gnawing on a bone instead!

“Really? Then why not finish it?” asked Zorean, with a jolly expression.

“Mmm, I wish to share the joy?” I said, turning to get Dad’s approval – he nodded in acknowledgement.

“Okay okay. Thanks! I’m glad you liked it.” She passed her plate to Sharon, who was seated nearest to her, so I could send over the *akabego*.

There was soda as well; chilled and fizzing, as Dad believed it should be. But for me, the soda was not as great as the taste of that water we keep in the smoked pot – I had craved the taste and flavour for long!

“I’ll drink mine tomorrow,” I assured Dan as he passed one bottle of soda to me at the end of that sumptuous meal.

“My dear Joan, please get me some drinking water though.”

The scent and flavour that our water had - mostly as a result of dried banana leaves used to smoke the insides of the pot every once in a while, and also due to the flavour of the clay used to make the pot itself - made it richer in taste than any fancy, commercial, “fresh mineral water”, so ubiquitous in shops, and most of which is equivalent to “paying for the bottle and label”, as my roommate had once complained. *The ancients put good thought into it... Thanks to them.*

\* \* \* \* \*

After the meal, we transferred to the verandah; seated in the dark - all of us, besides little Joan who had already retired to bed. When we sat outside at night, even when there was no moonlight, we rarely brought the lanterns out – I am not sure why, but that is how it had always been at home, as far back as I can remember. Dan owned an old, “*Sembule*” radio, powered by four AA-batteries. That night, he had it tuned-in to one of the evening talk shows on BBS (Bunyoro Broadcasting Service), where a heated debate was raging between the kingdom press secretary, representatives of Tullow Oil, and a Member of Parliament, concerning the “shameful” way in which the central government was letting capitalists ravage “our natural resources and animal habitats”, of which, the Albertine oil fields seemed to be the gist of the argument. Listening to the escapist

defence of the politician and his comrades left me feeling bitter, and all I could think of, though I did not voice it then, was how most of our local politicians are merely monstrous opportunists with shallow intents.

“Don’t you sometimes just hate our politics?” I asked, not directing the question at anyone.

*I hate our politics!*

“It’s a bad day for the MP,” replied Dad a while later. He loved politics, especially local, Bunyoro politics. I did not believe there was so much value that could come out of such politicised debates, and so, as with most other radio programmes, rarely paid attention to what was being said, especially when it was the MPs involved.

“Most of them talk to the tune of whoever is going to pay them next,” Dan said, adjusting the radio’s aerial a bit, so it could lessen some of the static building up in the background.

“Exactly!” I approved, as though he had picked the sentiment right off my mind.

“Anyways, the games of politics are never clear-cut,” Dad stated, “even the one accusing them of these ill-acts, is very likely serving some hidden agenda. The question is always about whether we, the ordinary folks, benefit from all their games, in some way at least.”

“That’s a dream,” laughed Zorean, who had been silent all the time.

“She’s right Dad. I sometimes see very little hope in our leaders.” I did not know whether she was implying what I thought she was, but I felt she had a point.

“You,” Dad went on, “the ones who’ve been to Makerere, ought to set things right for the rest of us. The colonialists destroyed our societies – perhaps unintentionally so, but they also set up schools, and it’s the same minds they’ve trained, that we should expect to right things once more. Strange!”

“Aaah, enough with this politics people,” interrupted Dan, “Tell us about Kampala!”

“Kampala? What about it?” I too felt I wanted a change of topic.

“Yes, tell us about campus!”

“Oh, Sharon, I thought you were supposed to be sleeping!” I teased her, wondering as she’d seemed almost absent.

“There’s nothing interesting in bed trust me” she replied.

“Indeed, you’ve been gone for like forever! There must be lots to share,” said Dad, adding wood to the fire.

“What do you want to know? There’s definitely been much happening at school, but I don’t know where to start though.”

“Is it true that students kill each other at campus?” It was Rael asking.

“Kill each other? I didn’t experience any of that. But what I saw and heard, is students fighting each other, sometimes to the point of hurting each other fatally, especially those in halls such as Nkurumah, Micho or Lumumba.”

“Lumumba! I hear those boys are the worst at Makerere, isn’t that the hall with the infamous Gongom spirit?”

“Dad, how did you know about Gongom?”

“Ask the man with the balding head,” he said, laughing cautiously.

“Yes, it’s Lumumba, and though I wasn’t sleeping there, I occasionally visited their hall, and indeed, there’s a statue at the entrance, often wearing a *kanzu* and a torn condom!”

That made Zorean and Dan laugh.

“He’s overworked,” joked Dad.

“So, which hall was Irumba in?” Rael asked, hesitantly.

“Livingstone?” Dan replied with a question.

“Yes,” I affirmed, “I originally wished to go to Lumumba, but was posted to Livingstone, which is calmer, and generally considered to be the ‘gentlemen’s hall’”.

“Are you really gentle?” Rael’s stunned question challenged me, punctuated with laughter.

“He is,” defended Dad, also laughing.

“I love you, Dad. She doesn’t believe I’m a gentleman.”

Zorean laughed as well.

“How bad am I at it really?” I wondered.

“How was the course though?”

“Now that’s my dad! Tough, but I tried so hard to get no re-takes.”

“Byabadaki’s son? He’s failed to graduate because of re-takes, I hear!”

“And that’s my mum!”

“No, Sandra said he’d eaten all the tuition for his final year.” Dan said it with much conviction.

“Oh poor man, his best child just might fail to make it,” Dad sounded so concerned.

“It was poor upbringing as well, or it contributed a lot,” replied Zorean.

There was some silence, as Bobi Wine’s classic, *Ladies’ Wine*, played on Radio West, which Yussuf, who had hardly said a word since sitting down, had silently changed the dial to.



Then Rael started humming in sync with the song, as everyone else enjoyed the melody. “You are the best, Yussuf”, said Zorean, as she joined Rael in the humming, though slightly off-beat at that.

“Do you have some airtime?” asked Dad, turning to me.

“I did, but the phone was taken for charging...”

“Didn’t you see it?” Dan asked.

“Where?”

“Oh sorry dear. I forgot to tell you!” Rael said, standing up to rush back into the house.

“We met her while returning from the shops, and I already had two charged batteries with me, so we took yours for charging, replacing it with one of mine.”

“Oh, would it work in my phone?”

He smiled, “Well, you’re about to find out.”

She returned with the phone turned on, and suddenly, there seemed to be some sort of moonlight helping the dark, thanks to a very bright screen.

“That’s too bright, won’t it drain your battery before morning?” Zorean asked, concerned.

“No, I increased the brightness while inside, one of the lanterns had gone off.”

“Oh, I guess it’s about time to sleep then,” declared Dad, to the disagreement of all present.

He wanted to call my uncle and let him know that I had reached safely. *Why didn’t I think of doing that myself!* I felt guilty about it. I dialed uncle’s number and passed the phone to Dad. They talked for a while, but luckily, being on the Africell network, I had activated the “Super Combo Seevo!” which gave one; 70 SMS messages, 70 minutes of same-network calls, and 70MB of data; all for just Shs7,000! Typically, only the calls and data mattered to me.

As they talked, I thought of the events of the day, and felt I needed to go spend some time at a bar, just to crown it off well. *There was some money still left*, I thought, *so, why should we crown three years of hard school this way?* I decided, I would suggest to Dan, see what he had to say.

In a low tone, I told my big brother about my plan; “It’s kind of too early to sleep, don’t you think we could head out to a bar, and down one or two before the day ends?” *He’s gonna say yes* – I assured myself.

“Ha, there’s no fuel in the motorbike, how shall we reach town and then return, especially at this time?”

I gestured to him without saying a word, “there’s money!”

He nodded in agreement, “Let’s wait for him to finish the call. We can walk down to the shops and get a *boda* to town.”

“Yes!”

After the call, during which he’d stood up and walked about in the dark - asking, laughing, agreeing, listening and gesturing, he finally returned the phone to me, and it felt hot to the touch on that chilly evening. Dan shared our plan with him. I thought he would challenge or reject it, but he only said, “*Obwabasigazi tibukaswekere*” (loosely to mean it was too early for “young blood” to retire), undoubtedly indifferent about it.

Rael protested, claiming I could not desert them on the very first evening of my return, but I lied to her that we only wanted to go buy the drinks, and then return to drink from home – a very unlikely thing. Zorean, guessing what our motive must be, only laughed at her, saying “Babies get drunk on soda, so it’s bed time for the rest of us!”

“21:09” reported the clock on my lock-screen. I had returned to the bedroom to pick some money and that old jacket I always kept home, when I heard Dan’s voice breaking in from behind me; “Let’s get going before all the good folks leave town.”

“Sure. Aren’t you carrying any jacket or sweater?”

“I’m all set, already.”

He had his blue neck-pull sweater on, a pair of jeans, sandals and he was as ready as one need be! *He loves plot.*

“Fine fine. Let’s disappear from this place.”

Because we had been sitting outside for a while, when we set out, it did not seem as dark as I had expected. There were neighbours right outside the gardens surrounding our home, but at that time of night, with no moonlight to illuminate the place - one could think our home was entirely isolated.

On the footpath though, as we left home further behind, only Mr. Sabiiti’s home - which is about 15 metres from the turn towards ours, seemed to

have any sign of life. There was someone walking outside with a wick-lamp, and it clearly stood out, against an otherwise sombre atmosphere. I thought better and decided to use my phone's flashlight to make our navigation easier. It could get creepy if you had not walked the route recently, and I did not want to dare. And again, there was no such thing as getting used to the night though, not in Bunyoro! Was I right?

# Chapter V

“So, how do you feel, having been away from home for so long?”

“Like whether I’m happy or not? I definitely feel great about it,” I replied, as he led the way.

“We missed you, especially on First!”

“Oh, I really wanted to be there, but Uncle and his workmates had arranged a trip to eastern Uganda, and so I went along with them. We spent New Year’s Eve in Mbale, and the next day travelled to Jinja, where we spent the next two days, enjoying the Source of the Nile.”

“He really loves travelling!”

“All his friends do as well. It was a great experience for me too; I’d never had a chance to travel to the east, especially to Mbale.”

“I hear it’s the neatest town in Uganda?”

“I wouldn’t say so, not anymore, as far as I can tell.”

“Why?”

“Too much’s going on, and the roads and streets don’t seem to have been upgraded since the Amin days! It’s also very worn out, and we don’t seem to have a good culture of renovating or maintaining our old architecture.”

“I couldn’t believe it too, though people mention it a lot.”

“Mmm, perhaps, everyone just misses ‘the old days’ as they say.”

For a while, I thought of Mbale and the trip to that old town. It had been a very tiring ride getting there, though, there had been some remarkable moments along the way; we stopped somewhere in Iganga to eat jackfruit and buy roasted maize at some roadside stalls. The vendors were very cheerful, friendly and one old man was very funny. When we finally reached Mbale – and it was nearly dark, we took about an hour hunting around for a good and affordable hotel, finally settling for a decent one, not so far from the city’s clock tower. That night, Uncle had suggested we go hunting around for a place selling pork – we are Ugandan, remember? At 11:00p.m., we gave up and retired to some restaurant operated by an Indian, with a couple of harsh male staff. Surprisingly though, their food was great, or we were too hungry to critique it!

As midnight approached, we hit a club called “El Tanjia”. It was one of the best nights of my life; very cheap beer, lots of fleshy *Umasaba* girls that did not really know how to dance but knew how to make a guy so happy. And they were so many of them in one place than I’d ever seen in the clubs around Kampala. As we drove out of the town the next morning, one of Uncle’s friends saw me lost in thought, and he probably knew why. He laughed, while asking Uncle to check me out as well. “Don’t tell me you want to stay in Mbale!” I could not stay, but I somewhat would not mind it after that experience.

“It was a great town though,” I assured him, “especially its people.” He didn’t seem to be convinced and instead replied, “I hope I can get a chance to travel to Jinja. I want to see the dam and the source.” *Jinja? It’s a great town too, but...*

“It would be great, if one were allowed to take photos of the dam,” I said. “But you can only drive over it, admire it, and move on. The army guarding the place can’t let anyone take a pic of it!”

“Even tourists aren’t allowed to do so?”

“So I hear.”

But, I was not sure, though I had not seen anyone take a photo on my trip. “It’s stupid of them,” Dan said in regret.

“But, if you are daring, and don’t use a flash, you can take pics with your phone, assuming you do it a great distance from the surveillance posts on either end.”

He only grunted in agreement.

*I should try it next time I go past the dam, after all, what good is a national heritage, if we, the citizens can’t take pride in it. My thoughts!*

\* \* \* \* \*

We met a young boy walking in the opposite direction, all by himself, and he was panting, as though he had been trying to escape from something! I was going to let him walk by, but Dan did not. In typical raw dialect, he asked him what had happened.

“Why are you walking alone at night?” he asked the boy, whose face we could not clearly make out as I was polite enough not to flash the light directly at him. The boy did not answer, and everything about him indicated fright. For a moment, I suspected Dan’s tone had worsened things for him.

“Do you stay around here?” Dan further inquired, holding the boy’s arm so he would not escape – part of me wanted to laugh, but another thought it might be silly to treat this as a joke. I listened as the boy replied.

“Yes, at Zubairi’s”

“So, why walk so late at night, alone?”

“I’m returning from the shops.” The boy said it cautiously, as though he might get punished for it. Dan seemed to understand immediately.

“Watching TV at the video shack? You are in deep trouble...”

He let go of the lad’s arm, and told him with authority, “Okay, better run off fast, then. But avoid walking in the night alone, it’s sometimes not safe around here.”

I rarely heard Dan give such parental advice, very rare of him to do so. The little boy continued on his way, and we walked on as well, sure that for us, it was okay to walk at that hour. Despite the said risks? Yes.

“It was a lovely meal by the way,” I began, breaking the ice as we walked on, “I’m not sure I’ll drink much, because I feel so full!” And I was really feeling quite uneasy after all the food I’d had to clear earlier on. It had been as though they were compensating for all the time I’d been gone?

“It was kind of special, especially given the time of the year right now,” Dan replied.

“Zorean is such a good cook,” I added.

“Good cook? I wouldn’t say so.”

“Really? Didn’t you enjoy the food today?”

“Yes, once in a while, she’ll cook such, but if you can only be patient over the coming days, you’ll notice that it’s not always that good.”

“So, seems like I came home to such a glorious welcome then! Very nice of her.”

Dan cleared his throat as if to say something but did not utter anything for a while. I chose to stay mum for a while, it was getting cold as well.

We reached a small junction, one route - the one to our left, led out to the well, via a small forest; the one to our right is the one we chose, it led to the trading centre, and the dusty road immediately after that. However, we had just taken about five steps along this path, when Dan signaled for me to stop; my heart leaped inside of me. Though I did not speak, I wondered if he had seen or heard something I had not.

I turned the flashlight off, unsure if that was something he wanted me to do. He was not speaking, just standing there, looking out as though something stood ahead of us that only he could see. He turned to face me, though not looking at me in particular, and then instead of sounding an alarm or asking me to dash for life's sake, spoke to me in a very heavy, sad-like tone. "There's something I must share with you my brother."

*Here and in such a creepy dark place?* I did not show or mention my reaction. I did not know what exactly to expect, and so I just listened as he went on. "I should not have been telling you, but eventually, you will agree that it is better I don't keep silent." Now, I was getting worried. Was he about to ask me for money? *Does he have bad debts again?*

"Since you left, there's been a lot that's taken place, much of which I won't detail today."

*Oh, family problems...* I thought!

"No, it's fine, tell me please."

In my mind, I was wishing he'd waited just a little while, for us to reach some "safer" place, say in the town or while seated over a warm glass of Bell Larger. But, it seemed, he was not ready to wait that much at all. As usual.

It was indeed dark, and our voices, speaking there on the road, surrounded only by shrubs, gardens of maize and cassava, must have been easy to discern and catch from a long distance away. He seemed to realize this after a while, and so he toned down a bit.

"You might not have noticed it, but there's something wrong with our stepmum."

"Mama Zorean you mean?"

"Of course. She's the only one we know, right?"

*What do you mean?* He went on...

"She's been acting strangely for almost a year now. I'm not sure whether Dad noticed it as well, or whether the others have, but I guess Rael knows, as she was the first to tell me so."

*Rael? She seems to get along well with almost everyone!* I had to ask.

"What did Rael say about her?"

He paused for a while, asked me if it was okay for us to pause our little adventure for a while, "because it's important that I tell you these things as soon as possible." Once it involved Rael and Zorean, I felt it couldn't wait, not for me either. I gave him my assurance.

\* \* \* \* \*

It started some time during March last year. We were returning home from church on a Sunday morning, and I was asking Rael about a shameful confrontation she'd had with Zorean earlier that day as we prepared to go for Mass at the parish. I had been inside our room, preparing as usual, when I overheard Rael and Zorean exchange bitter words from the kitchen, behind the house. At that time, I did not try to find out what had happened between them – there was no time for it. We were all late for Mass, which starts at 8:00am sharp these days, and for which there is no second Mass anymore. And so, I decided to ask her about it, later, perhaps while returning from the church.

So, as we walked home, together with all the children, I asked Rael to tell them to walk ahead of us, as I needed to ask her about the event without being overheard. Zorean was not with us, and Dad, who normally goes to church earlier than any of us, also stayed behind for a parish meeting. At first, Rael denied having had any such confrontation with Zorean, but when I quoted some of the things I'd heard — very hot accusations at that — she was overwhelmed with guilt, and seemed to even want to cry. I pushed her further, and assured her I would not tell any of it to Dad or anyone for that matter.

Assured of immunity, she started to reveal to me the ghastly tale of what she had uncovered about Zorean. She told me that the events of that morning had only been the first evidence of what she had suspected for a while – that Zorean was practising witchcraft or some sort of sorcery, right there at home! I found it difficult to believe, and so asked her to tell me everything she knew or suspected. But she said she could only tell me what had happened that morning, and nothing more. I agreed, and so she let me in on her secret discovery.

She had woken up early for church, mostly because she wanted to have a shower before getting dressed. It was cold that morning, and so she'd gone to the kitchen to boil some water for bathing. Since dinner is eaten much earlier, and there is hardly any further cooking in the night, it was rare to find fire or hot coals in the kitchen from the previous night's cooking. And so, she had to take some fresh firewood, matches and dry leaves with her into the kitchen to make a fresh fire.



According to her, by the time she woke up, only Dad seemed to have woken up already, and he was preparing to leave for Mass. She claims Dad did not take a shower, as the bathroom was dry. Zorean and the rest of us were still sleeping. But to her surprise, when she walked into the kitchen, she found that there was a little smoke coming out of the fireplace, and that the smell of it was not anything like firewood, dry leaves or the polythene bags they sometimes used to light the fire. She was wondering what it was that could be “burning beneath the ashes”, and so, she got one of the pieces of wood she had brought with her, and poked about in the ashes to see what could still be burning from the night before.

What she found, in her own words, “was most disturbing and scary.” When I asked her to explain exactly what it was, she seemed afraid to say, and also ashamed of saying it, but she eventually revealed it to me. She claimed that beneath the ashes, still burning, and some of it not likely to entirely burn, were bits and pieces of knickers she knew so well from the patterns on its fabric, as belonging to Zorean. But, it was not just the undergarment that was mixed in the ashes, but there was something like bits and pieces of a man’s underwear as well, and though she did not mention it, I could only suspect, that it must have been Dad’s. I asked her to describe the colour or patterns of the man’s underwear, and she described its colour as a pale green, which is not anything like mine or Yussuf’s underpants that I know.

She also mentioned that there had been possibly simsim or some other similar seeds, mixed with something she could not discern, and bits of all of these things, were still burning in the ashes when she came to make the fire. “It seemed fresh,” so she said. Additionally, she said, “They must have been recently set on fire because if it had been fire from the evening before, probably the smoke or whoever had started the fire, would have been easy to notice. So, I suspect it had been done in the deep of night as the rest of us slept.” And that, for her, this made it even scarier. Who could plan, and execute such, except Zorean? Such was her concern.

I was gripped with fear, but had to find out more. So, when I asked her if the fight between them had a thing to do with the things she had discovered, she went on to say: “When I discovered those things, I wanted to talk to uncle about it, or call someone else to come see what I’d found. Part of me didn’t want to believe Aunt Zorean had done such things, but I

wasn't sure who to speak to at the moment, and so, I decided to abandon the firewood and the idea of boiling water, and decided I would instead bathe cold water and keep silent about it all. However, before I'd even left the kitchen, I heard someone else walk out of the house towards me. When I turned to see who it was, my fears multiplied, because Zorean, only dressed in her nightdress, and still barefoot, walked up to me, a clear look of anger on her face, and asked me what I was doing in the kitchen, as though it was wrong to be there in the first place."

"I told her I was just planning to boil water for bathing, but without listening to any of it, she pushed me aside, and walked into the kitchen to see what I was actually 'doing'. She found what I suspect to have been her 'secret work', not only incomplete, but uncovered and in a mess from all the probing I'd been doing. Without saying anything about it, she slapped me so hard, I almost fell back into the kitchen, and then she assured me that if I dared to do anything like that again, she'd kill me. When I asked her what it is I'd done, she only said 'What's not your business, is not your business. Go and sleep or pray, but don't you dare say anything stupid about this.'

She added: "I stood there, confused and in much pain. I had tears in my eyes, and thought she'd get ashamed, but instead she asked me to keep quiet or risk causing myself harm. I was annoyed as never before, I assured her there was nothing she would do to me, especially since she wasn't my mother. That really pissed her off, and she abused me, calling me names and all. She pulled the kettle with the cold water from me, and asked me to leave. Later, I think she put out the fire, collected all the evidence, and hid it somewhere I wouldn't know."

"Dan, I'm afraid of Aunt, so afraid, but don't think I can do much. I can't leave this place, because Uncle's all we have as our hope of paying our school fees, and he is such a good person. I can't really think of an alternative."

That is the drama Rael revealed to me. I was really bitter, and was sharing in her pain after hearing her testimony. I tried to comfort her, and told her it was wiser and safer for her to pretend as though nothing had happened. We needed to establish or gather some more evidence of Zorean's devious habits before telling anyone else or presenting a case against her. So, as we walked home that morning, I felt afraid of what she might do next, or what she had already done, that we might never find out about. But I was also

strong, and decided I would keep the secret until when the right time had come to unearth her sorcery.

Days passed, and weeks became months, without anything bizarre happening. To me, Zorean seemed all fine, despite the things Rael had told me, and the memories I had from their exchange a couple months before. One day, talking to Rael as we worked in the gardens, I assured her all would be fine, and that it must have shocked Zorean to have her secrets exposed, which must have caused her to abandon her schemes if any. However, though Rael seemed to be at ease at home and even around Zorean, she told me she was not sure it had stopped. "Dan, you are a man, and can't possibly understand women, but there are things a woman can do in a home, and not even her husband, who sleeps with her every night, can ever suspect or dream of for years. Some women just die with their secrets unrevealed." Rael is a young girl, and I did not want to believe that such words were coming out of her head, but she is also a brilliant one at that, and so I did not entirely dismiss her claims. However, it would not be long before I would establish how true she had been.

It was a Tuesday, sometime last October. I had returned earlier from my job in Kinyara earlier than usual. It must have been around 2 or 3:00pm when I reached home. The doors of the house were all closed, and anyone would have thought there was no one at home besides me who had just returned. I only have the key for the backdoor, and so I used that to get in. I wanted to rest for a while, and then go down to the trading centre later on. Not expecting anyone to be home, I opened the door, and walked straight into our bedroom. I made sure to close the door behind me because I wanted to take a long nap, and I did not want the goats or chicken entering the house to disturb me.

It was hot, and so I undressed and just stayed in my underpants, as I lay there on my bed. Soon, sleep caught up with me. Now, the first bizarre things happened during that nap. I had a very strange dream, which I should not really be telling you, but which, if you do not hear of, will make your understanding of what is happening almost impossible. The dream, recounting it to you, as best as I can recall it at the moment, was something like this:

*I was walking naked, surrounded by stalks of millet on all sides, spreading out, for as far as the eyes could go. It was like being a small ant, and walking in a huge compound, where instead of grass, there was but millet stalks. And*

*they were of many kinds, many shades and many sizes. Some were flowering, others had dried and were ready to harvest. Still, others were just starting to sprout from the ground, and others possessed the lovely green of baby stalks.*

*I continued to walk, wondering if the garden might end somewhere, or if I might find something else besides the millet. It looked like the day was just starting, or that night would soon come – I could not tell which direction was which, and so did not know if the sun was just rising or about to set, however, it was near the horizon, and most of the sky looked like ripened coffee beans. It was a beautiful scene, but I was lost, and wanted to return home.*

*Some distance behind me, I heard voices calling out my name, summoning me to “return”. They were calling out to me, “Isoke garuka! Isoke Isoke garuka...” When I turned to see where the voices were coming from, it all stopped, suddenly. But, soon, I realized that in front of me, not far from where I was standing, were others, also walking about in the endless garden. I started to walk towards them, and soon realised they were not only familiar, but were likewise naked! In one direction I noticed you, Irumba, in another I saw our Dad, and still elsewhere I saw Zorean. But, that was all. It was just the four of us, and Zorean was the only woman I could see.*

*When I tried calling out to you, or any of the others, no one seemed to care or notice me. I walked close to Dad, and realised he was busy picking ears of millet into a basket. I tried to attract his attention, tried to walk towards him and grab him, but he always seemed to be walking away from me, and wouldn't notice me. I changed course and ran towards you. However, you had a basket upon your head, filled with millet, and were walking in the direction of the sun. Zorean was not picking millet, but walking about, holding a stick, and would occasionally look towards the sun, and then continue poking in the soil here and there as she walked on. Occasionally, she would reach into a pot balanced upon her head, and would scatter from it, what must have been millet seeds, over the ground she'd just walked from. She was planting more millet it seemed.*

*When I got closer to her, not wanting to get too close, I saw her, working with nothing to cover her nakedness! She would pick the seeds from the pot, and would scatter them in four directions, muttering some words, and then move on to a new spot. I wanted to hear what she was saying, but was afraid to get any closer. Then, at some point, she seemed to have become aware of*

*my presence, and stopped midway her 'planting', to look at me. She was smiling and gesturing at me to get closer; however, I was afraid.*

*As I stood there, wondering what to do, I noticed that Dad was walking towards us as well, and that you too were walking back. It was like all of us were convening towards where she stood. I looked behind me to see if there might be someone else besides us, but there was nothing but the endless millet and the crimson skies. She had stopped her planting, and was just standing there. Then, seeing as the two of you had gotten so close to her, I too walked closer. No one was saying a word. I noticed that where she stood, was a clearing, circular in shape, and that she was standing in the middle of it. All about her was almost bare earth, fresh from being tilled, though she'd not had a hoe at all. Important to note, there was not a single weed in that entire garden that I had seen. It was as though the millet grew in some magical soil where no other plant could grow.*

*So, there we were, standing in the clearing, with her in the center, not saying a word, but seemingly happy. Just like me, neither you nor Dad seemed to understand what was going on. The expressions on your faces indicated to me you had no clue whatsoever, and so I did not bother to ask you about it. I instead turned to Zorean and asked why she wore no clothes. When I spoke, she turned her attention to me, not ceasing to smile, but not saying a word either. She signaled for us to sit on the bare earth; I saw you and Dad sit, but I refused, and chose to stay standing. She lowered, and removed the pot from her head onto the ground, to the side where she stood. Then she pointed at me, as though to show the two of you something about me, and I saw that you all started to laugh so hysterically as though something totally bizarre was apparent on my body. I didn't know what it was you were all laughing about, but I felt so annoyed, and decided I would walk away.*

*As I turned to run, since nothing was making sense to me, I realised that a huge python was crawling up my feet from the pot she had placed on the ground. It was of moderate size, but very long given that it was girding about me, and was even starting to climb up my legs, and yet more of it was still coming out of the pot! At the same time I realised that, I saw that Zorean was starting to reach into the pot and pick out more millet, but, instead of throwing it into the empty space as before, she was throwing it out at me, and whenever the millet hit me, the snake seemed to tighten its grip on me, and I was screaming and crying out to you and Dad to come help me before it was too late, but you were only laughing and did not seem to care the least bit.*

Almost shocked to death, I woke up from the horrific experience, all sweating, gasping for air, and almost falling back unconscious as I tried to rise from the bed. It was unlike any dream I had ever had because unlike other nightmares, when I woke up, it seemed as though the dream had followed me into waking. I was as terrified by everything around me as I had been in the dream. Meanwhile, I realised I had not been alone in the house because in the corridor outside our room, I heard Zorean calling out to me, asking me what was happening, because she had heard me scream.

Recalling what I had just dreamt, and how terrifying she had been, I even felt more fear thinking of letting her into the room. I assured her I was fine and that she could leave. However, she did not go, but instead, she pushed the door of the room wide open, and stood there, wearing only a bra and her petticoat, and she assured me, "You're a man Dan, why have such nightmares in the middle of the day?" I felt ashamed sitting there in just my underpants, and her standing there like that." She did not seem to care though, and without saying another word, closed the door behind me to return to their bedroom. I could not believe she had been in the house all along. I felt so confused and troubled, I later dressed up, and went to Masindi town to spend the rest of the afternoon at a bar.

I only returned late in the night, with profound fear of our own home, but I had no option, and it did not seem to make sense that someone should have such fear, as a result of a mere dream. However, putting together the dream and Rael's testimony from several months before, I started to believe how it might indeed be true, that Zorean was doing something unorthodox in the home. But because my dream had involved you and Dad, I did not seem to have anyone else to share the bizarre experience with, and so I kept it to myself, until this moment.

\* \* \* \* \*

After he had recounted that tale to me, I did not know whether to ask him to let us abandon the whole idea of going out to have fun, or whether it was better for me to go out and likewise drink it all into oblivion. He asked

for my phone, so as to check the time, and as though he had picked the later of the two options in my head, bid that we go on and drink.

“Life’s strange bro, I just pray that it doesn’t get any weirder than it already is. There’s just too much going on than I can clearly understand, and it all seems to be caused by just that one woman!”

We walked on, faster this time, and though he had vowed to not say a thing more about it, he would later add, as he sat, sandwiched between me and the *bodaboda* man, on our ride towards Masindi town, “Sometimes I think, the beauty of a woman is also her most dangerous trait, as it can hide the most gruesome things about her, behind her flesh. Dad shouldn’t have rushed to marry this woman.”

We were on a *bodaboda*, riding to a place that should give us an escape from the terrors of what home might have become. We were not alone – there was that man, a stranger, sitting at the front of the bike, our *pilot*. I felt it was not safe or wise discussing the matter any further, and so I just kept silent about Dan’s remarks.

We passed a couple of bars still open and bursting with life, but there was one particular one I wanted us to go to. It was the only one I believed, where one might find some descent, modern entertainment and lots of distractions, under a single roof. I paid the *bodaboda* his fare – this one had enough change, and off we walked into the noisy bar.

To those watching us enter the place, it seemed as though we were latecomers to a funeral, as not a hint of joy ensured from our faces. “Get wild or you’ll die from being mild!” such was the wisdom my roommate’s girl, Achen, had once shared with us, as she held a roll of unsmoked marijuana in one hand, and with the other, invited me to join them in the “wild voyage” they were about to undertake – or so, she referred to it. I only shook my head in disbelief, and had assured her, I would never, under any circumstances, smoke weed or any such bizarre herbs.

“Who says you have to smoke it?” she had challenged me, “Actually, the real explorers of consciousness, never smoke, but merely consume the weed as a sacrament – as a tea, or even alongside food.” I believed she was going nuts, and I just laughed my way out of it. Kabanda laughed hard and advised me not to listen to his crazy girlfriend. I was wise enough to abandon them in the room and instead walk to a friend’s room to watch a movie. *There’s enough madness going on in the world to keep one entertained and thrilled till death. One need not add drugs to the already insane experience.* That

is how I rationalised my fears anyways – the thing I feared most in life, was to lose my mind, and nothing seemed more certain to make one lose their locus, as the manner in which the youth were exploiting such potent herbs. However, sitting in the bar with Dan, my thoughts occasionally slipping off into the grisly tales I had just heard, I wished there was a roll of cannabis, with which I could sacrifice my little insanity instead. There wasn't any, just the beer all about us, and so I figured, we had better get started with it...

We sat at a table close to the counter itself, and I confirmed to Dan that he could order for anything he fancied, “as long as it doesn't eat into our transport back home.” We laughed, and placed an order for four bottles of Club Pilsner, and for Dan, an extra, small bottle - “a quarter”, of the legendary Uganda Waragi. “Life has just begun,” a voice in my head assured me. I did not want to think anymore, all I wanted was to enjoy the groovy dancehall tunes blaring above everyone's chattering, and the sight of neon lights and dark girls rotating all over the place. Somehow, amidst all that life was, it felt good to be back in the village.



# Chapter VI

Because of the neon lights, it seemed even darker inside the bar than on the cold streets outside. The DJ was busy in a corner - not far from where we were seated - and from the number of people shuffling, swinging, rubbing, throwing hands in the air, laughing, screaming and hustling with the music on the floor, I knew we had come to the right spot, at the “moment of the greatest harvest”. There was an Indian song playing, remixed into the typical dancehall-raga vibe so loved all around Uganda, and everyone besides me seemed to be having a good time! I looked at the fluorescent placard glowing over the bar counter, and it had the provocative phrase “A Place Called, True Obsessions.” Indeed, the place did seem like it nurtured many obsessions. This bar and club is located near the junction of Commercial Street and Ntuha Road in Masindi town, but somehow, I had never checked it out until then.

Dan had almost emptied his first bottle, and was already in the mood to dance! “Igini? Won’t you join us?” he asked, as he left the stool to join two girls that were busy on their heels, not far from where we had parked. They had totally grabbed his attention, or he had abandoned me to my thoughts and hesitation. I was gathering momentum, but there was a lot that was still grounding me, even though I kept myself busy, trying to drink it all away.

My glass, half-filled with that charred, creamy black taste of the stout, felt very rewarding and soothing, though a bit too cold to the touch. Someone nodded at me from the table opposite us; he was enjoying a native brew instead. I smiled back at him, and just winked in acknowledgement. Besides him and the revellers near us, I could not clearly see much else of the crowd. There had been disco lights in another bar we had walked-by prior to this, but ours did not have any, despite all the high-energy music in the air; very possibly, ours were not functional anymore, or could it be, the management preferred to brand the place darker than all the others?

I rapped at the tabletop with my fingers and wrist, as yet another wonderful jam permeated the air. One of the reasons we had settled at this club was the choice of music their DJs exhibited, right from the moment

we first came within listening-distance. A bit eclectic by local standards, but still true to the locally popular rhythms and tempo. They could even remix some arrhythmic songs, into tickling vibes. After I emptied my first bottle of Guinness, I grabbed the second one without pouring it out into a glass, and went to join Dan, who had managed to bring together three girls to himself! One of the girls had already walked over to my table and asked for a dance, but, at the time, not yet roused, I excused myself, and instead chose to be distracted from all the fun, by poking aimlessly, pathetically, at the phone. "You're too sly for your looks!" she had complained, but I was about to disprove her.

The girls definitely expected drinks from us, and Dan, being too clever, had refused to walk to the floor with his. When I joined them, one of the girls who had been dancing with him, immediately turned to me, most probably, in reaction to the bottle I was waltzing about with. "It's okay!" I shouted, as she could not possibly hear me over the music; she had been eyeing the bottle, and was gyrating, dunking and twisting all about me. My original partner was struggling to catch-up. I passed the bottle to the *Shakira-thing*. As she enjoyed my drink, I got busy with the music too. It was time to get groovy!

Someone grabbed my shoulder, I turned around wondering...

"Oh! Man!" It was my OB, Araali! He was screaming into my ears, all jubilant, and he smelled of *waragi*.

"Ignatius! Where have you been all these years?"

"Around! I've been here all along..." *I lied?*

"No way! You mean you've been at Mzees all this time?"

"Well, not so long, but I've been around."

"Man, it's been so long! What's good?"

I pointed at the girls dancing, "It's all here man!"

He laughed, and hopped in-between me and the girl I had been dancing with. "She's not liking you?" I thought as she danced away. Araali turned back to me, as though nothing had happened – he was clearly enjoying himself, and did not care a single bit.

"Ooooh yeah!!!" he shouted, and pointed fingers at me, as I unleashed some undoubtedly invalid strokes before them. He would not let me have the best of it alone.

He reverted with an equally *illegal* move, but his was just too hilarious, he knocked into Dan's partner behind him, sending them crashing into a

circle of jovial dancers behind them. The mess just was too loony! Everyone seemed to be having their best time of the night.

After about fifteen more minutes of non-stop dancing, I felt exhausted, and decided to abandon the girls and Dan on the floor. "It's been long since I danced this much, I must rest a bit," I told Dan, taking the empty bottle from him, and walking to the counter to grab some more drinks. I ordered for two Clubs for him – he had leeches to take care of and as for me, it's a Nile Special that I instead went for. I knew mixing beers tended to get me hangovers easily, but it was also the only way to keep the table flooded, without quickly voiding the wallet. With the girls tapping into our budget, one had to be cautious. I handed Dan two Clubs, and also brought him the small Ug bottle that he had probably forgotten about. He was happier than I was used to, but I knew, the drinks were serving their role very well. I sat at a different table, one closer to where I could clearly see the entrance into the venue. Who is *who* around here? I wanted to know.

\* \* \* \* \*

As I sipped my drink, enjoying the music and smiling at all the funny strokes people were inventing on the floor, my thoughts got carried back to the events of earlier that day. I recalled Mabel! *What could she be doing right now?* I asked myself, not able to think of anything besides her being asleep. My phone was on the table, and I was scrolling the phone book, looking for the contact she had saved herself. I must call her, at least wish her goodnight. I also wanted to find out if she had reached home safely, it had skipped my mind all along. I found it, "Mabel-Trudy", read the contact, the only one that could be hers, as I could not find another 'Mabel' therein.

I dialed the number, ready to run outside, away from the noise, should she pickup. It rang for a while, and then got dropped abruptly. I took another sip, and another, and then tried it again. "It's kind of early..." I convinced myself. It rang, and then when I pressed it to my ears, could only hear the voice of the auto-responder, claiming the "Sorry, but the number you are calling is currently switched off" Damn! I cursed at the phone. "Why?" I murmured to myself, with no one to reply. I put the phone back into my pocket, doubting what the computer had just said. It was on, just a few minutes back!

One of the girls I had been dancing with earlier on, walked over to where I was sitting, and asked if she could join me. I just pointed at the empty stool next to me, and she pulled in to sit even closer to me. "Why are you not dancing?" she asked, seeming too concerned.

"I'm just relaxing a bit. I've been dancing for almost an hour."

She was drinking a Mirinda Fruity, and her tongue had already been stained dark. The way she talked and how her tongue played as she drunk made me think she might want to lick something she should not. First, I thought she might be interested in the bottle of beer I was drinking, but soon, I was sure it was not the beer she wanted.

"What's your name?" I asked her, having nothing better to talk to her about.

"Jena"

"I've never heard that one before! What's your other name?"

"I forgot the other one!" she giggled, and in the process spit some of the soda on my hand. I did not wipe it off, just pretended as though nothing had happened. A bold character, she noticed it after a while, and used the tip of a scarf around her neck to wipe me. I tried to stop her, but she did it anyways.

"It's a nice name," I assured her.

She smiled in agreement, though I did not believe it was her real name. Her head would go from side to side, throwing the hair into her face, and then she would pull it away, and continue the head-dancing. The music was getting faster, and many of the folks on the floor seemed to mostly be jumping than dancing.

Amidst all of this, my thoughts returned to Dan's stories. Zorean is a very good person, probably the best I've ever had, besides my mum. If it is true that she is doing such things, then we are surely going to be orphaned the rest of our lives. I was thinking that way, because the allegations that she was practising sorcery in the same home that my dad, and all of us stayed, made me think something bad could happen to Dad, if not all of us. But Dad loves her so much, more than he probably did our own mum – he never talks about our mum! I reached into my pocket, once more, and pulled out the phone. "No, I don't want your number," the voice in my head said to the girl, whose attention had been drawn to my phone by its ambient light. I saw a missed call!

The tall girl seated with me saw it too, and she asked immediately, having seen the name on it; "Is she the one?" How I wish, but I did not tell her that.

“No. She’s a cousin of mine.” She did not seem convinced, and I did not care to try persuading her. I grabbed my bottle, and walked out of the noisy bar to try calling her once more. Dan, who had not sat a single moment since he started dancing, saw me leaving and rushed towards me. I did not wait for him to reach me, “Just making a call... I’m coming right back.” He waved, and rushed back to his *farm*.

Outside, it was mostly empty, with a few *bodabodas* still running up and down the street. A couple of cars were parked along the road, and there were women frying chips, others selling tea, cigarettes and other vanity items. However, I was not interested in any of it at the moment. I dialed her number, and waited to hear someone pick on the other end. It rang and still went off without being answered. I was getting pissed off and impatient too. “What’s happening? If she’s sleeping, why not switch off the damn phone?” I was complaining to an otherwise indifferent night, and loudly so. I paced about for a while, hoping she would see my missed calls and call or beep me back.

I wondered why I was bothering her anyways. “I’ll likely call you tomorrow, if I’m free,” she had said to me on the bus. I was just ignoring all of that. Bitten by a love bug? I felt I wanted to talk to her, at least hear her voice before the night ended. I was wishing and dreaming. As I stood there, trying her number the fourth time, a man approached me. He looked too repugnant to belong to the venue. As I would soon realise he was a beggar, another derelict still begging into the night. “Sir, I’m hungry, please help me.” I normally would step away or walk-on before such characters approach, as most are habitual and commercial beggars, who won’t abandon the craft regardless of how much they ‘earn’ a day. But this particular one really had me in a fix; I had some coins with me from the *bodaboda* ride earlier on, and I felt like I needed some good luck regardless of its source. I took out three, and tossed them into his hands, “Go to sleep old man,” I advised. He thanked me, and wanted to shake my hand, but I pulled away just in time. “Be blessed,” the man said as he walked on. “It’s fine. Move on please...”

Damn! She’s calling...

“Hullo?” the voice on the other side inquired.

“Hi Mabel, it’s Ignatius.”

“Ignatius? Oh! My friend from the bus?”

“Yes! You had forgotten me that fast?”

“Not really, it’s the name.”

“Yes, you remember it?”

“No, you called me by a name I rarely use.”

Oh, what’s her name, Trudy?

“So, they call you ‘Trudy’ at home?” I asked, reading the second name off of her contact.

“Did I give you that name?” she asked rather surprised.

“Sure you did. Which one of them is the real one then?” I realised she could have lied about the names.

“Trudy is actually my name. Forget the ‘Mabel’” she replied, snickering on the other end of the line. I suspected it!

“See? I’ve caught you.”

She almost choked on her own laughter, excused herself and continued laughing.

“Well, ‘Trudy’ is my real name as you’ll probably prove later on.” Later on...

I wanted to meet her that very night. I just was not feeling as happy as I had on the bus. There was something about her that I just could not let go of.

“Trudy, I’m in town with my big brother, is it possible to come party with us?”

“You guys are not sleeping yet?”

“It’s Friday!”

“I know, but... as I told you, it’s kind of tricky to move around here. Especially in the night.” *Yeah, I’ve heard you say it, but...*

“I’ll pay for your *boda*, and you don’t have to stay long.”

“Hmmm”

“It’s such a great night, but for some reason, I just can’t seem to enjoy it without you around.” Oh!

“Ignatius!”

“What?”

There was silence on her side for a while. Was she plotting yet another lie? Had the grandma been eavesdropping on her? I could hear some noises on her end, as though she was knocking things over, and then the line was dropped!

“No!

“Really?” I screamed in frustration, and kicked at the earth with such ferocity, I both shocked and amused a couple that was just arriving at the

club. The party was really getting hot inside, I could hear people ululating and whistling to the music. The DJ would pause the music, and let the crowd fill-in the gaps with much merry, but wrongly-tuned singing. *You are missing the real fun!* But no, I was bent on pursuing Trudy yet one more time. I hit the green, handset icon, and listened closely, as I walked even further away from the sound of the music in the background.

She picked up after it had rang for a while. "I'm sorry Ignatius," she said, "I was making noise in the house, so decided to move outside."

"Is your grandma sleeping?"

"She is, and hates when I disturb her sleep."

"I can only imagine. So, what's your decision?"

She paused yet once more, and finally answered, "Okay, I'm wondering though, why can't you wait to see me over the weekend?"

Hmmm, I wondered too, as I did not know exactly why I wanted to meet her so soon.

"I want to see you Trudy." The words just formed naturally, almost subconsciously, and it just felt true.

She giggled, then whispered, "As in right now?"

"If possible," was my firm response.

More silence, a bit of deep breathing, and then a "fine!"

She went on however, "but you'd have to come, as I can't really travel to town from this place at this time. We have no *bodaboda* stage nearby, and they would most likely be sleeping as well."

"That's fine too!" I was feeling relief... for no apparent reason. No, I wanted to meet her, and tell her I was in love, probably.

We agreed, I would not take longer than 30 minutes to reach her, as she could not wait much longer before dozing off again. I asked for directions to her home. However, I could not make sense of it.

"Bitanga, and the area is Karujubu", that is what she described the village as. I knew of Karujubu, but not that particular village.

"There used to be a school at the roadside, called 'Little Molly Nursery', but which is closed these days," she added, trying to help me visualise my way to where she stayed. It was not helping much.

I laughed at her, for I could not make out whatever area she was trying to describe.

"Trudy, let's do this," I advised, "I'll find a person who can bring me there, and will call you so you can describe the actual place to him, or give him directions to where it is we can meet."

“Okay. But it’s pretty easy to find, if you can just find out where ‘Bitanga’ is. Also, there’s a prominent building that used to be a Catholic church. Maybe, that will be easier to identify?”

“I don’t know, is it near the road? In any case, let me get one of these *bodaboda* men, and I’ll call you to direct him.”

“Fine. But hurry...”

“No problem. I’m on my way dear.”

She laughed, and ended the call.

It was approaching midnight, and I was not believing I had actually decided to travel to such a distant place at such an hour, just to meet Trudy? I rushed back inside the bar, where the music had morphed into R&B for a while, so that many of those who had been grooving on the floor, had since retreated back to their seats. I hate the blues as well. I located where Isoke was seated; joined by a bunch of other guys, none of whom I knew. I walked around the table to his side, and though shouting so as to have him hear what I was trying to say, it seemed as though I were only whispering!

“I’m going to leave you for a short while. But I’ll be coming back soon.” He stood up from the seat and gestured for us to walk outside. “No, it’s okay” I shouted gleefully, evidently excited.

“What? You said you are leaving?”

“No, there’s a friend of mine I want to pick up, and then we’ll be back in a moment.”

“A girl?” he asked, rather surprised.

“Yes!” I confirmed, nodding frantically as well.

But he seemed a bit uneasy... I figured that to keep him calm, he would probably need some money for drinks, as he did not seem to have much on him.

“Hey, here’s some drinks to keep you going.” I said to him, as I reached into my wallet, and retrieved a 20K note, new and crisp. I handed it over to him, and jokingly added, “Don’t drink much, I’m coming back to join you!”

He grinned, evidently full of delight, and also shook my hand, “No problem!” he said. One of his friends had seen me giving him the note, and he was whistling in celebration. I left them jubilating, and emptying my bottle before stepping out, waved goodbye to the so-called Jena. *Enough of these opportunist girls*, thought I, as I stepped out. She did not seem to be having that much fun otherwise – she wasn’t dancing, just standing there, sipping on her drink; solo, and still in the same spot we’d sat earlier. I



somehow pitied her but would not help her. In my mind, all I could think of at the moment was, I have no option! *I hope you find some other temporary lover tonight!* And I quit the place.

\* \* \* \* \*

Outside the joint, the first man I approached, standing beside a navy-blue bike with white and black stripes on its cushions, was very eager to accept business. I walked closer to him and started to describe where it was I wanted to go. Lo! When I described to him the destination, and especially when I mentioned “Bitanga”, he just pointed me towards another bike without even explaining why he would not take the job anymore.

The man he pointed me towards had his bike humming and ready to go the moment he saw me approach. His was mostly black but had a brilliant-red fuel tank and red rims to match. He did not even wait for me to explain where I was going, he just made it clear to me, “At this time sir, you pay before we leave. Then I can take you anywhere!” His attitude, though impolite, gave me that much needed hope.

“Do you know an area in Karujubu called ‘Bitanga’? The one near some Catholic Church?” I asked him, refusing to sit, though he was signaling for me to take the seat already.

“Karujubu? Yes! I know it, and I think I also know the village...” he hesitated for a while, peering out into the far, pitch-black night, *for some reassurance?* Then he called one of his peers and consulted from him;

“Yobu, do you know where the turn towards ‘Bitanga’ is on the Karujubu road? I can’t seem to recall very well...”

*I thought you knew this place like the back of your hand sir...my mind, wandering.*

Yobu, a busty man, probably in his late forties, spoke with a deep, but quirky voice. “How much is he paying?” They both turned to face me, and I was wondering why one might ask for the fee before even establishing clearly where it is we were going.

“How much do you normally charge?” I replied, with a further question. The one who had been summoned, Yobu, said, “If it were the town itself, I would personally ask for 4,000, but since it is not directly on the road, and

especially since it's Bitanga, you will have to top that with an extra 2,000." 6,000 shillings? *That sounds like a lot!*

Yobu, added, "I know Bitanga, but that's not a safe place to go to at this time. Are you visiting, or do you stay there?"

Any place is not safe once darkness falls, right? But should fear of the dark multiply fees? I didn't bother to reason with them.

"So, is it you, Yobu, or him that's taking me? And Yes, I stay there." It was a clear lie, but one they did not seem to catch or challenge. Yobu walked back to his bike, and said to his friend, "Take him, if he knows where he's going. What I recall though, is that there's a kindergarten on your right, as you almost approach Karubuju, that's the route to the village."

For a moment I thought none of them seemed interested in taking me, and then my man, after checking his phone a couple of times, asked me to sit so we could leave.

\* \* \* \* \*

I recalled that I had to call Trudy, so she could direct him, but then I decided, it would be better to call, only after we had reached the actual turn towards Bitanga. I had my jacket tightened, and I sat closer to the man, so I could fend off more cold as we rode at speed, away from Masindi town, into what for me was some "vast unknown". For about a kilometre, we passed a couple of small shops, a few bars that were not about to close, homes here and there, gardens, and lots of untamed bush, with varying lengths along the edges of the road.

As for activity on the road itself, besides some other few bikes we encountered while still close to the town, for most of the trip, it was just the light of the bike and only occasionally would we meet another vehicle or traveller – most going in the direction opposite ours. I would sometimes turn to look behind with hope that, perhaps, another bike or some vehicle might join us on what otherwise seemed like a two-man voyage to the dark-side of the moon. The night was thick, gloomy and silent, except for the noise of the *boda's* engine.

Thinking of how much we had veered away from the town, and all visible signs of human life, I wondered if we might not be close to our destination yet... I tapped on his shoulder a little, and then told him thus; "When we

are about to reach Bitanga, please let me know, so I can ask someone to properly direct you.” He was not wearing a helmet, and there was not that much dust as I had feared. He heard me and nodded.

Actually, it was Trudy that I was thinking about the most. I was trying to recall everything we had spoken about earlier that day, while on the bus, and what more we had shared during that fateful break in Nakasongola. It is only after we had exited the bus, and while we freely interacted outdoors, that I properly realised just how fascinating she was. I had seen something in her eyes that reminded me of someone I had known and adored, as far back in time as during my O-level! Not blue, but also not brown or black like the rest of us.

She was one class ahead of me, and although I never got the chance to really know her – a friend had once claimed she was ‘a Virgo, and, perhaps, the proudest of them all’. I could hardly forget her face, especially when during a dance at school – an Interact Club party, I momentarily danced not just close to, but *on* her! Unfortunately, that much cherished moment only lasted a song, and then she excused herself, never to be seen with me ever again. Had it been another girl, I would curse myself, but, for her, I wrote a special entry in my journal that night, and read it to myself, every once in a while, until I finally decided to let go of the fascination with her.

I recall boasting in the dorm that evening, telling my friends about the dance I’d had with the queen herself.. However, unknown to me, not one, but a couple of envious boys in my dorm had observed the scene begrudgingly, and one recounted it in the most painful way: “You didn’t even touch her! I mean, she was having fun, making you fantasise and all, you didn’t ever touch at all! And it was just one song, and nothing more!” They laughed, out of malice, because the opposite was true – we’d more than touched! I sulked, because their envy was noxious. Thus, I vowed to never return to the dance floor that term. I’d had the best of school, or so I decided. I trusted, I would not find another girl like her after all. I was wrong.

Trudy’s eyes, and then her smiles, her breasts and the overall aspect of her persona seriously hypnotised me. But damn! *She’s a psychologist, perhaps she just played with your brain...* No, I would not buy that. In fact, thinking about her being a psychologist, just intensified my interest in her. I mean, if a girl is a psychologist, just imagine the kind of things she might do for you.

*Or to you...* I was fascinated. And she is sort of like a psychic too? I did not want to miss this dance, I would not!

Once, while reading an encyclopedia on modern philosophy, I read about the work of a certain brilliant Swiss psychologist called Carl Gustav Jung, who, amazingly, despite living in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, had a keen interest in alchemy as well. In some of his more interesting theories, he claimed there was nothing in a person's life that could not be readily explained or predicted by a careful analysis of one's dreams – often, over a long period that is. What is more, his work seemed to show that not just art and music, but religion, politics and even some instances of modern science like the accidental discovery of the benzene ring, had a lot to do with the kinds of dreams their authors had. Furthermore, he claimed, that much of what we considered to be culture, tradition and mythology, had roots in the dreams, fantasies and psychic experiences of our ancestors since the dawn of time. He called this the collective unconscious. I found his ideas very unorthodox and sort of unscientific in the traditional, empirical sense, but then, there was a lot in his psychology that made lots of sense, and almost seemed to be intuitive even to my skeptical self. Jung restored the colour in science, and made me cherish the mind in new ways, but I did not think I would ever find anyone else with whom I would share this fascination for the human mind.

So, I would think of it all, and then think of Trudy, and in my mind, behold a girl who had not just beauty, but who might someday exhibit a truly remarkable intellect as well. I wanted to meet her, and share my admiration for her. But I also wanted to forget the pain I had suffered at the hands of Loyce, and the queen I would never meet again. Trudy represented hope and a new chapter in my life, and somehow, it all seemed like it was not incidental – *why would I have met someone like her, just like that?* I was wishing too much, and it hurt me to think it might not be as I was desiring it to be. *Boy don't forget the power of the self-fulfilling prophesy...* the thought crossed my mind, and I believed the radical in me. I would not be too sure though. Not just yet.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Do you stay there?” the *bodaboda* man, whose name I had not asked for yet, asked me.

“In Karujubu?”

“Yes, are you a resident there?”

“Not really. I'm just meeting a friend shortly. I stay in Kihande, not far from Nyamigisa.”

“So, why visit a friend so late? Have you ever been to that village?”

*Is there a right time for visiting around here?* I could rationalise it, if I wanted to, but instead chose to go light on him.

“Why not?” I replied, “It's kind of an emergency.”

*It really can't wait?*

He did not question, nor react to my response. I stayed silent too, while trying to make out the shape of a huge, unfinished house that abruptly showed up to my left. From the look of its hazy outlines, it seemed like a new, modern addition to an otherwise desolate neighbourhood. However, it soon faded in the night behind us, and I lost all concern for it pretty soon.

The noisy bike would easily give us away to anyone listening. I wondered; why was everyone so concerned about the village we were heading towards? I'd never heard of it before. I knew of troublesome villages, especially those near the eastern shores of Lake Mobutu Sese Seko – that magnificent rift-valley lake, where Coryndon's ship met its fateful end like others before and after it. I also knew of other troublesome areas, mostly in such distant places like Kamwenge, but I'd never heard anyone mention Karujubu as a bizarre destination. Trudy would have warned me already, after all, she already told me of so many grisly tales happening elsewhere... But, I decided to ask, just so I could be sure.

“Is it that the area has thieves?”

I realised that was the wrong question to begin with – in my opinion, such a question always reeked of guilt, especially when asked of a stranger, but I'd already said it.

“Thieves are actually almost everywhere. It seems you don't really stay in Masindi, do you?”

*Oh, you've given yourself away... too easily.*

“Hmmm, I've just returned recently, so I don't know how things have been while I was away.”

Maybe he weighed my response or was just focusing on avoiding the bumps in the murram road. He soon spoke...

“Especially while travelling at night. It's not encouraged anymore these days, as the cases of people getting robbed or disappearing is sort of increasing.”

That did not sound good indeed, and so I asked, “Are we still too far off from our destination in any case?”

I needed some reassurance.

“I wouldn't say too far. Besides the extra route to Bitanga, we should be at the turn in about twenty minutes.”

*That's not near*, that inner voice assured me.

I looked about us and saw some new signs of occupation. *Some life at last!* There were a few lights concentrated in a single place – most likely, a small trading centre. There followed the outlines of homes against the sky, long stretches of sugarcane plantations, with a few tree-tops, which all seemed darker against a relatively dark sky. There were stars, many of them, especially right overhead. It was actually very scenic and rich, as the skies had almost no interference from ambient urban light, as is the case in Kampala and other developing areas of the country. In Masindi, once the night sets in, and you happen to be just a few miles outside of the main town, you'll most likely not see many artificial lights beyond midnight. In the areas we were passing, even midnight seemed too far, almost everywhere, it seemed like a Sunday night already.

“So you said, for Bitanga you would add an extra 2,000? Is the place that far from the road itself?” I was thinking about the inflated price I'd have to pay soon.

“It's actually close, but you wouldn't want to walk there on foot, not at this time.”

“Is the road bad? Or is it just too convoluted?”

He laughed, “If you're not a tourist, there's no confusing road around here.” He went on, “Yes, the road is not good, it's dusty and has lots of gullies for those who'd want to drive there, but that's not the reason Bitanga is feared.”

Oh, so it actually is “feared”?

“Why? Tell me about it please...”

He did not immediately start speaking, but a while later, reduced the bike's speed a bit, and then started telling me about that “feared” village.

\* \* \* \* \*

If you did not know, or just have not grown up here, there is quite a lot you might want to learn about your own people. It helps, especially if you want to make sense of the many stories and beliefs that are considered

tradition, and some of which are deemed so important, that to not know them would make your chances of survival around here very minimal, or at least, make your stay among the Banyoro miserable. And yet again, as with many children and adults in these modern times, the memory and understanding of who we are as Africans, has mostly been suppressed, or demonised, and so many walk about empty, and with much unexplained suffering.

Before I was a *bodaboda* rider, I worked as a mechanic after being trained at St. Joseph's Technical in Kisubi, and when the work became unprofitable for me, I went to work in Kinyara Sugar Works, like so many others around here. But after getting some money to build my home, and a small business, I retired from active employment, and, instead, decided to spend my leisure time working as a *bodaboda*, since I really love bikes. Besides, this trade helps me to meet and stay in-touch with many people and many parts of the area. Not many jobs these days would allow you to openly interact with others – especially people from all walks of life, most of them strangers. And then, there is the advantage of travel, even if not too distant places, it is rewarding to keep in touch with reality.

I have grown up in Masindi, and have also stayed in Hoima, Kibale and recently did some work in Kiboga. However, I can tell you that outside of scary stories we grew up being told by peers and adults alike, I have myself witnessed certain people, some of them Banyoro, others Bagungu, Barugwara, Bakiga and even the Baganda, that seemed to possess some very unusual characteristics, and to defy what you children of the city understand or believe in, especially concerning what is possible, and who we really are as Africans.

The village we are going to, Bitanga, is one of many that are so well-known, and mostly feared by those who have heard of it, but not stayed there. It is considered to be home to some very different kind of people, with practices and beliefs that many of the people elsewhere nowadays find strange or even scary. Much of what goes on in that village is not really that absurd, just *too African* for many people to accept or embrace.

In Bitanga, for example, it is well-known that a good number of residents still practice some form of ritual cannibalism. Not just people who rob recent graves of their sleeping folk, but those who are capable of using witchcraft to mysteriously cause the sudden death of a person, even at long distances. Such targets, if they are meant to be used in ritual, would

somehow end up in the homes of these darker folk, after their death and burial that is. There is definitely cause for alarm, even for those who are residents or familiar with these practices. The rule of thumb in Bitanga, is to beware of who you make friends with, and also to keep the number of your enemies in check. Survival is not by mistake; these practices and cultures serve a purpose for them, and they have been here since ancient times. It serves one best to be familiar with, and, perhaps, even learn about the taboos and ideals of the people among whom you live.

It is not like people do not visit the village, no. We do go there, I personally have been there a couple of times before, though I tend to forget the route sometimes – it is not a good road as I said. But typically for such areas, unless if you have protective charms or when you are sure you are not visiting for long, you need to watch what you eat or drink, who you allow to touch you and not just enter people's homes anyhow. It is not as risky as it used to be; nowadays many natives have been influenced by and converted to mild forms of Christianity or Islam. But still, and this you will ask your friend if you think I'm lying, even among the clergy, these practices have not been entirely wiped out, but are now cloaked in modern beliefs, and when witchcraft is used, some might even consider it a form of Catholicism for example. In a way, perhaps Catholics share much in common with traditional beliefs than not – for example, the idea of eating the body and blood of Christ, is not so far removed from ritual cannibalism, I would say.

There is a famous story about Bitanga related to the church you mentioned. It is said, mostly by people who have stayed a while near or on that village, that once, when the colonialists came to conquer Kabalega's people and his lands, one of the areas they faced the most trouble with, was in Karujubu. There were a couple of villages which seemed to produce the most obstinate and fearsome characters, many of whom it was said, feared not even bullets or spears. One of those villages is Bitanga, and many say, it was their superior knowledge of witchcraft and the occult world that gave their people strength and the ability to fend off colonial oppression. They had so much awareness of their sovereignty and power that to enslave them to western ideals, no matter how modern and civilised they seemed, was like a serious threat to the very core of who they were as a free, intelligent and cultured people.

As you might already know, the colonialists, when they came to conquer and plunder us, would always carry both the gun and the Bible. So, they



would first try dialogue, and if that failed, they would try to coerce you into submission by attempting to convert you to Christianity, and then, as it so happened with us the Banyoro, who hated most alien beliefs, and especially those of the white man, violence would be the next option. The methods used to torture and punish us for failing to submit to white beliefs and control were many and varied, but among them were the destruction of crops and homes using the scorch-earth method, causing the unfortunate depopulation of our lands. And as though that was not enough, the plunderers went all over Uganda – and not just in Bunyoro - surveying for places with oil and other natural wealth, and then demarcating these as national parks or game reserves, further making their intentions clear. We definitely lost too much, even in those early days.

But history tells us that even with violence, control of our people did not come easily, and though we lost many innocent people and lost much of our heritage and pride, still, some few areas of Bunyoro continue to preserve and advance those ancient, but seemingly scary practices, that made many of our ancestors heroic and wise, even by modern standards.

So, of the places where the missionaries chose to establish themselves, Bitanga was one. And there, they attempted to set up a Catholic parish, with the expectation that Christianity would drive out much of the beliefs and practices of witchcraft, and especially ritual cannibalism. But, it is also said, that from the very moment that church was set there, there was much “spiritual turmoil” in the village, especially in regards to those who converted to the new religion. Suddenly, there were cases of people getting possessed by “evil” spirits, something that had never been heard of, because, traditionally, the only spirits that possessed people were either those of dead family members - *emizimu*, and those of the Cwezi – tutelary, and sage ancestral spirits. Perhaps, and very rarely so, some initiates with strong vessels, might also get directly possessed by nature spirits – who typically regulate and command natural forces, and who are traditionally known as *emisambwa*. None of these forces is essentially evil or malevolent, except when obviously abused. But ever since Christianity arrived, stories of people being disturbed by evil spirits became all too common, for unknown reasons. Overtime, some of the local leaders and elders of the area got concerned, especially those who still believed in tradition, and these, together with the majority of natives, connived to ensure there was a conscious suppression or total expulsion of Christianity in the area, for the good of all.

When I was growing up, it was said the church in Bitanga was haunted by the ghost of a Catholic priest, who had committed suicide there, during those turbulent days. The story goes:

When the clergy realised they had not many converts in the area despite having built a physical church there, Mass was said less frequently, and over time, most priests would take long to visit, sometimes sending deacons to say Mass or meet the small congregation that was still surviving. However, one particular priest, known as Father Eman put the final nail in their coffin, and they abandoned all hope of conquering the village and its neighborhood ever.

As you might know, there is the sensitive matter concerning the so-called Buganda traitors-turned-martyrs, who it is said were killed by Kabaka Mwanga, not only for conniving with the invading, cunning colonialists, but also for allegedly allowing them to encourage and spread acts of homosexuality among his youth. That these missionaries worked so hard to establish many single-sex schools – as many as, or even more than the churches they built, is no doubt. Deviant sexual-practices weren't limited to the newly converted congregations only, but it turned out, the vows of celibacy and the insistence on keeping single-sex communities, even among the clergy, greatly encouraged sinister explorations of sex, for many of the members who must have found fighting human instinct very difficult. Sex is divinely given, and is, perhaps, one of the greatest gifts to humanity, but, it is also very easy to abuse, once it starts to be regulated or stigmatised. However, unlike those who always managed to hide these things from their congregation, and those they attacked as heathens, the case of Father Eman was a total fiasco for the church.

It is said that he had been suffering retribution in his former parishes, for his sexual-perversions on minors – especially boys, and that he was transferred from one diocese to another by his bishops. It was one of their secretive policies, meant to cover-up such shadiness among the supposedly chaste and pious clergy. So, instead of punishing Eman or avenging those innocent children he used to victimise, the institution chose to turn a blind-eye, and only work at saving its image. That, my friend, is how Eman finally found his way to Bitanga, where his ordeals would finally meet well-deserved justice: by his own hands, and allegedly under influence of the very forces the church fights, he literally sacrificed himself, at the very altar where he used to say Mass!

Father Eman was in his late thirties or early forties when he died. And how did his death come about? Apparently, he fell in love with the son of a certain local shaman, well-known in Bitanga for his advanced sorcery using the Cwezi spirit of Wamara. For a Catholic priest to sexually fall in love with any man would already seem wrong, but what was worse, the boy was only fifteen, and worst of all, was a shaman's only child. It is said, the father of the child had struggled to prevent him from attending Christian gatherings, but the child's friends had introduced him to the priest, and it is claimed, he used to meet him and the others after Mass, to teach them the catechism, as a process towards baptizing and giving them "other" sacraments. Also, it is said that some of the kids had started to volunteer as altar-boys or altar-girls, and some were in the choir as well, so they spent more time at the church, with the priests, even after the adults had gone.

Father Eman was very fond of the young man, and unlike other priests who had deserted the troublesome village, he would visit occasionally, to say Mass and educate him and the other youth.

So, the news of this 'leprosy' one day leaked, after the boy stupidly shared the details of their intimate relationship with a friend who could not keep the secret. Soon, word spread like a wildfire throughout Bitanga, and eventually, the elite shaman got to know. Normally, the church was closed most of the week, and would only be open on Sunday mornings for Mass, and thereafter, for Sunday School for the children. But during that fateful week, the unfortunate priest showed up one Wednesday, and after playing the summoning drum, typically used to call the congregation on Sundays, he tied a rope right around the crucifix hanging over the altar, and there, hung himself. He died before anyone arrived, just like that.

Soon, members of the congregation convened, expecting some urgent official communication or possibly an abrupt Mass, but instead, they were greeted with morbid horror, as right there, where they had turned up to pray and escape the said darkness of the world outside, hanged an even darker omen. It was such a shock, and also the last that Catholics would have to deal with in that village. For some reason, no other priest ever showed up after the incident until a long while later. They say the priest was never given a proper burial, because no one bothered to contact the parish where he was sent from, until almost a month after, when someone from the parish passed by, as part of an investigation to find the missing clergyman.

Some say, the locals, filled with disgust, just hurled his body into a pre-existing grave, somewhere in the cemetery that had been established right next to the church. Some further claim, the original occupant of the said grave had recently been exhumed, and had gone missing as usual, and so, they just filled the vacant grave with the body of the priest, and that was it.

However, another legend goes; after hearing of the incident, a group of priests visited the place to try and perform a proper burial for their fellow, but found the said grave vacant, except for the evidence left behind – his sacerdotal robes, in an otherwise empty grave. The rope he had used for the suicide was therein as well, and it was then concluded, his body had been robbed, soon after the burial. No one seems to doubt that the body must have gone missing after its burial, but then, almost everyone contends, that the people in Bitanga would never eat of such a man. Personally, I think it is possible that his body was then used in some form of sorcery thereafter.

Anyways, some say the story is a myth, but others believe it so much, that they fear going near that church ever. I am saying these things because I have grown up here, and have known Bitanga and villages like it, for a long time. So, if you will be staying in Masindi for a while, or any other area in this region, you might want to always learn about the legends of the place, so you do not get caught unawares. And then, do not be fooled; despite these darker tales and legends, just like any other part of the earth, there are more positive and rewarding things in these places than not. And to most of the residents, it is the best home they could ever have.

I'm personally not so afraid of Bitanga, because I have a relative who is married there, and I have visited them many times before. So, I doubt everyone is to be feared, and also doubt that the old practices are still common. If you trust your friend, then, you have no reason to be afraid.

\* \* \* \* \*

We finally reached the 'turn', and there was the sign-post of the nursery school before us, and a small road leading away from the big one we had been riding on all along. He stopped the bike and asked me to contact my "friend". When I dialed, she immediately picked, as though she had been waiting long for it. I told her to speak directly to him, and so passed the

phone to the surprisingly bold and strange wise man. They talked for a short-while, the man insisting that he did not want to reach the church. He finally passed the phone to me, and I was about to ask Trudy what they had agreed to, when I noticed that my airtime had run out. I turned to the man and asked him what they'd agreed to, on the phone, but he just assured me, "It is okay. I will take you there, but won't wait for you." "You'll give me your number, so I can call you if I need you later." I told him. He shook his head, "I don't think you'll need it, because after I'm gone, I can only return tomorrow morning, and there will definitely be others to bring you back by then." I sort of understood him, and so told him to ride on.

The road towards Bitanga was not good indeed, and as we drew closer and closer to the final destination, the thumping in my chest increased pace, and I somehow struggled to keep my thoughts at rest. I was wondering what Trudy was doing or where exactly we would meet, especially since I couldn't make any more calls without airtime.

Looking back, I doubt I had ever heard so many scary things in a single day. But then, I also cannot believe that I was not entirely freaked out, nor that I did not recede from the adventure, and just return to the safety and familiarity of home and my own folk. *Strange!* After the mechanic-turned-*bodaboda*-man told me of Bitanga's disturbing past and its dark tales, like those of Trudy earlier on, the civilised, schooled part of me dismissed most of it as mere legends and conspiracies. I regarded them no different from the scary stories of cunning hyenas, horrific gorillas or talking trees, that we were told so many times in classrooms, as little children learning about a strange world. However, because his stories concerned the very place I was going to, and because there had been clear hints of fear in him and the others when I had mentioned my destination, I thought it would be wise to find out a little bit more...

"So," I asked the man, "do you believe most of these things yourself?" "If I hadn't grown up here, maybe I wouldn't." was all he replied. I was afraid of asking more, thinking I would soon seem nagging, but I had just one more question to ask.

"So, what happens at the church these days? Why don't you want to reach there?"

"The road is bad, but once I leave you somewhere, you could easily walk there. But then also, since you are a visitor, I would rather leave you right there, so you have no regrets or excuses."

That was not the answer to what I had asked, but I did not ask anymore, only checked the time on my phone – “01:33am”, it was really late. He knew he had not answered me, and so, a while later, did.

“It’s not a Catholic church anymore; they stopped using it for Mass a long, long time ago, and from what the people in the area say, everyone seems to be happier about that, though silent about what its new function is, besides being a prominent reminder of a dark past.”

It sounded a bit strange, but somehow felt familiar. Sometimes, especially since I went to university, I would find myself questioning the whole idea of Christianity, and sometimes, all of organised religion for that matter. I guess, even the uneducated have their reasons for not trusting orchestrated, alien beliefs.

A dog was barking somewhere, and the sounds were sending echoes through the air.

“I’ve heard though,” said my guide, “that some secretive group of people, do pray from there. I don’t know much beyond that, and I don’t want to lie to you, nor talk about it any further than that.” And he did seem frank. I decided, I would find out the rest on my own. *Trudy will explain it all; she must know enough already.*

## CHAPTER VII

In the distance, he pointed to what he claimed was the said church. It was a building that stood out from the rest of the silhouettes, as one lofty and stark structure. In many ways than not, it seemed misplaced, especially given the kind of neighbourhoods we had passed on our way to the place, and most of what I could not see, but had already heard of. I surveyed the imposing, monolithic structure for anything that might even distantly distinguish it as a former Catholic church, but the only clue I could see, besides the size and shape of its roof against the star-filled sky, was a solitary, vertical pole jutting into the air above the roof, somewhere near the front. "That must be all that remains of the original crucifix," so I convinced myself. The pole's horizontal arms had since vanished, and so it stood naked, like a flagpole whose purpose had since been relinquished. They surely lost their conquest!

He switched off the engine, and I disembarked, believing he would venture no further than that. I asked him about it, and he said I had reached my said destination – I wanted to doubt him. I asked him to wait as I tried figuring out whether I might see Trudy anywhere near. He asked me to call her, but I could not, because I did not have any more credit. I asked him to lend me his phone, but he indicated he only had enough to beep, not call. "That'll definitely do," I said to him, taking the small feature-phone and quickly dialing the number that had already stuck at the fore of my mind.

It rang for a while, and then she picked. I was just starting to explain that I had reached, and it went off – we had both run out of credit! Since I had already paid him, he didn't seem to have much holding him around, and so he asked to leave. I begged him to wait a while, just in case she might call back via his phone. But, after just a little waiting - about five minutes, I realised it was better for me to venture a bit closer to the church, just to see if there might be any sign of her anywhere. I felt abnormally bold. I asked him to turn the headlights of the bike on, even momentarily, pointing them towards the church, hoping she might see the light and know where we stood or that I had arrived. He thought even better, and

additionally hooted a couple of times as well, as I walked towards the building, which was about twenty metres from where he had stopped.

Though he had done as I had asked, turning the lights on – at full luminance actually, I hesitated to walk, and instead surveyed the area, with the help of the light. From that distance, I could not really make out much of the details of the building's exterior, but it seemed sort of familiar; mostly bare-brick, with tall, glazed, tinted windows - the sort one might not typically expect on a home. It looks so churchy indeed. However, there was only one door that I could see; huge, wooden and locked. The *bodaboda* man hooted two times more, and then started turning around. I could not see any signs of my host, and the place, very silent and dark, reeked of gloom, especially given the fear that had been induced in me, concerning its said ghastly history. I only wished I could see Trudy – all I wanted was to see her, and maybe convince her to return with me to town, *before the bodaboda man leaves*.

I walked towards him, and asked him to wait a bit longer, but he said it was late, and that I would either have to abandon my visit and return with him or let him go. I looked at my phone, silently praying that she would call, but the screen just looked back at me – nothing, no incoming call, it soon timed-out, and so faded to black. I took a deep breath at last, looked about, and told him he could go.

“Are you sure about this?” asked the man.

“Seems I have no option”, I said, with a sad tone.

“But your friend, did they say they would meet you here? Why not at their home?”

I did not have an answer for that, and I would not say it even if I had it anyways. I realised the queerness of my situation, and decided it was better to let go and face fate alone. I did not want to lose or give-in to fear, but it also felt too daring of me. *You have got a chance to prove something!* And indeed, I chose to. I composed myself, and assured the impatient man;

“I'll be fine. I'm sure they'll call soon.”

I did not even want to mention the gender of “my friend”, as I felt it might make my situation seem a little more foolish and too heroic.

“Alright then. I'll be available in the morning, if you need me.” I nodded, and showed him the face of my left palm, without actually waving goodbye.



He started the engine, and slowly rode off. For a while, standing there irresolutely, I looked at the red tail lights receding from me, and I felt I should run after him and tell him how I had changed my mind, but something just kept me grounded. A part of me was more than certain, I had to wait. I chose to stay, despite all the darkness about me, and face my chosen destiny.

Once the *bodaboda* disappeared, I knew I would have to walk back home on foot if Trudy did not show up within about thirty minutes. Again, I looked at the time, and then turned off the light – being alone, I decided it was better to lurk in the dark, attracting no attention towards myself. I looked up at the beautiful night sky, and it made me smile. Then I lowered my gaze and attention towards the palpable shadows all about me. Standing there, in the middle of that narrow path, with an imposing, ominous structure mere metres from where I stood, feeling an invisible breeze soothingly play against my skin, it dawned on me, that the night was really thick. I was unwilling to move, not just because I didn't want to, but because I did not know what any step, in any direction, might attract. I stood there, hoping for just one thing; that Trudy would soon show up or call me.

I was taking deeper breaths, in the hope of keeping calm and limiting the chances of fear overrunning me. Though I did not want to think about it, all the stories I had been told, over the last couple of hours, seemed to all pile up on me simultaneously. It was like having Trudy, Dan and the nameless chauffer all recount the tales once more, at the same time! They streamed through my mind with a vividness that made me shake; the kid whose demons hated drums, the mum who nurtured lascivious serpents and the suicidal priest – probably still hanging around, who had fallen from grace. *It is the priest, you should most be worried about*, said a voice in my head. But what of Nondi, back home? I would think of her, and how resentful Dan's narration had been. I still could not believe it, that such a lovely woman, seemingly pious at times, and so in love with my father, could be capable of such deviant acts. "But you have not really spent time around her enough," I was reminded, "behind every adorable woman, is a dark secret."

"Do ghosts exist?" I murmured to myself, recalling one of the key questions we used to ask each other, in reaction to grisly stories we were told as kids. It seemed like no adult ever dared to offer a meaningful answer; the teachers at school, would say the stories were meant to teach a lesson or

some moral; my mother, my grandfather and a couple of other people who used to tell those stories to us, would normally laugh and say we did not need to worry about whether they were real or not; "If they are real, they only attack bad people," my mum had once said.

For a long time, I did believe that ghosts were real, especially by virtue of the things I had grown up hearing in church sermons and reading about in the bible – while I still read it. I used to reason, that if indeed demons and devils existed, and if they indeed attacked people, as was related in scriptures and church testimonies, then very possibly, even ghosts did exist. But what I never seemed to make sense of, was how such seemingly evil creatures, could confront such divine people like Jesus or walk in heaven with the holiest of angels and even commune with God, as in the story of Job. Evil seemed all too divinely planned to be it. Those and similar concerns, were the dominant, questionable aspects of religion, that caused so much bile to spill, as we debated for or against religion and spirituality, amongst my peers at campus.

I recalled a time when one girl called Jammy, who was a Jehovah's Witness, visiting rooms to share their colourful, prophetic literature of a said oncoming, near-future paradise on earth – in which apparently, lions would no more exhibit their carnivorous, beastly traits, but in which even rabbits could dine with them – on what? She had not answered. "That's blasphemy!" one student in the room had reacted, to which, when she asked "Why?" he had boldly replied, "For men to behave as women, and women as men, or for lions to eat grass and for there to be no more difference between meaningfully different natures, is to claim that what is currently existing, is God's worst mistake!" Even I did not understand his attack, and the girl, clearly outsmarted, had dismissively handed out just one other set of brochures, and excused herself from the thralls of unbelievers.

After she had gone however, I turned to the one, Kakinda, and asked him to explain his objections, "for our benefit" I added. It turned out, the gist of what he believed, was that evil, or the negativity that seemed to permeate the world, was a very essential part of nature, and definitely a hallmark of God's own great wisdom and diversity. "As the mightiest, most majestic of sky creatures is designed to master scheming and predating as part of its very nature, perhaps, what seems to the prey as madenningly dangerous evil in its character, is but the necessity required to keep a certain balance in the creator's own masterpiece." Maddeningly bizarre,

somewhat sound reasoning from Kakinda – more often than not, we begun to gain rapport. It was then that I started to seriously question the plausibility of many religious claims, especially those of Christians and several mainstream religious paths; doctrines that started to seem much anti-natural, unforgivably exotic and in many ways than not, biased towards hidden agendas such as inscrutable dogma – stuff I began to be very averse to, paths I wasn't much ready to accept anymore.

“You see, the biggest problem with scripture is also its strength – ambiguity and heavy use of allegory and metaphor; it can be bent or interpreted from many, even contradictory perspectives, depending on who or why it is being quoted. And so, unlike the philosophy and science texts we study and scrutinise using logic and intuition, religious texts have been used, but mostly abused, for reasons often serving the interests of those who could read, interpret and explain. For as long as we rely on a text that is allegedly divinely inspired, we must accept that as beings with intellects that are even a little lower than the divine, we are bound to suffer from the consequences of accepting another's account and interpretation of the mystery we can't fully contain.” Those were the words of a usually silent, but very intelligent friend of mine – Tetu, who was the only serious student of theology and scripture that I ever met, and whose wisdom greatly influenced my subsequent approach to all written faiths.

On the other hand, I had known as a child, though not directly, that our father had once been one of the prominent native diviners of a class called the *Abarara*. But that our mother – the real one, had coerced him to convert to Christianity at some point. But, though no one at home ever talked about it, other kids and even some adults in other homes, would sometimes claim our father was still a feared and respected man by many, especially by virtue of his past – about which I knew very little, and which past I'd never gotten the guts to ask anyone in the family about. *But I need to know about these things, someday...* I assured myself.

\* \* \* \* \*

As I drifted about in my own thoughts and fears, the device, which I was earnestly holding onto, vibrated in my hands, causing me to jump in shock! I had accidently switched it into vibration-only mode. She was

calling me, at last! I picked and spoke more impatiently than I had sounded a while back.

“Sorry, I tried calling back, and you weren’t picking. Until someone picked and told me you’d used their phone to call”

“Yeah, I have no *AT* anymore, and was almost leaving, on foot that is.”

“No! Please don’t. I’m on my way there.” She seemed not the least bit afraid.

“Where to? The abandoned church?”

“Abandoned? I’m coming over, just walk towards the church and wait there. I’ll be with you soon.”

“How long?”

“Ignatius! Have faith for once!” She whispered, and then laughed, timidly.

“Okay. But did you say there was a cemetery near-by? I don’t want to be walking on the wrong grounds...” She giggled some more, making me realize it actually hadn’t been her who’d mentioned it to me, but nevertheless, she sort of asserted it when she replied; “You’re the man Ignatius! I bet ghosts would fear you as well...” I knew she was being sarcastic, but I was freaking seriously concerned.

“I’ll wait,” I replied, “just hurry my dear.” I did not want to exhibit fear on our very first, undoubtedly ill-timed date, but could not mask it away from myself too long. I hang up, and then walked a little closer towards the church, all the while, looking from side to side, for where evidence of a necropolis might be.

It was not long, however, before I saw the screen light up again and also vibrate - briefly so, before going dark once more. *She’s beeping me, yet I told her I have no credit?* I looked about, believing she had arrived. I paced about haphazardly, not knowing which direction she might manifest from. I wished the new occupants of the church had been more benevolent, and at least installed solar lighting outside their iffy edifice, at least, that would reassure paranoid visitors like me, there was something holy, haunting the place. I looked in the direction we had arrived from, and did not see a sign. My eyes, having sort of adapted to the night, could see more clearly than before. I tried scanning every pocket of darkness about me, and wasn’t seeing much to be hopeful about. Then my phone vibrated and lit once more; she was still just beeping me? “She’s crazy”, I murmured to myself, wishing I had a means of zapping her head for playing pranks on me. I actually looked at the phone screen to be sure. It was rather disappointing – wasn’t her that had been beeping me but Dan! *Oh damn! Better drink and return home brother, I might not return very soon!* I didn’t bother to call back – well, I could not even call back! I put the phone back into my pocket, and

waited, impatiently... I knew she was approaching, but from where, I had no clue whatsoever. I smiled and was furious in the same stance, I wanted to revenge on her.

As I took another uninspired step in no particular direction, I heard something move behind me, and then another and another! I could have screamed or jumped into sudden flight, but before I could decide which to do first, I felt warm fingers touch the nape of my neck hesitantly; I knew it could be no one else – not unless the fingers had felt cold!

I did not immediately turn around – as the movement had stopped, but reached behind with my right hand, and tried to feel whoever it was – and I was convinced it must be my long-awaited host. In a movie, probably, a bad one that is, my fingers might have touched pointy teeth or some slithery, ominous tongue, but, instead, I felt a smoothed face, which felt cold, but which was soon accompanied by the sensation of warmth, as her breath brushed the insides of my palm. As I turned around to face her, sure of what I would find, my heart raced recklessly, and I did not know what to say first. It was not some cunning succubus I beheld, but Trudy, the girl who had made me dare, like I had never ever done in my life before.

We did not talk; I reached out for her, and gave her one big, sustained bear hug. Her heart was beating faster than I had anticipated, but not like mine – I was still racing. We had finally met. She was pressing hard against my chest, and yet I felt like there was something yet to arrive. Her head was rested upon me – she was slightly shorter than me, and her breath was tickling my left ear. At first, she did not hold me back; her hands were just playing with her jacket, in-between us. But after a while, she slowly reached out with both hands, and held me even closer, pulling me from the sides of my back, towards herself. Time seemed to slow down, and for the first time since leaving Dan, I realised how long it had taken for us to finally meet. I wished the moment would never cease. I pulled slightly away from her, wanting to look into her face, even in that vague atmosphere. I felt calm, at last.

“You took longer than you said,” I accused her, quickly adding, “Though, as you said, the ghosts feared to dare come close, so I was okay, but lonely.” She chortled, her hands resting upon my shoulders, as she looked into my face, as though trying to search for something deeper, behind the veil of those words I had just dropped.

“You really can risk!” she said lightly, in that voice I had been so dying to hear once more. I smiled back at her. I wanted to see her face more clearly once more, and so dropped my hand from her, and reached into my pockets for the phone. I pulled it out, slowly, unlocked the screen, tapped on the flashlight icon – I didn’t care if it would attract attention anymore, and trained the light on her. I wanted to study her.

“Duh! Turn it off please” she begged, but I would not, not until I had taken in all of her face, her neck, her... she was wearing a nightdress under the jacket! The sight of it, flipped some often dormant switches on, in the depths of my head. She let go of me, and tried running off, but I held her right arm just in time to draw her back.

“A true chemist needs and loves to study the perceptible aspects of their specimen, just to be sure, there’s room to apply some chemistry.”

She laughed, and dismissively replied, “In that case, I guess I’m the wrong specimen, look somewhere else please...”

I continued to take her in, studying the embroidery on the hem and the faint paisley patterns near the waist and towards her bosom. The dress was slightly translucent under that light, and at last, seeing as I was picking up more than I probably should, she grabbed the phone and tucked it inside her jacket.

“No no no, that’s not allowed. It’s not part of the science!” She told me, shaking her head from side to side, and laughing louder.

“Really?”

I pulled her closer again, letting her hand drop as I held her by the back of her neck, and drew in to smell more of that lily-like fragrance she was wearing. She did not resist it, but instead dropped her gaze from me, and onto the ground. For the first time, she seemed shy! I had no words to express just what I was feeling, I smelled her face, as my eyes closed to the rest of that insipid night. She was breathing heavily again, and my heart was starting to race once more. I parted the lips slowly, carefully, and reaching out with that tongue, tasted her cheeks, making her develop goose pimples everywhere I could sense it. She pulled out the hand from between us, and not letting go of the phone, hugged me as we progressed into a wet, longing and amorous deep kiss. The night seemed to turn into day, for I felt like some sort of light had suddenly been turned on inside of me. We kissed so passionately, and only much later did I wonder how she had ever learned to kiss so wonderfully. *No girl’s ever kissed me that well...* No, not even the glamorous Loyce, who had once let me kiss her, before she decided to deny me that affection ever again.

I felt her hands reach into my T-shirt, and play with my skin, making me shiver slightly. She giggled at my reaction, as we continued to kiss and immerse into each other.

“Does your girlfriend know about this?” she asked, totally sweeping me by surprise. *Really? At this time?* I did not stop touching her, one of my hands was stroking her hair, as the other caressed the insides of her spine from inside the jacket, only lightly touching her, through the fabric of her dress. I was looking for an answer, a good one that is... it took a while to get one, and I wasn't sure if it was the right one.

“At this moment, even if she did exist, I guess you'd have already erased her into oblivion.”

She let go of me. I knew I had said the wrong thing... *damn!* I did not try to hold onto her this time; she paced away from me by about three steps, looked around, and then walked towards the church. “Oh, so what now?” I wondered silently. I stayed standing there, pondering all the wrong things that might have crossed her mind after my hesitation and the answer I had given to her biting question. *She's probably read your mind already, damn fool! She knows about Loyce, Jena and all those other babes that have ensnared you before!* I did not want to believe any of it though, and so I started walking after her, unsure why she had chosen to retreat towards the church and not back home?

“It's safer here”, she said, as I hesitantly approached where she was standing, leaning against the wall of that building I had been avoiding all along. *So, that was it?*

“Oh, so you finally admitted to fearing this place?” she asked, kind of surprised.

“Did I?”

She turned the phone back on, and flipped through the icons as I stood next to her, more afraid of what further trouble I might evoke, now that she was browsing my phone, and least afraid of the troubled venue she had chosen for our first date. But, as she went through the call logs, which only went as far back as the evening before, I felt reassured and secure. Luckily, and without having anticipated this, I had cleared the phone's call and SMS logs after being frustrated by Loyce's final gimmicks the night before, so there wasn't any incriminating evidence she would find.

“Who's 'Danny'?” she asked, not threateningly so.

“Daniel? That’s my only, big brother.” I felt a wave of relief sweep over me, seeing as there wasn’t much in the logs to cause any further trouble, unless she thought me gay. I silently laughed at that thought.

I felt the night start turning slowly cold, I wanted to take the phone from her, but...

“Do you mind if I look at your gallery?” she further asked. That one, I was not so sure about, at all! Not that I had any pics that might lead to an impeachment, but sometimes I kept fancy, sexy pin-ups that I had downloaded from the web. Around fellow boys, I typically would not feel fidgety browsing them, but not with girls, especially not in such a time as we were in. But I did not want to show any more hesitancy, and so, immediately, almost subconsciously, replied; “There might be some pics that will make you jealous, but yeah, please go ahead.”

“Hmmm, let me guess,” she said, making me want to complete her phrase... “Multiple, hotter girlfriends, all naked?” but no, she didn’t say that, instead, she said something unbelievably closer to the truth:

“I believe all boys keep porn on their phones. As long as it’s not their girlfriends.” *Damn! She’s a fucking witch!* I laughed in shock of how true her claim was, and as she opened the gallery app, even the little defenses I thought I still had in me seemed to fade away in her presence. *What doesn’t she already know?* Perhaps I was over mesmerised. However, as she flipped through the mostly uninteresting campus pics of boisterously posing friends saying goodbye, and many pics of the buildings of Makerere that I had taken during my final week, I felt a trace of hope return to me – she didn’t seem much interested in going any further than that.

“These were your classmates?”

“Yeah, most of them, though some are from different courses, some in different years than me.”

*Where is cupid’s stupefying arrows when you most need them?* I wished I could charm her off that phone somehow... I needed the *other* her. Then, as though there might be a more revealing folder, she pressed the ‘back’ button, and opened yet another gallery! *No no, please...* But I decided to stay calm. Whatever...

That one was the folder named “Downloads”, and it definitely had more to reveal – about my browsing habits and fascination for hentai especially. And no, I rarely cleaned that one.

“This one’s exciting!” She admitted, slowly navigating the JPEGs, PNGs and GIFs. I was praying there be no “awkwardly disturbing” GIFs, especially.



A meme about the silvery-mercury, bullet-shaped futuristic Mercedes Benz of the F015 kind that read, “Earthlings, some cars are definitely more equal than others!” She did not seem that fascinated by the car, I’d wished she’d asked something about it, but she just flipped forward. A red, almost bloody, undoubtedly Photoshop-enhanced sunset that might turn any valentine decors bland. She smiled at that one, but didn’t comment still. She flipped through many more pics; more cars, a house, gardens, a pic of some Chinese friend, an LSD molecular structure with the label “God-Particle” – she probably didn’t get that joke, as many people possibly wouldn’t. Then she came to the first of the gals. She paused, as I had expected.

It was the photo of a white model, manipulated to look all black, and the eclectic piece was called “portrait in black and colour”, and had been created by some artist called “Alba”. It’s not the unnatural blackness that struck Trudy, but the lemonish, highly contrasting shades she wore, which also matched an equally stunning, ochre flower in her palms.

“It’s a gorgeous picture”, she affirmed, “and I love the shades...”

“I loved the whole composition,” I replied, wondering how long she’d linger over it. She flipped on.

A LOL cat picture, with one half depicting Jack and Rose, in that legendary pose of romance, as she looked out onto the sea, upon the Titanic, in *Titanic*, him, looking at her, his hands wrapped around her waist. The meme had the caption at the top, “I’m flying, Jack! I’m flying!” and then in total lol manner, a grim looking feline, cast right below them responds, “WTF, you’re on a boat.” It got both of us cracking, so loudly I fearfully shut up when I realized we were not in a place I would regard safe to drool over lols and lmaos.

“Hey, Trudy, the folks around here will be wondering...” I started.

“Laughing thieves”, she said, “that’s what I would think.”

“Not zombies?”

“Only in Hollywood I would say...”

She flipped on, noticeably losing interest in proceeding with her screening of my browsing psychology.

An Alan Moore quote, an epic fail pic, the Ugandan flag, “The Cation Ions Are ‘Pawsitive’” – yet another chemistry joke, cast as a lol cat, that she didn’t sniff. Another fancy, modern home picture from Houzz, a portrait

of Kasparov, and then, just as she was about to close the app, she came onto the one photo I most adored in all of the most recent downloads...

“Fulani girl - Nigeria”, was a curious, almost enchanting portrait of a most amazing, naturally beautiful, simple African model – arguably the greatest I’d ever seen on the Internet up to that time. The model overflowed with an expression that reeked of detachment, yet seemed so full of emotion. And she looked not just truly African, but very beautifully so. Trudy must have felt jealous at last.

“That’s a lot of jewelry!” she said, in reaction to the pic.

“I wouldn’t really call it that, it’s just plain beads, carefully arranged to make her really stunning. Much like you would do, if you wore our native *enkwanzi* or *butiti*.”

“I do have them, but rarely wear them anymore,” she replied.

“Oh really?” I knew beyond doubt, she had adored her as well. She closed the app, handed the phone back to me, and added, “I will show you some of my pics someday. I make my own jewellery, and it’s really cool I believe.”

*Can’t wait to see...*

She turned away from me, but did not walk off, just stood there. I drew closer, from the rear, and wrapped myself about her. I was feeling cold, but she seemed to be feeling colder. For a while, we did not speak, as I traced my hands over her tummy, up and down, lightly stroking the bottom of her breasts. She took a deep breath and seemed to go stiff, then she reached out with her left hand, and started stroking my thighs behind her. I was feeling the blood rushing down from my head to every part she was touching, and somewhere against her otherwise warm butt, I felt my manhood turn barbaric, in response to her subtle, but awakening movements. A hand reached into the top of her dress, and for the first time, felt the bare skin of her more coveted self. “It’s happening...” a voice in my head proclaimed.

Her movements, rubbing and gyrating against my crotch increased in intensity, as I tightened closer onto her. I felt my legs tremble somewhat, and for a moment felt a corresponding shudder sweep across her body as I stroked her nipples, while licking and sucking on the cold tips of her ear lobes from behind. She gasped, and her hand left the outsides of my pants – perhaps to venture deeper. She did not turn to face me, but rather, continued, with her evidently impatient hand, undoing my belt, the

buttons – which disturbed her for a while, until I reached out and undid them myself, as well as the fly. I was more than hard, I was terrified everywhere, as she reached into my undies, and got hold of my nature. The feeling of her warm grip was unlike anything else I had felt before. It was my turn to gasp for air. She stroked gracefully, and started turning around. I bit my lip unintentionally, and it hurt.

“Have you ever fallen in love?” she asked me.

“Yes, a long while back.” I didn’t care anymore...

My hand sought her blessing from below. I lifted the dress with my left arm, and caressed in a nervous manner, her inner thighs, enjoying every moment of it. I loved how she would shudder as I touched her in those places.

“Do you think love can happen spontaneously?” she asked further, continuing to stroke me, in a most delightful rhythm, occasionally just gripping and pressing on me. I felt her start to get wet, as a baby finger traced the outlines of divine territory.

“It can.” I replied, starting to kiss her again. Her lips were trembling, it seemed as though she had never been kissed? I held onto her tongue, and stroked it using mine. She tasted something like an almost ripe banana, I felt like eating her, but I knew it would hurt. She played against the ceiling of my mouth with the tip of her tongue, making butterflies flap inside of my head. I withdrew and chuckled, unable to take it longer. She was really remarkable!

“I’ve never been in love,” she testified, falling onto my chest, and licking my neck, as her arms reached lower to stroke my thighs. I turned her about, making her lean against the unforgivingly cold and irregular wall.

“I’ll share all I have,” I said, falling to my knees before her, as I reached inside of her dress to the back, and started stroking her rear, generous curves.

“I’ve never felt this way before”, I added, as I lifted the hem and started kissing her navel and belly. She was stroking my bristly hair, and it felt more soothing than any form of combing I had ever tried. My fingers were playing with her, and it felt to me like dipping fingers into warm, richly oily, peanut paste. The kinky person in me wanted to taste them, but my tongue knew better... I went directly there. She moaned, and called my name, pleasantly and with desperation. I paused a bit, every now and then, to let her regain stamina – I would feel her legs quiver as though she were about to fall over. She begged me to stop, but would I?

“Just close your eyes honey, and allow yourself to travel to a paradise of your longing.”

“Ooooh, I can't stand”, she pleaded.

“Try it”, I replied, letting my tongue probe deeper, my lips and chin getting more anointed in-between her legs. I was feeling something get wildly stiffy and riotous in-between mine. *Do it! Do it!* Screamed the impatient angel inside of my head. But I knew, from my little experience, that it was always better to wait a little longer...

I felt something like tiny drops of rain fall onto my busy hands, I had been rolfing her breasts incessantly all the while. I paused when I felt something wet seep through the fabric where I least expected it. She was moaning, and I was thinking, *is it starting to drizzle? Could it be a blessing from the heavens?* I let go of her oyster, and rose upwards to meet her face. My pants had fallen hopelessly, but my undies were still on. *Is it really raining?* No! She was crying! *Oh, not now my dear!*

Whisperingly, and rather confused, I asked her, “Oh sorry. Have I offended or hurt you somehow?” I didn't know what to make of it, as I had never heard of, nor experienced such a reaction to oyster eating. She taught me better...

“I've never felt this good in my entire life,” she swore, caressing me everywhere as she held me tight against her body. I felt both privileged and thrilled – I wanted so much to believe and understand her.

“It made you cry?” I asked, adamantly.

“I've heard about it from a friend, but had never experienced it,” she said, kissing me lightly as she resumed caressing me where she probably knew I had my most delicate chemical reactor. I responded by kissing her on the neck, as my hands let go of her lower body, instead holding her head in position and providing cushion against the relentlessly hard wall.

“You are amazing Trudy...” I confided my sincere feelings to her.

“Thank you,” she replied.

*Fool, you carried no condom with you!* My conscience was rioting, and indeed, I realised how unthinking I had been. What was I to do? All signs showed she wanted me to go on and do it, but I did not feel it was wise to do it unprotected - not even with her, who'd claimed to have “never experienced it.” *Oh damn! What's wrong with you young folks!* I wanted to scratch my head, but she was already scratching my hair, differently though, in anticipation of what was likely to happen next. She must have sensed the tenseness in me, as I started to go limp, where I'd stood like cwezi rocks before.

“What’s wrong dear?” she asked, continuing to emphatically caress me. I was losing it.

“I’m sorry, but I forgot to carry a condom.” I felt ashamed saying those words, really ashamed of myself for having been so stupid and shortsighted. She fell silent for a while, and slowly ceased her endeavour to keep me going.

“Don’t you trust me?” she finally asked, the question, carrying an evidently very heavy implication.

“No, not in that way!” I instantly replied, knowing what the same would have meant to me. I knew very well what the use of a condom typically implied – the desire to stay safe, from HIV/AIDS especially. But there was also the desire for contraception or the need to keep other STDs aloof. Thoughts were crossing my mind... *Nowadays, more people seem less worried about the unpopular STDs, some of which are not even lethal, but which for me, like any STD, are unwelcome just like the chief celebrity of death herself, HIV. This shit can get horrendous*, so I felt. But, no, at the same time, I felt I wanted to trust her, and I thought I should. *You have already risked too much*. I got reassured. I could risk further, or lust got the better side of me... *You can’t fight it*. Luckily, or rather assuringly, something in me convinced me she was safe.

“I trust you Ignatius,” she said, in a pleading tone, “I know you are safe, but you should trust that I would never wish to hurt you.” *Oh dear, you don’t have to...*

I hugged her like I would a child, and assured her, “I definitely trust you. I have to,” as though some commandment would get utterly shattered if I had said otherwise.

“You know you don’t have to”, she whispered, her arms wrapped around me as well.

If someone had been watching us; say some stray nightdancer having no better couple to prey on, or a thief in search of easier targets, or the priest’s ghost in utter envy or one of those sleeping folks, lying or sitting somewhere close, likewise excited about the unfolding romance in their otherwise quiescent domain, they would definitely regard us as a pathetic lot at that moment.

I started stroking her once more, kissing her and feeling her heart beat almost in sync with mine. I had one final problem though; I wasn’t really comfortable doing anything more daring from the pavements of that

unlucky Catholic church, and even worse, in the possible sight of whomever was capable of seeing us in the dark. *It must be possible for someone to be seeing all of this*, the voice assured me, and I concurred.

“Can we move somewhere else?” I inquired, unsure there was any better option than what she had already chosen. It was also cold, and it seemed as though clouds were indeed starting to form in the heavens above us. She saw me look at the gray sky, and responded, “I would have suggested home,” she was letting go of me, “but my grandmother would kill us.” *Oh, her pesky grandmother!*

“I’d not even remembered about her by the way! Is it even safe for you to be here still? It’s been almost an hour I guess.” I was now really concerned, however that did not seem to be her real concern.

“I made sure she’s fast asleep,” she said.

“How? Like sneaking out on tip-toe?”

She laughed, and suggested better, “I used her own charms on her.”

*Charms?*

“Like, real charms or...?”

“Anha...” she replied, nodding frantically, while smiling. I did not believe her.

“You’re sure you used magic? Is that even possible?” I must have sounded too naïve to her. She passed me, and strolled ahead of me, towards what seemed like the back of the church, and it seemed even creepier that side! *Wow! She admits to using charms – she really is spooky sometimes! And now, is leading me towards the darker side? This is getting out of hand.... Somewhat.* She paused, turned to see if I had been following all along – I had stayed grounded in the same place she had left me, not knowing how much more I was going to have to dare. But I was kind of spellbound.

“It’s fine *Igni*”, she said, calling me by a diminutive I had never shared with her, and which only my closest friends and family used! *She’s in your mind.*

“As in, following you that way?”

“We don’t have to stay here, there’s a better place inside.” She was so sure, that I could not really doubt her even if I wanted to. *Go on then...*

I pursued her, as she continued onwards. I thought I heard something pace behind me, and I quickly turned around, but saw nothing, and so convinced myself it must have been my shaken imagination.

\* \* \* \* \*

The back of the building wasn't anything like the front. There was a smaller, shorter annex, directly appended onto the bigger structure, though it seemed to be equally old, judging by the look of the exterior walls, as I lit the way ahead of me. I finally caught up with her, but chose to stay behind her, watching in awe, as she confidently maneuvered with the lock of the only other door I had seen leading into the church – this one smaller than the one I had seen before. Finally, she managed to open it, so that the door retreated into a highly suspect, and definitely out-of-bounds room, but she didn't seem at all concerned. She turned around and signaled for me to follow her inside. I hesitated a bit, then looking at the gardens and other indistinguishable surroundings in various directions about the place, saw it fit to better get indoors.

Before entering though, I paused for a while at the door, inspecting the nature of the lock, and then looking out into the dark once more. Trudy moved closer and touched my chest, near my heart, in a gesture I did not totally understand. And with the light of my phone illuminating her adorable face, assured me in a coy, almost babyish tone;

“Love is stronger than fear,’ I once read, and I believe it will keep us safe, always.”

I looked into her glowing eyes, and felt kind of magically reassured. I was the one who pulled the door back into place, as she immediately held me again, and started kissing me herself. Whatever she had done, I felt no fear anymore, but I sensed something that made me feel we were not alone anymore!

# SECTION 3: THE BLACK SHRINE

Invisible,  
How magnificent you are!  
Some will mock you  
Others will be ensnared by you  
Others are but curious about you  
Many are just blind to you  
And then, once in a while  
Comes one, that knows how  
to grip one of your inscrutable hands  
And paint it with colour,  
So the blind can finally see with their shallow eyes  
In what colors, the shaman chose to paint  
Your invisible, but palpable hands.

A Great Circle,  
That's what you are  
Inside of which, the shaman, his client and their victim  
All reside.  
But, like any circle,  
Within you, dwell an infinity of smaller circles.  
All dwell within, but there are differences therein;  
Some seek to approximate the Great Circle  
Some draw their circles, away from the center of the Great Circle  
Others fear to cast any circle within the Great Circle  
Some feel trapped within the Great Circle  
And the unfortunate, are further trapped  
Within the circles, drawn by others, likewise trapped  
Within the Great Circle.  
And still others, will never see, nor understand  
That there's a Great Circle  
Within which, everyone else is likewise trapped.



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## CHAPTER VIII

“We are more than fine here, aren't we?” she asked, holding my cheeks in her palms, and lightly tasting my lips. I held out the phone, so the flashlight could illuminate more of the place. I wanted to study the interior of this rather forbidden hideout she had led me into. There wasn't much to see on the floor about us, and neither above us on the ceiling, but the walls seemed to have many interesting things to say and show...

There was a huge red fish, drawn in outline, on the wall directly opposite the door via which we had entered, and adjacent to this fish, on both the right and left, knelt two boyish cherubs bowing in adoration. It immediately reminded me of the insignia I had seen before, on certain Catholic regalia, but whose meaning I could not tell besides memory of the two fishes and five loaves. *It also looks something like a gate to something divine*, suggested a voice in my head, but that did not make much sense, so I just ignored it.

“Yes,” I said to her, “it seems safer, though it also looks like the owners of this place wouldn't be very amused with us being here illegally, at this particular hour of the night.” She just laughed and looked where my gaze had been focused – on the giant fish glyph.

My biggest consolation, thinking back to what it had felt like the last couple hours, is that, it wasn't as cold as it had been outside. “It's kinda warm in here. It feels better too, right?” I asked her.

“Yes, we could spend the night here I guess...” she affirmed.

“The night?” I inquired, looking deep into her eyes, whose pupils were dilated and very mesmerizing if not comical.

“Well, I don't know about you, but now that we are here, we might as well make the most of it. After all, you asked for it...” she giggled, and then dropped her arms from me, took a few steps into the room, towards a glazed-glass window that wasn't really letting in any useful light.

My attention turned to the area beyond where she stood. There was a table on the far end of the room, with nothing upon it. She turned around to look at it too, and walked over to it, removing her jacket as she approached it. With the jacket gone, and the light falling upon her disclosed figure, I could not avoid admitting how perfect she looked in that light dress of

white. As she moved, the knickers showing under the translucency, and emphasising the generous behind she possessed, I could not help but gape in awe.

“This,” she said, pointing to the table, and looking back at me, “can do for a bed. What do you think?”

“It’s hard though,” I replied.

“If we turned it upside down maybe, we might use our clothes as cushioning,” she suggested.

*Brilliant!* The suggestion was very welcome, as I was already tired of standing, and had been yearning to lean or sit against something for a while. I walked over to her, and inspected the table with the help of my phone’s handy flashlight, shaking it with my other arm, just to see how stable it was, and then bowed a bit, to look underneath. I didn’t like the idea of us using it closer to the floor, but she knew exactly what she wanted...

“Let’s turn it,” she repeated. I agreed.

I placed the phone on the floor, light facing upwards, and then held one side of the table, as she held the other. We inverted it, so that it became like a bed asking for both a mattress and mosquito net, with its four poles sticking out into the air.

The floor was bare cement, painted over with a darkish-red hue, making it contrast strikingly, with the mostly plain, whitish walls all about. Trudy had been wearing craft sandals, and I saw her take them off, and walk about on bare feet. I showed her the thumbs up, as she threw her jacket into the table’s groove, and then walked to one of the corners, held onto the table’s leg, and then turned her back towards me. “Hmm, let me guess what you are suggesting,” I said, smiling from ear to ear. She started humming a song, and accompanied that with some twerking of her butt, every now and then. I was just laughing, and somewhat feeling shy too. *She is naughty!* “Wish someone could bring us some music. I’ve not danced in a long while...” she said. I was enjoying her drama, but also getting impatient with myself. I moved closer to her, but she heard me approach, and jumped away just in time, teasing me, as she continued to hum jovially.

She bent her knees a bit, held onto her thighs with both hands, and continued her twerking and lousy parody of a dancehall classic I knew so well. I was humming along with her, but instead of dancing, sweeping my palms about her teetering rear.

"It's called *Oye Mi Canto*, right?" I asked, as she rocked harder, that her dress revealed something I was somewhat shy to uncover all along.

"Yep!" she said, "I bet everyone knows this one, but I never cared to learn the lyrics, so I can only do it this way." I was silently gaping at her exposed butt, but in true diva style, she let go of her thighs, and pulled the silky night-dress back down, to cover the knickers and what she had flashed at me. Luckily, or rather unfortunately, the phone's light was starting to dim too – *the battery!* And so, I did what I had not felt bold enough to try just yet...

I removed my jacket too, and threw it where she had thrown hers. She turned around, all smiles, and asked me one question, "Be sincere Ignatius, do you really like me, or do you think I'm just some crazy nut?" I laughed so hard, and just held her arms, pulling her towards me, in a huge, loving embrace. She was definitely a "crazy nut", but I didn't feel like I would rather have her be anything else besides the Trudy she had shown me already.

"Trudy, you are the craziest girl I've ever met, but also the most adorable one too." I was stroking the insides of her back and the curves of her tooshie, finally liberated to devour her without fear. She pulled down my pants, this time lucky that only one button was fastened, and the belt had been loosened already. "I don't really know you well," she whispered, "but you seem very special, and different from all the boys I've seen before. I feel very safe and free with you, I don't know why."

"It's fine dear," I whispered back into her right ear. "This probably means we are in love, and that's usually a good thing."

We were kissing again, furiously this time. As this happened, slowly, a step at a time, we shifted closer and closer to the table, or rather *bed* we had prepared. Using the fingers of my right hand, I started playing with her crotch, feeling as she had gotten wet already, and the cotton of her moistened knickers felt kind of warmer than the rest of her. I was enjoying it...

She felt me feel the divide between her labia, and I felt her legs convulse as she bit on my lower lip, yet again! In that moment, even that little pain felt like a joyous thing to have. My body was all tense and electrified, as she reciprocated my actions, touching between and below my balls, letting her upper wrist toy with my stiffened man. Sometimes I even gasped, or

choked with a little muffled laughter – it felt ticklish, but very pleasurable too. I pushed the front of her knicker to one side of her triangle, and pushed a finger, the little one, inside of her melting lips. But as I did this, she pushed hard against me, and likewise squeezed my penis so hard, I felt all the blood rush to where she was touching. We nearly fell as we somewhat lost balance playing these silly games... She chuckled and then let go of me. I let go of her too, and walked over to where I had placed the phone. The light was getting dimmer, and when I checked the battery, indeed, it showed signs of dying soon, but I wouldn't turn it off. I needed to see her still.

She got the two jackets we had thrown on the table, and laid them out well, though they did not cover it completely. She then stepped into the table, and gestured for me to join her. I wanted nothing else but that. I kicked-off my open shoes, and walked towards her. She knelt upright as I stepped in, and as I got closer, she started pulling down my pants. I did it for her – I pulled them all the way down, and removed them completely from both legs. Meanwhile, she removed her knickers too, but did not undress. *I like you like that...* Soon as I removed my pants, it felt a bit cold, and so I resisted removing my T-shirt. I then knelt in front of her, our tummies almost touching, as she reached down with her left hand, and holding my rod herself, let it play with her tiny, pointy clit, as I looked down at what she was doing, enjoying every moment of it. Damn... I took a deep breath, and moving my hands upwards, inside her loose dress, eventually cupped my palms about her virgin breasts, feeling for those stiffened nipples.

“I can't wait,” she whispered to me. I did not speak. I slowly pushed inside of her, feeling as her lips parted to let me get inside. “Oh God...” I murmured, as I had not been inside a girl in a very very long time! She held my naked butt and waist, sometimes wanting to pull away, only to pull me deeper after. “You are incredible,” I whispered in her ear, as I licked her ear lobe and felt as she gyrated down there. “Thank you Igni... Thank you soo much,” she whispered back, tasting my cheeks and neck as she did so.

“I want to experience every aspect of you,” I whispered to her, as I continued to rock her slowly, but steadily. She held the back of my head, and traced fingers along my nape.

“You're killing me dear...” she murmured, as she thrust herself against me harder, and squeezed my butt with one hand. The rhythm was

intensifying, and I knew she might make me cum all too soon! I pulled out of her, against her will, and instead leaned back against my feet, the wetness of my animal making me shiver as the coldness rushed to kiss me there.

“What is it dear?” she asked, possibly puzzled as to why I’d pulled out yet things were getting even sweeter. I just smiled, as I saw her touch herself with her fingers.

“Let’s play it slow,” I answered, “you are too sweet to be rushed.”

“Oh really?”

I nodded, and then reached out for the phone, which was beeping to warn about the dying battery.

“I don’t think we need the light,” said Trudy, as I sulked at the warning flashing on the screen – “Re-charge, or your phone will soon go off.”

“But I love looking at you!”

She laughed.

“Well, we could have used mine, but if we both run out of battery, it might not be good. Plus, I didn’t charge mine either, there’s no power at home.”

I thought about it for a while, then a sinister idea occurred to me. Trudy, still playing with her stuff, saw me beaming with joy, and then asked, in a comical tone, “What’s it now my hot chemist?” I did not tell her I was about to indulge in a fetish of mine, she might not have understood. Instead, I suggested to her something remotely related...

“Do you mind me doing that for you?” I asked. She looked at me, a bit clueless, and then finally got the tip. She got my pants and rolled them into a little pile behind her. Then lowered herself, and lay on her back, resting her head on the pillow of jeans. I cheered her, and then joked; “If this were the last bit of light tonight, I’d rather spend it looking at your flower.”

“But you’re a sick boy Igni,” she giggled, “and I think you also need to visit a pharmacist too.” *I am surely sickly in love with you my beautiful psycho...*

“We’ll see about that tomorrow,” I replied, and then lowered myself between her legs, using the last bit of light, to study her palace in more detail than I had ever been blessed to see in any biology class or internet search result.

“This, is amazing...” I told her, as I proceeded to play with her clit, and stick my tongue’s tip all around her pulsating lips. I knew she loved it – she had already proved me right.

\* \* \* \* \*

Somewhere during that detour, I discovered something I'd never tried before. It happened as I ate her jelly-like clam, all light finally gone, and my fingers caressing and exploring the wetness flowing out of her, down to her other hole, and then between the bulbous butts, onto the jacket below. I touched something that I had never thought sane or safe to touch – her butthole. Oh God, you should have heard how she sighed and moaned when I did that. *Is this a G-spot?* I was wondering in my mind. It was crazy. As with all positive feedback, it reinforced itself, as I didn't stop, but instead licked her even deeper, all the while playing with that spot, and even sticking a finger inside, causing her to convulse and shudder, as she hit her first climax of the night.

“Go on sweetheart! Please don't stop...” she cried as she pushed against my face, and thrust my head into herself. *You've struck the right chords damn boy!* I wanted to fuck her at that point, but thought better – let her orgasm first, then I can join her on the second one later. *How come no one ever told me about this sweet spot?* I wondered, as I used my other hand to stroke her breasts, which she soon grabbed and stuck inside her mouth, suckling on me like a very hungry babe. *“These things are forbidden knowledge, and sex is a very big taboo for the average person,”* answered a voice in my head. Feeling the way I felt in that moment, and the way Trudy kept moaning and gasping, I knew that if exploring forbidden things in sex were indeed illicit, I would be ready to break all the rules and die for exploring her. I had never felt so liberated to enjoy sex like that night. It was like I had been a virgin all my life – perhaps, a secondary virginity of some sort, just like I had established hers to be.

After her climax, I thought she would want us to pause for a while, but instead, she pushed back from me, the jacket where her butt had rested all wet with saliva and her streams. She asked me to step away a bit, and then she turned it around, then flipped it over, so the wet part was down, below where her head had rested before.

“Oh damn”, she said, “you have given me something I'd never expected to experience in life.”

“A wet jacket under a roof?” I replied sarcastically.

She held my shoulders with both hands, and then pushed me backwards, compelling me to lie down, not so different from what she had been doing before.

“Something like that,” she said, “and for such an amazing experiment, I want to give you the best I can offer right now.” That made me blush, but it was dark, and so she'd not see the effect of her words on me. I was very eager to taste her best indeed...

My head rested on one of the horizontal bars of the inverted table, and though I did not mind it at first, it quickly got intolerable, so that I begged her to wait a little, as I arched forward to reach for the jeans.

“Oh sorry my love,” she said, realising she had not passed me the pillow. She grabbed it, and placed it behind my head, also pushing backwards a bit, so that I finally laid back supine, my entire body fitting inside of the table's groove.

“I wish I could look at you my dear”, I whispered as she sat right on top of me, and started rocking and riding me in a naughty, but sensual manner. Her butts were still wet, and she had not stopped oozing with oil. I felt her grip and then release me, as she reached out with her hands, and played lots with me under her galvanizing butt. *Truly forbidden stuff!*

“Ooooh!” I cried, finding it hard to even swallow anymore.

“Just close your eyes, touch me anywhere, and see with your crazy mind...” she answered me back. I was already imagining things, very impossible things!

We fucked. We laughed, we cried, we made the sweetest love I had ever experienced. And the really crazy thing about her is that she never was too silent during all of this. She would occasionally pause, and whisper something funny or dirty to me, and then rock on even harder. One very naughty thing she suggested, and which was again another very novel thing to me, was her desire to help me prolong and suspend my ejaculation for as long as I desired.

“How? I mean, how can you stop me from reaching orgasm when I've been soo worked like this?”

I was about to be proved totally naïve!

She laughed, paused her rhythm, and then got off of me. *I'd almost cum! Do your shit witchy faerie, quickly!* I relaxed.



“I swear, I’ve never done this before, but was told about it by one of my aunties. You know, we traditional girls still get instructed about giving pleasure to our men as part of the mandatory education of an African girl child.” *That sounds very unlikely*, I thought, *how many families still do these things today?* But she knew her stuff so well, I even felt envious of whoever she had fucked before I’d shown up.

“It’s hard to explain,” she went on, “but let’s try it. I’ll show you how this works.”

“Like squeezing my sphincter muscles?” I asked, eager to prove I’d read about such a technique for those who desire to masturbate longer, or train themselves to hold a full bladder for long.

“No, not really.”

She turned around, and then sat on my chest. *Somewhat heavy, but fine*. Next, she then held my dude in her palms, stroking it as she added warm saliva to what was already slippery and hard. *In another life, she might have been a porno star!* I laughed inside, as I held her butt. *Oh fuck!*

“Damn! Trudy, you are going to make me cum inside of your mouth!” and true, I was feeling it draw nearer and nearer. That was when she did her genius trick! Just when I screamed that I was cumming, and as my body shook with rapture, she had already done what she had not cared to explain to me – pressing hard with her fingers, between my ball sack and other hole, she magically caused me to orgasm, yet I did not ejaculate! I shook with delight, as she likewise experienced yet another high; my fingers, not two, but a couple of them, doing to her more justice than I had done before.

When she got off me, and turned around to kiss me with her real lips, lying on top of me, both of us stretched out, I only had one big question to ask; “How the fuck did you do that?” I asked, because, before she came to me, she searched about for her phone, and shining the light where her lips had been, proved to me that despite me having experienced orgasm, I had not jizzed in her mouth as insane dudes in porno love to do.

“I also wasn’t sure it would work, as I’ve known it in theory, and never in practice until now,” she laughed, and then turned the phone off.

We kissed more, and before I knew it, thanks to her crazy art, I was soon turned on yet again, and this time, she told me she wanted us to do it by convention – “Let’s do it how the good missionaries taught us to”.

“Oh Trudy! You are very naughty!” I said, as we turned around, so that I lay on top, and between her legs, as she assumed the position I’d held during the previous leg.

“It’s all for you, sweetie. All for you...”

“I’m loving this moment,” I assured her.

She mentioned something about wanting to die... “Let’s die together,” I told her, not even sure what she had meant by any of that. As we made love, she sucked the fingers of my free hand – the other one giving me support against the wall next to us. “Heaven at last...” she cried, humming some things I couldn’t make sense of.

I stayed inside her, fucking gently, sweetly, savoring each movement, as she thrust into me with her hips, and tugged my butts with her hands, her fingers kneading my flesh as though she were trying to make it softer. She was not the only one experiencing bliss, nor the only one making imaginary journeys during that final moment of love. I’d travelled somewhere else as well, my eyes closed, and visions of a different place had started to form in my mind. For some reason, I was not thinking of Trudy, but Loyce and Zorean! I was in the gardens of millet that Dan had described earlier on. Me and these two ladies were standing there in the circular clearing, all stark naked! I gazed upon Zorean’s nudity, and focusing on the black, dense pubic covering her loins, and the fleshy, bare spot below. She was summoning me with her middle finger, while her right arm played with her breasts. It seemed too obscene, given that she was my step-mum, but I was also aware that I was erect and unresentful.

Loyce was squatting next to her, nude, and was toying with the snake that had been inside Zorean’s pot. It looked ominous, but I was looking at her cleanly shaven below, partly in horror, as she let the snake, which was undoubtedly the very python that Dan had talked of, slither about her, as she held its head between her legs, letting it flick its forked tongue at her visibly erect clit. I was about to scream “danger!” when I jolted back into the church, as I felt spasms of pleasure eat at Trudy’s lower body, in rapid, convulsing succession.

“Oh my God!” she screamed, as I returned to her, feeling her contractions threaten to drive me wild with ecstasy as well. She pulled me closer to her, and we literally ate each other, as I pounded into her even harder; this time, I wanted to do it; I wanted to feel my seed flow into her. She said

something, but it escaped my attention as part of me wasn't even on Earth anymore.

"Excuse me dear?"

I slowed down a bit, and though I could not see her in the dark, felt her look at me.

"Try this..." she said, then reached out with one hand, to touch my forehead – perhaps to check if I was sweating or something? She went on, "We both have desires and dreams, right?"

"Sure," *only the dead aren't dreaming anymore...*

"So, let's both imagine something we like. No, something you really really want in life."

*Hmm, damn, at such a moment as this?! Where's this likely to head surely?* I didn't wish to spoil her fun though...

"Like finding the philosopher's stone?" I joked, not even sure she knew about it.

"Yes, if that's what your biggest dream is, then focus on that."

I was not getting her intent, nor where she was taking me with this odd thought experimenting, and so I had to pause and naively ask, "Sorry, but why do this day-dreaming in the middle of such amazing love-making?" She uttered some muffled laughter, and then vaguely explained.

"Not in the middle, but towards and through the peak of it. Just close your eyes, and see as vividly as you can, what you desire the most, whatever it is – even that *philosopher's stone* is fine. Just hold it in the mind while you hit the sweetest moment of love-making, and maybe, in the future, you will understand why this is a very wonderful thing to do."

*Very strange girl!*

"Okay, what if I'm not sure what I desire the most?" I asked, also sensing that unlike me, she was not pausing the action despite the digression. She was rocking me underneath and playing me like a fiddle.

"No, that's not possible. At any one moment, you would have something you really desire. Just pick one thing, something serious, and use that. Just make sure you can see it in your mind... that's all."

"Hmm, nice. I don't have to tell you, or should I?"

"No, you don't have to. Not now."

"Okay sweet T. You really amaze me with your crazy ideas... let's do this then!"

We fell silent, picking up the momentum from where we'd digressed. Meanwhile, I thought about the things I desired the most, and taking a leap of faith, chose to focus on a single thing I cherished the most – building a remarkable chemical lab, right here in Uganda. It felt odd, thinking about chemicals and white-room processes during sex. With another girl, I might even have lost my boner, but she was not just any girl anymore. She was the girl!

Before long, I was walking through those mythical labs, all the while, feeling the climax approach very fast...

“I love you Igni! I love you so much...” She seemed to be half-pleading, half-laughing, and then let go of my lips, and instead kissed me on the neck, before sinking her teeth into the flesh – not actually biting into, but simulating it, in a manner that was entirely alien to me. It felt so pleasant, it made me get goose-pimples all over! As she did it, I felt her pleasure hit new chords, and I was going somewhere higher as well... I thought I felt blood, but it was her saliva dripping down my neck. *Oh good, she is no vampire.* “I definitely, madly love you too,” I reciprocated.

As we both hit climax, which seemed to last longer than I had ever experienced, I thought I felt a wind blow into my face, even though the room was definitely closed! I cried out her name, repeatedly, as she urged me on. I experienced something else as well; electrifying sensations swept across my body from head to toe, and as her orgasm continued ahead of mine, I heard her, though almost inaudibly, seem to chant some mystifying things – I must have heard a word or two in Runyoro, but most of the others seemed too exotic for my understanding. *Weird girl, saying weird things in love!* I thought she was going insane with ecstasy, but I was feeling intoxicated too.

Her odd crooning soon faded into gasps and cooing, as I fell on top of her, utterly exhausted, but still bewildered by the sort of intimacy we had just returned from.

“This church really has something to it,” I whispered as she stroked my hair, thanking her in a child-like tone, for the amazing love we had just shared.

“No, you really are something else Ignatius,” she whispered back, and then kissed me once more, as I eased myself to her side, starting to acknowledge that I was heavy against her precious body.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Wow! That was unlike anything I’ve ever known.” Trudy whispered in the dark as she reached for something in her jacket. It was a hankie, and she proceeded to wipe my manhood with it, cleaning me dry before she did the same for herself. *Would she keep it?* I wondered...

“Thanks for everything Trudy. It’s been so lovely, and all worth the trouble we went through.”

As I wore my pants once again, and her the knickers, silence dawned upon the room once more. The only thing making a sound was our panting, and the rustle of our clothes and the creaking of that table as we lay down to sleep inside of that improvised bed. As I touched her, I could not help but notice how we were both still sweating, and how we smelled a bit odd after all that marathon action. I let go of her, wanting to catch some air and get away from the stickiness between us. She giggled, and then said something I had thought about earlier, but which I had totally disregarded until when she resurfaced it...

“Do you think I’ll be fine?” she asked.

“Why?” I replied, not yet sure what she was implying.

“I don’t think I was still in my safe days,” she said, before adding, “it was some days earlier, but I don’t know.”

*Oh damn! We can definitely do something about it...*

I thought for a while, without speaking to her about it. She drew closer to me once more, and rested one leg over mine, as we lay there next to each other. We were both looking upwards into the obsidian nothingness.

Finally, I had the best idea I could think of.

“It’s called ‘Levonorgestrel,’ I started, “and it’s sold under various brands in most pharmacies.”

“Family planning pills?” she asked, sounding a bit shocked.

I explained, “These ones work well in emergencies, typically within 72 to about 160 hours of having unprotected sex.” Some of my friends back at the university had used them often, and I knew they were some of the most effective around. Even the university counsellors had once recommended them during a lecture on safe-sex and contraception, given to the entire student body. However, Trudy seemed to be disturbed by the idea, though she was not voicing her concerns. I felt tension slowly fill the air.

“You definitely don’t want a pregnancy on your hands right now, so there’s no other option really.” I told her, seeing as she wasn’t saying anything.

“Actually,” she finally replied, “it’s not the pregnancy that I’m worried about,” she paused, taking a deep breath, before going on, “but, if I’m actually pregnant, not only would it be difficult for me to terminate it, but I doubt my family would let us merely walk away with it.”

*Family... her grandmother?*

“You mean your grandmother?” I asked, becoming the more troubled one.

“Yes, but not just her.”

*And her mother and their relatives... this isn't going well sir...*

It was my turn to take the deep breath, I put my arm around her, my heart beating faster, and me wishing she could touch me like she had done when we first entered the damned church. “You can’t trust her now,” a voice uttered in my head.

“Okay, so what would you suggest then?” I asked her, to see what better plans she might have for both of us, if not just for her own good.

“I’m confused,” she replied.

*It often happens after the act... Eh, Mahano!*

“Let’s rest please,” she begged. I doubted I could rest with such thoughts plaguing my mind, and so I turned to her, and instead urged her to go on and rest. “We need a plan for this Trudy, and don’t think I don’t love you, really I do. But, we need to think clearly about it all... it’s happened all too suddenly, and I trust, I’m the one to blame for all of this.” I testified my sincere concerns at last.

“Love,” she said, paraphrasing her earlier words, “is stronger than fear.” After saying those words, she reached out for me, kissed me goodnight and wrapping both her leg and arm about me, fell silent, as sleep finally sneaked-in on her. I stayed there, gazing into the dark, feeling her body against mine – a girl anyone could die for. I thought of all the risks I’d taken that night, just to get myself into that enigmatic situation? *But think of the pleasure and memories you now hold*, a reassuring thought suggested. I was not sure it was all good; *was it really worth it?* But the better part of me kept assuring me how it was definitely worth it. I was split for conclusions to make, and didn’t know why I couldn’t accept fate and just go to sleep...

Amidst all these thoughts, I felt her hand move slowly towards my chest, and finally settle upon my heart. I literally stopped thinking, and was feeling the warmth of her touch against my skin. Soon, everything stopped making sense, I stopped caring, and just faded into gray...

# CHAPTER IX

I looked at the jackfruit, which I wanted to buy as well, but he would not give me a fair discount. For the Shs3,000 I still had left with me, I decided to just get two more of those large and juicy mangoes and be done with it. He was very happy though, as I would be the customer that would clear his mango stock for the day.

“Thanks for the support!” he said. “When I started this morning, I didn’t know if I would have my stock cleared in a single day, but it seems people have really loved this particular mango breed.” His jolliness said it all; he’d had a good day, and it did not seem like those with stalls near his had fared just as well.

“We have a mango tree back home,” I said, as I helped him pile the mangoes into a smallish, tired basket, which he offered me free of charge, “but not this kind. I really love them.”

“Feel free to pass by any other day, I always have some around.”

He patted me on the back and waved as I started walking back home.

“Boss. Boss! Hold on,” his gruff voice called after me, or so I thought. I turned to see if I might have forgotten something at his stall, or if he still owed me change?

“I forgot to give you the bonus!” he shouted, running to meet me, two fingers of banana in his hands.

That was indeed very welcome; “Thanks very much! I now see why I should always enter the market from the east!” He laughed and wished me a safe journey.

I was already hungry, and so decided to eat one of the bananas as I started on my journey back home. Like his mangoes, his bananas not only tasted different from the *ndizi* and *bogoya* I was used to, but they also looked smoother and sunnier! I savoured the first one, and threw the peel into a gutter, before walking on, all filled with delight at the nice deal I had gotten, and the bonus that had come with it. I felt the urge to eat the second banana as well, but decided I would take it home with me. I thought it would be nice to give one to Dad, who I knew, loved bananas so much, so I decided to just keep it.

Then, somewhere along the way, I felt my bladder was about to burst and decided to stop and take a leak. I rested the basket on a small patch of grass along the wayside, and then walked a little further, so I could avoid spattering my “harvest”. There was a sugarcane plantation lining the edge of the road, and so that’s where I turned, opened my zipper, and started doing man’s favorite act. I was having fun, whistling and sprinkling the dry earth from side to side – it felt good! But then, before I could finish my pee, I saw a huge rat emerge from the plantation and immediately dash for the basket of fruit. I watched it, not believing a rat would find mangoes or the banana interesting. However, it proved me wrong, and I was taken aback!

The rat, a huge, ashy-haired thing, almost the size of a little rabbit, started by getting a whiff of the mango closest to the edge of the basket, and then moved on to another, before returning to the first and then taking an audacious bite out of it! Oh, I was annoyed and impressed at the same time! I quickly concluded the leaking and turned to face my hairy crook. He did not see me or didn’t think my presence much of a concern. I got agitated, as he had gone ahead to take yet another bite! I drew closer, and he momentarily turned to face me, but then quickly returned to the feast that was not his! I stomped my right foot on the ground, hoping it would make this thief panic and flee, but he just dashed a little to the right, and even threatened to advance to my only banana!

Furious, I looked about, and saw a loose stone on the ground; one of a size capable of fitting my palm very well. I dashed for it, and quickly span around to smash the guts out of that reckless rodent. But, alas, it had grabbed the banana straight out of the basket and was starting to vanish into the plantation! I shrieked, and ran after it, but it vanished into the plantation before I could hurl the rock at it! I peered in the spaces between the stalks, hoping I could see just where it was hiding and so deservingly end its pique. But there was naught. I wanted to cry in anger.

I was still beating my chest over it, when before my naked eyes, a path started to form, wedging deep into the plantation, as though to make way for something I could not see. Where the path had formed, no sugarcane stalk was uprooted, and yet none seemed bent or broken! It is as though some elusive hand were clearing the ground in a most bewildering manner. Where to? What for? I didn’t know. However, I soon caught sight of the very rat that had disappeared into the garden, and somehow, the



path led directly to where it sat, and slightly beyond. The filthy thing was munching the banana, oblivious of the new development! I saw the opportunity presented before me and believed someone was inviting me to take vengeance. I still had the piece of earth in my hand, and so ran down the path with speed, hoping to get close enough, so I could deal my thief a fatal blow.

The rat must have had ears on its ass, for soon as I started to advance, it clutched the banana with its teeth, and dashed ahead, unregretably. I would not surrender easily, and so chased on. More to my astonishment, not only did it charge ever forward, and undeviatingly so, but the mysterious path, likewise, continued to extend ahead of us, unceasingly. I chased, until I realized I could not easily catch up, and so stood and hurled the stone with as much force as I could muster. I almost hit the thief – missing him only narrowly, but at least, I managed to hit the banana out of his grasp! He turned to look at me and seeing as I was not done – I was darting once more, to finish the job, he abandoned the heist, and sprinted in resignation, and for his own safety, into the thick plantation, not along the cleared path anymore.

I walked over to the wasted banana, and picked it up, not having any intentions of returning it, but so I could behold the damage that rat had caused to my reward. As I inspected the grooves etched into the fruit, I realised that there was even much more left to lose, back in the basket I had abandoned by the road! “Oh my God!” I cried at how stupid I’d been. I threw the wasted banana in frustration, and turned to go save my lot, so all my money doesn't go to waste.

Alas! There was no road anymore! What had happened? I looked about and saw the same had happened to the path that had seemed to extend indefinitely into the plantation ahead of me. I was trapped! What’s more, the sugarcane followed suit, morphing into millet stalks – shorter in height than the sugarcane, but even more densely packed! Was I deluded? I tried to walk about randomly, hoping the same miracle of a self-defining-path might happen once more, but neither the path nor the stalks changed a bit!

In desperation, I tried to recall where the rat had vanished to, but failed, as everywhere, the transformed plantation looked the same, and it extended unceasingly into the horizon everywhere! Oh! The cleared patch of earth upon which I was standing, was dwindling too! I felt as though the garden

might swallow me soon. I started to panic, while sweating jugs – I had to do something, or whatever had led me into the plantation, would soon devour me. I chose to run... anywhere but run!

I ran as fast as I could, breaking through millet stalks, most of them dry and their blades gashing at me. I was hoping, memory of the proper direction towards the road, would soon emerge, or that I would see some guiding landmark to the same effect. But there seemed no hope; no matter how fast I ran, or where I ran, it all seemed futile. I was baffled. I stopped running and instead stood still. I felt all worn out, but I needed to think; figure out just how to escape this unfolding menace. But instead of figuring things out, my horrors just multiplied!

First, I heard scornful laughter from one side, and then it turned boisterous on another, and then stopped all-together! I wondered if I should resume running, but before I could decide, a compassionate voice called out my name from ahead of me – it seemed as though it were just a few meters from where I stood. It called, and then stopped, then called again.

“Irumba!”

The voice somewhat sounded familiar...

“Irumba?”

I knew that voice... I asked desperately, “Is that you, Mama?”

“Yes, it’s me dear.”

I knew immediately who it was – Zorean, my step-mum. I started walking towards her voice, but I couldn’t see her!

“Where are you Mum?” I asked, eyes scanning the ears of millet from end to end, she had gone quiet. I paused and listened; there was whispering, and it was not coming from the front...

“Hey! Hello? Hey!”

Who was that?

I turned to my left – slowly, my ears alert so I could hear everything well. Someone else, and not just Zorean, was there in the vast garden with us. My feet were hurting, as I had already lost my slippers from running about carelessly. Things had pricked my soles, and it felt like I was bleeding somewhere. I did not know whether to run or wait. Then she started calling again...

“Ignatius my dear!”

It was to my right, and I turned in time, but she wasn't there!

“Please, stop hiding Mama. My feet are hurting from running too much.”

“But I'm here,” she replied.

“I can't see you Ma.”

Then she laughed! I wasn't amused, I felt harassed, and all the hope seemed to fade with it.

“I can help you Igni!” she started again, “if you accept to be mine.” I didn't get what she implied, and so I asked.

“But Mum, am I not already yours? I'm your child!” That did not seem to work, because next, I heard a boisterous guffaw!

“Stop laughing like that Mama, you're scaring me!” I pleaded in disgust, and then she stopped. I heard movement, and turned to see where it originated from, but it immediately ceased.

“Is that you Zorean?” I asked, then took a step forward, wondering what it was that was approaching furtively. She did not reply.

I took another step, trying to avoid making the stalks creak. Though my feet were carrying me forward, the eyes would not let go of the scene behind me. I did not really know where next it would arise, but I did not want to really find out either. Again, a voice like Zorean's spoke, and I chose to walk towards that direction, seeing no safer alternative.

“Come! Come to me if you decide!”

She was speaking again, and her voice seemed to be running away as I continued to approach her. I started to run, hoping to catch up with her...

“But I can't see you mama!” I complained as I sought on. Was she hiding from something as well? I had to find out.

As I ran faster and faster, the stalks whipping me furiously, and some cutting me more, I started to cry. I would call out to her, and she would only ask me to “Submit to her”. I did not understand her intentions, nor did any of my torments make sense, but I was just trying to desperately reach and possibly be saved by her.

Then, as I ran on, something else emerged. It was approaching from behind, and though initially far, drew ever closer and closer. I slowed down, to better discern what it was.

An outlandish and ghastly sight! Running on one leg, bent on a joint above the millet stalks, it seemed like a rooster's leg, only devoid of flesh or scales! And it was approaching so fast! I had to stop running, and instead race! There was also a beastly growl, and a cacophony of voices that all seemed to be emerging from inside of that same monstrosity! I wailed at Zorean to come to my aid; I could still sort of hear her, but the mixture of fear, the clashing against those stalks, and the pounding of things on the ground would not let me hear her clearly anymore.

"Zorean!" I shouted, hoping she might reconsider and help. In time, I seemed to be finally approaching her. She seemed to have stopped running off. Suddenly, I came to a clearing; circular in shape, exposing bare, freshly tilled earth. But she was not there. I could not run anymore, and so chose to stop and die. I wanted the earth to swallow me, or the garden to consume me as it had already tried, but nothing, not even the millet replied, though, looking in the direction of that new menacing sight, I felt death finally seem to reply. The monster? It was nearing the same spot as well, and looking out in its direction, I started to see more of its sinister features more distinctly...

It wore a skull like that of a goat, upon its neck – complete with sturdy, twisted horns and wide, gaping, but dark cavities where the eyes used to be. It was disturbing. The neck did not seem like a goat's though; it was more like a human's, but well appended to its devilish skull. The thing wore a priest's white collar, on a contrasting, but worn black cassock. It looked like a banished priest in need of burial. I was petrified.

As it continued to approach, steadily slowing down in pace, I avoided gazing upon its bestial face. I studied its arms and leg more instead; the arms were stretched out as though held in place by some invisible horizontal bar, and I could see holes in its visibly human-like, but skeletal palms. Had it been once crucified? I didn't dare to ask – who would answer me anyways? The leg was skeletal too, but more evidently cadaverous – it had stains of earth and seemed to be blotted with decay where the cassock, which was not even covering the bulbous knee, stopped. It must have escaped hell or some perverted grave. I waited for my demise.

It started to whine! The legion of competing voices all trying to say something or other at me, all at once! I could not help but shake with fright; I silently begged for my ears to become clogged, but seeing as it

would not stop, I timidly raised my arms, and pressed as hard as I could onto my ears, so I could escape its piercing cries. That did not seem to make any difference, but instead, I caught some words or strings of them – in different languages!

“...*Anima vestra!*”

That sounded much like Latin or some ecclesiastical dialect.

“Fool! Fool you fool...”

I was getting that one, loud and clear, from another voice.

“*Et capiet te anima tua, et robur vitale!*”

I was not sure if that was still Latin or French, it sounded a bit like both.

“*Im non moritur*” the same voice went on. I could hear but was not understanding any of it though.

“I will capture your soul. *Ninywe mwanyisire!*”

A mixture of threats and accusations in English and Runyakitara! *What is this thing?* I wondered. I decided, if I was going to die, I would better go down with some satisfactory answers.

“Why are you torturing me?” I shouted the question towards this beast. It had stopped approaching – not venturing any further than the outer edges of the clearing. A chuckle there, a cry elsewhere, but all from the same daunting sight. The chaos finally quelled, and only one voice replied, in a hoarse, but authoritative tone.

“You have transgressed and caused me much joy. But sadly, I can only reward you with what you best deserve.” I wondered what transgression it implied; trying to kill the thieving rat, or trespassing in a forbidden land? None seemed to warrant such a grueling scourge. But I did not have the guts to even ask, nor desire for it to further clarify. The thing must have read my mind, for it further described...

“I have not been fed, and my person aches. Yet you, filled with youth, can't do better than to dissipate your energy on whores and pitiful curiosities.”

“Don't speak to him like that!” screamed a different voice, from a different place among the stalks. It was approaching us, and I could hear something slithering through the thick.

“Who are you to demand?” inquired the scarecrow priest, turning its attention towards the approaching source, with audible command.

“And who are you to think you can command?” the challenger replied.

“I’m his confessor, and if you don’t tread carefully, you might end up having to seek absolution from me as well!”

That sounded sarcastic, but the look of the monster did not reflect any of that.

“Absolution my ass! Aren’t you Eman, who’s supposed to be roasting in hell?” the challenger, whose voice started to seem familiar, further inquired.

“Just make sure, before I go to hell, I don’t screw the ignorance out of your behind! Pathetic, useless whore!”

They were starting to fight, and I was no sure whose side I was on, nor if I would survive their brewing ordeal.

“I’m his mother, and you will not speak to me like that!”

Clearly, evidently, it was Zorean’s voice at last!

I deeply exhaled, feeling an aura of relief sweep over me. Amid absurd threats and the curious argument over me, I felt like smiling, but wasn’t sure I was really approaching salvation just yet. There was the same cacophonous rumblings emanating from the beast once more, and in that turbulence, I overhead much swearing and cursing, and it seemed like Zorean, who I was not seeing, yet sure was around, was fighting the monster from somewhere near the ground!

The monstrous “confessor” was hopping from place to place, balancing on nothing else but its lone, bulky leg. Occasionally, he would try to grab at something in the stalks with his osseous hands, but was not gaining any traction despite his towering size. As the mystifying fight dwelt on, I wondered what sort of Zorean it was, as I could see nothing of her glamour yet... Was she actually there to rescue me? I was confused, but nevertheless, amused!

\* \* \* \* \*

Eight kids, six of whom were girls barely fifteen, walked by us, in the direction leading out of the forest. They were all carrying bundles of firewood, possibly heading back home or to the marketplace. The two boys accompanying them were not carrying piles of small branches like the girls, but were instead carrying one huge trunk each, that were nearly twice their height in length. They were little boys but looked very macho for their age – and they did not seem like pygmies either. The whole procession was full of delight, as they jeered at each other, with

occasional speedy pacing to and fro, and with playfulness that hinted they were either all from the same family or very dear friends. I was steadily advancing towards the well with her; a somewhat prettier girl than me, also a longtime friend of mine, Olga. Unlike me and her, walking towards the tamed springs, only three of them were not barefoot – one wore black gumboots, and the other two wore Umoja slippers that were too dirty for their color to be distinguished anymore.

As we trekked on, something caught my attention about the expanse we were journeying through; unlike Budongo forest, which still has majestic, giant trees, lots of monkeys, chimpanzees and lots of birds lurking in the shadows, and which occasionally dash out onto the road, the forest we were walking through, on our way to the well, had been heavily encroached upon for firewood and timber, and so mostly seemed lifeless. Walking down those dirt roads, we encountered a series of huge logs waiting to be ferried away, and a couple of piles of neatly cut wood, with lumberjacks laughing and chatting away from behind the thickets, as they cut and collected even more. “Stupid and greedy people,” I thought to myself.

Olga called my attention to a group of boys approaching from the well. There were three of them perhaps, visibly about the same age as us or slightly older. Two of them, had their Indian-made Hero bicycles overladen with yellow jerry cans, closed at the mouth with fresh, green plantains. The other boy was holding a stick, walking behind them as though herding them, occasionally pushing their bikes from behind – when they failed to manoeuvre over a hump. I knew one of the boys; the son of our LC 1 chairman, and a very rowdy fellow most of his waking hours.

“Let’s hurry,” I said, “and don’t look at them please.” I begged Olga. She was already starting to show signs of wanting to flaunt her big ass – wrapped in a loose *lesu*, bound to cause us much unwarranted attention from this approaching juvenile lot.

“The one to the right, he met me the other day at the funeral,” Olga started, “but I refused to give him audience.” She laughed lightly, already changing her stride and gait, making me boil inside.

“I will laugh at you if you drop that pot Olga!” I warned, trying to dress up my jealousy.

She turned to peek at me, and I was walking faster, threatening to overtake her.

“Then maybe we should slow down?” she replied, in a way I interpreted to be derisive, if not disdainful.

“Trust me, they will harass us, not with all the obvious lust in their eyes. You can even smell it from this far!” I was not really averse to boys, but wasn't fond of village mobs of their kind. Olga, despite not being as pretty as me, undoubtedly possessed a fuller body than mine, and always turned faces when I walked with her. Sometimes I would ignore it; other times, both of us would fall prey, but I usually felt envious of her, and sometimes even avoided walking with her altogether for that matter.

Soon we approached them. As I had anticipated, the one with the stick, even more woeful than the other two, was the first to flaunt his exhibitionism; suddenly stepping forward, and walking ahead of his fellows, who were laughing and urging him on. I knew he would try to touch us or say something reproachful. So I held onto Olga's hand and tried to drag her forward as the boy attempted to stop her – gesturing with the waving of his cane, indicating how he had gotten love-struck, and that he was further paralysed by her beauty.

“I swear, I'll pull that stick of yours and beat you with it!” I assured the insolent character, as I let go of Olga's hand and strode furiously forward in time to avoid him touching my breast with it. The mob had even halted the bikes and were just roaring with spiteful laughter!

“Don't worry Trudy,” said Olga, “I know each of their homes, and would definitely cause them much trouble if even a whisper of this reached their old men.” That did not avert my anger; she was loving the attention, and it was clear, she loved turning them on – I could tell by the look on her face.

“Do you really think they would care? Or that they are worth your attention?” I replied to her, as we left them further behind.

I paced on, forgetting that the pot on my head might fall and crack, if I kept trotting that way. I swallowed my pride, and held it in place with one hand, not turning to check if Olga was following suit.

“Trudy! Wait for me please...” she was still having fun, and I wouldn't have any of it.



I did not respond to her, just hurried to the well, and reaching the spring, proceeded to remove my sandals so as not to mar the water. However, I wanted to first rinse my pot before starting to fill it, and so stepped into the water, a little further down-stream, away from the felled piece of log, upon which we typically stand to draw the clean water.

Finally, I heard Olga approach as well. She was whistling gayly, and I kept pretending not to hear her. It was a humid afternoon, and there was a lot of cloud cover so that the reflection of the sky in the water made it seem grayish.

“Will you be coming to town with me Olga?” I asked, finally deciding to break the spell of silence. We were alone, and as usual, those little episodes of drama easily faded when we were by ourselves. She did not reply though, and I decided to wait and see if she would drag it on.

She was standing right behind me, because I could see her reflection in the water beside me. It looked shaky, as I muddled the water with the rinsing. But she was not moving or saying a thing, and so I paused to see her expression in the water more clearly. No, it wasn't Olga that I was seeing! Really? As I started to stretch upright, wanting to clearly see who else had joined us, I felt this sharp jolt in my back, which sent me lurching forward into the water uncontrollably, causing me to crush into my pot in the process! *Oh fuck! What was that?*

Before I could even turn, I had a step, and then a slap to my head, I wanted to fight.

“Olga what's wrong?” I shouted as loud as I could, filled with rage and anguish at the abrupt attack.

“You can't even see clearly anymore, can you?” She asked, in a derisive tone still. Half my dress was wet and clinging on me in a shameful daub of water and silt. I picked one of the broken pieces of what had remained of my pot, and turned to face my tormentor in retaliation, but what I met with totally startled me! It was not Olga, and in shock, I quickly surveyed the place, wondering if she might have been watching the episode from a distance, but she was not anywhere visible! In fact, despite sounding like her – which was odd, this stranger was only remotely like her, and this really started to frighten me.

I could not tell where this enraged woman had materialised from. What had become of my friend? What had she done to her?

“What have you done to Olga?” I asked her, threatening to plunge into her with the jagged, dripping piece of pot in my right hand.

There was smirk on her face, and her eyes seemed to be looking right through me. She was not in any way agitated and was already holding something in her right hand as well – it was a knife! I was losing stamina at the thought of what she might attempt to do next. I thought of fleeing before she could make another move, but then wondered why she was doing any of it. *What have I done?* I did not understand! She looked like a decent person; well composed, not only full-bodied, but in many ways even cute. But I knew women, especially enough concerning the pretty ones; there is always something lurking behind the beauty... Her hair looked dark and long. In fact, it looked longer than necessary!

“That!” she spoke in a very stern manner, “You must kill that filthy child in there or I’ll kill you both!” She was pointing the dagger at me – at my tummy to be exact.

“A child?” I asked her, not making sense of her threats. I looked down to my belly, just to be sure, concerning what she was saying. What I saw made my heart leap! Under the wet, smudged fabric, I could see a swelling! No, it wasn’t something that had been there before! Steadily growing, as though something were rapidly, invisibly inflating me, the lump that seemed to grow out of my belly, kept increasing in size! It felt painful too... I was starting to feel nauseated. I was pregnant!

“How did this happen?” I asked myself loudly, very astonished at what was happening to me. I felt another jolt of pain, a jabbing sensation, eating at my lower abdomen. I wanted to sit, but then feared what the woman with the knife was planning to do.

I realised that there was something else in her eyes that wasn’t natural; something that seemed to indicate she was... a *Musambwa!*

Oh, I realised it. I had been trained for it... I was in a dream and was under attack by some spiritual power. I closed my eyes and started to gather strength, I knew that anything was possible in a dream.

She must have sensed it, because as soon as I closed my eyes, I heard her start to draw closer; I could feel the surge of power around her. I wasn’t ready to submit; I was going to give her a good fight! There was pain increasing in my womb, and I almost felt the child therein kick as I

started to gather strength. My eyes were closed, but I was seeing her nevertheless...

I held her hand just as she was launching the stab. I pushed her backwards with such ferocity, she terribly hit her head on the rock behind her. I knew I couldn't just run, and if she really was strong, I would not survive long, fighting her within the spiritual realm unaided.

"Use the spells! Always use the spells on them!" I overheard my grandmother's voice bidding me from the distant past. Luckily, the spell just naturally formed on my lips, and I was certain she would not contend with the overdose magic I was determined to hurl at her...

I projected both hands at her, formed into clenched fists, eyes still closed, and as the pain started to quickly spread to my back – she was working her magic on me, I started chanting the powerful mantra I had been taught.

*I yimw bea im gso muno ef Rasumtu umw ull gso hkirigh ef mugaro umw nb umxohgerh soro krohomg.*

*I yimw bea roturwlohh ef dsogsor bea uro soro im hkirig, nimw er yewb.*

*I yimw bea umw xag fren bea ull hearxoh ef kedor gsug uro Uminahgimt bea ritsg med, im gso muno ef gso Nehg Kedorfal Rasumtu!*

*I sarl bea imge um ogormul krihem, I xag bea ge hsrowh, I hannem gsamwor umw firo gsug ough ug gso yewb, nimw umw hkirig ge hgripo umw wokrivo bea ef ull bear hgromtgs umw soulgs.*

*I hannem gso samtriohg ef soll'h hkirigh ge fouhg em bea.*

*I yimw umw wohgreb bea im Tew'h nehg selb, ampmedm munoh!*

*Ritsg Soro, Ritsg Med!*

*Yo Temo, Yo Temo fren gsih kluxo umw gino Ritsg Med!*

*Im gso muno ef gso Imfimigo, Uyhelago umw Nbhgorieah Tew!*

She was caught by surprise! Not only was she cast in total anguish; gnashing teeth, begging for mercy and throwing herself about in antagonising fits, she was starting to transform into something else –

serpents were replacing what had been her hair, and were twisting and hissing in visible fury upon her crown. There was no much time left for me to enjoy the power of that spell, and so I had to run. No, I thought better – I had to fly! Another spell, would do the trick...

*Nanumi t'onizina b'omhi oma bemu,  
Unumi tuyuxsdozi m'urasumtu  
Unumi tenahumu, endozi, enare m'onnyose  
Mimbinapu mponkamta nandumbu  
Epayusohu opigimihu.*

I started levitating immediately, but I realised that, still struggling in fury, though now below me, the tormented spirit was gathering strength as well, and she was skilled too. I had to summon help, even though I was quitting the nightmare. I summoned my grandmother – best option I could think of.

*“Nyamaizi! Nyamaizi! Ija Onyambe! Nyamaizi! Nyamaizi! Ija oyambe omwijukuru wawe! Bambi yanguha!”* – loosely translated as “Nyamaizi, come to my rescue. Nyamaizi, come rescue your grandchild. Please hurry up!”

I screamed as I continued to rise into the air, leaving my sorcerous attacker further and further below. I soared high above the forest, and slowly started to fade back into consciousness, on the other side of reality...

# Chapter X

One goat was restless... Something was lurking in the air at that moment, and it caused the goat to run about in the shelter. In the process, it entangled its rope with the other goats, thus causing the entire lot to awaken, agitated by something they could not see. One goat started bleating, and like the flu, the rampage spread to the others. In no time, not only were their ropes entangled in a mess they would not unsnarl themselves, but the ground suffered haphazard stamping and the silence of the night got greatly perturbed. Also, what had started with just one goat, had successfully sneaked outside the shelter, into one of the huts in the compound. It was inside this hut, that an old woman, sleeping heavy and sound, got prematurely aroused out of her tranquility, thanks to the pandemonium outside. When she woke up, she sat on the edge of her bed, feet touching the bare earth, listening intently, in an attempt to discern what it was that could be breaking the night apart.

*Not a thief, not some stupid nightdancer, and maybe not a beast.* She decided she would have to step outside and be more than sure. She staggered about in the dark, looking for the matchbox. She felt the little thing on a stool beside her bed, took out a match, struck, and soon the hut was alight with the brilliance of the lamp hanging on her wall. She reached out and loosened it from the nail, and holding a walking stick in the left, and the lamp in her right, walked slowly through a door and into the adjacent room. It was their little “dining room”, and then she ventured further on, into her granddaughter’s room, instead of immediately heading out into the night, to investigate the omen.

“*Nyamwezi, olimu?*” she asked, holding the light higher so as to see clearly whether she was sleeping, undisturbed by the commotion outside. There wasn’t movement, nor was there a sound. She drew closer. The beddings were neatly tucked-in, the pillow was where it should be, and by the look of things, it was clear, there was no one sleeping inside that bed. But, she went ahead and tapped about the bed with her walking stick, all the while calling out for her granddaughter. No, she isn’t here, she finally concluded, after rummaging below the bed as well, as though her girl might have chosen to sleep on the ground instead of the bed. *It’s possible*, she thought, *she hasn’t slept at all. So, where is she then?* She checked to see if she might

have carried off any of the tools with her, but they were all there, neatly arranged under her bed; the beads, a sheath of cow hide, the belt and the stones. *She is definitely out for some other mundane reason. She is going to be in trouble then!*

Outside the hut, the woes in the goat shelter had not ceased, and one of the cows was also wailing. She walked out of the bedroom, and back into their sitting room. This time, she went straight for the door that led out of the house. First, she adjusted the height of the lamp's wick a little higher, to give more luminance to the night, and then held onto the door knob; she turned it a bit. She was startled! The door had been left almost unlocked – when she turned the lock, she realised it was not actually fastened, just that the door had been drawn back into place. She pushed the door, and with the lamp highlighting the anger and frustration on her face, stepped outside, to go unravel the omen before her.

Except for the noise in her home, all Bitanga was undoubtedly dead asleep. She wandered over to the bamboo shack, and talking to the goats as though they were rowdy kids in need of a beating, she threatened to “let dogs and hyenas in” on them if they would not quieten. She often talked to the goats – actually, she talked freely to all the animals in her home, including those that visited from neighbouring places, such as the fowl that often disturbed them when they laid out millet, groundnuts or maize under the sun. Nyamwezi, her granddaughter, used to laugh at her sometimes, claiming she was “losing it with age”, but as was often the case, whatever she said to the animals, seemed to sink in very well, for without raising a hand to scare them off, for example, troublesome chicken would take one last nibble at the seeds and would then walk off to find other sources of nourishment. Or, she would sometimes tell the goats and cows that food had been placed in the kraal or out on the edge of their compound, and these seemingly stupid beasts would heed her word and go find the food where she said it was!

She looked about the shelter, and saw nothing besides the mess in which their ropes were entangled. She knew that couldn't have been the real source of the stampede. Holding the lamp close to one of the goats - the one that seemed most agitated, and which belonged to her granddaughter, she looked into its eye, and saw fear, much fear therein. “Why didn't you tell me directly then?” She talked to the goat, whose little horns were just starting to curl. It was white, except for a prominent patch of brownish-

black on its neck, and which spread a little further to the front of its fore legs. She held its head, seizing one of the little horns with her right hand, and then again peeked deep into its eye. "Where are you?" she asked the goat. It was standing right there before her, but it did not say a thing. Well, she was not talking to the goat actually. Another goat bleated a little more, and then she let go of Trudy's goat, picked up the lamp and closing the shelter behind her, walked to another hut. She ignored the cows.

*Stupid children*, she thought, *she should have asked me or at least warned me concerning her plans. I doubt someone could summon her from this place that easily without her consent.* She was thinking of the possibility of someone having summoned her out of bed in her sleep, as was known to be possible not only in Bitanga. But after thinking about it for a while, it did not make much sense as the child's bed did not indicate she'd slept at all. That she must have sneaked out intentionally was the only meaningful explanation she settled on. *What for?* She wondered, she had no clue yet, and so had to find out. "You fall into trouble, and then ruin my sleep, and cause turmoil in the kraal! What's wrong with you kids?" She quarreled, with a persona that wasn't there! "Who sent you there?" she continued, still infuriated. She reached the entrance of one of the smaller huts in the homestead. She drew open the door, and taking her sandals off, entered the little shrine.

She walked over to a large clay bowl of coals, which was hardly left without fire each night. Using a stick that she picked beside it, she then tossed the ashes about, before adding a few fresh pieces of charcoal to it. She stirred with the stick, while blowing through a metal pipe, so that the coals started to glow more and more, and the fresh ones soon caught the heat as well. She walked to the opposite side of the room, bent and reached inside one of the pots, from which she then retrieved some polythene bags. She sniffed at the contents of each, and put three back into the pot, before moving on to yet another pot, from which she drew strips of bark that had been scrapped from various native trees. She walked back to the bowl of hot coals with these things, and there, sat facing the fire.

She picked the stick once more, and then, having two of the polythene bags open, proceeded to sprinkle a little of the contents of each, onto the naked flames and coals, while stirring emphatically with the stick. Most of the ingredients she was mixing into the fire were actually special powders; there was crushed bones of peacock; another was the dried and pulverized bark of the flame tree (*Erythrina abyssinica*), and yet another was powdered

resin of the African myrrh (*Commiphora africana*). She then picked some of the bark scrapings, without caring to distinguish between them, and then added these to the sizzling fire, causing bright flames of yellowish-white to jump from the bowl. One of the polythene bags contained dried roots of the special herb *Chamaecrista mimosoides* – which her and the other shamans typically referred to as the “seeing plant”. She crushed some of it in the palm of her hand, and ingested it all in one swoop. She sat for a while gazing into the fire, and then closing her eyes a little later, started chanting the mantra...

*Ndinapo imbdo uyuliyugu enanare*  
*Ndinapo imbdo uyureru enapizinu*  
*Ndinapo imbdo uyureru enanyose*  
*Ndinapo imbdo uyureru onizina*  
*Ndinapo imbdo uyurayugu enandumbu*  
*Ndiqgo nambelopo endumu dumto Mbundozi.*

She then opened her eyes, and looked deep into the flames, unwaveringly and expectantly. “Hurry!” she said to the flames, impatiently. Soon, though a bit hazy, a scene started to take form in the flickering flames. It looked like a shrine, but not like any she knew of. It was built in a strange manner, with its roof turned upside down, and the “supporting” poles facing the sky, so that it had no roof! There seemed to be two people tied with ropes onto logs therein. She looked closer at one of them, and seemed to recognize the shape of a woman, or girl, but the shape kept morphing haphazardly, just like most of the other features apparent in the flames.

“Is that her?” she asked the flames, without getting an answer back.

“Where is this place?” she asked, finally convinced she wouldn't get any better vision than she'd already been given.

“Bitanga,” a voice spoke inside her head.

“But that's the entire village!” she complained.

“Go out and find her before it's too late,” she was advised.

She gave thanks to the Cwezi powers that had given her the vision, and then dismissed them. Next, she cast water from a metallic mug onto the hot flames and smoky coals, which caused the little hut to be filled with smoke, causing her to cough incessantly as she stood up to leave. She walked over to a big basket, from which she picked a twig of the acacia



tree, which had two arms extending in opposite directions. She dusted it with her hands, and then holding it together with the lamp, walked back outside, closing the shrine's door behind her.

She went back into her house, changed into a *gomesi*, and wore her *lugabire* shoes. She also wore a necklace of cowrie shells, tied a belt of bark cloth, with more cowrie shells sewn into it, around her waist, and then putting out the lamp, walked back into the then calmer night. The animals had gone silent, at last, and peace seemed to have been restored to the air as well. She wanted the help of her assistant and friend, Ninka Atwoki, whose home was not far from hers. She walked over to her hut, and calling out to her by her *empako* (pet name) as she knocked lightly on the door, awoke them from sleep – she was a married woman, and her husband, who often spent the night at the homes of his other wives, was around that night. It is him that answered the door.

He held a tiny paraffin lamp in one hand, as he peeked out into the night to see who was waking them at that late hour. The old woman drew out of the shadows, and then stood directly in the light of his lamp. They spoke in Rutoro, because, though his wives were mostly Banyoro, he had never bothered to learn their dialect. He was a lean, but shrewd man, and his wives were known to fear him.

“Eh, it's you Akiki!” he said, studying her face under the light.

“Yes it's me neighbour.” Nyamaizi replied.

“Is there a problem? Do you need some help?” asked the man, stepping out to talk to her closely.

“Probably not, but there's something I need completed right now, and was kindly requesting you to let Abwooli come give me some help as usual.” She spoke softly, but with authority.

“Oh, your work...” he replied, a hint of uncertainty apparent in his voice. But then, he quickly came to a conclusion; “It's fine. Let me inform her, assuming she's not already listening.”

He did not ask what sort of “work” it was, he just knew that his wife always had a thing or other to do with her more senior, and well-known colleague. He wondered though, why they had chosen to “finish” their work in the deep of night. *It's been a while...* he thought, as he walked back into the hut, which only had two rooms. Ninka was already awake, but as the polite and submissive wife she was, she was still waiting for her husband to explicitly

give her the permission to leave. On the other hand though, she had not waited for his permission to arrive, before starting to change into her “working” clothes. Somehow, she knew he could never be able to stand in the way of “their work” – even when he did not know what it was. The custom or traditions required that they never declare what it was they were going to do out in the night... Success also required it, and to declare it, was sometimes further considered *mahano*. Once an elder such as Nyamaizi got involved, he felt there was no need to worry.

“Akiki is waiting for you outside. She says you have ‘work’ to finish,” the man said to his wife, as he took off his sandals to fall back into bed. She was not sure what work it might be, but given the hour, it dawned on her that it must be of utmost importance. She didn’t hesitate; she finished dressing up “in the proper way”, donning her belt as well, and assuring her man she would not be long; stepped out into the night, to join her master and friend.

“Sorry for waking you at this hour,” began Nyamaizi as she started walking off soon as she saw her friend emerge from the hut. “There’s been a problem, and I think we need to find where my granddaughter is currently trapped, quickly so.”

Ninka hurried to meet her, and greeting her in their ritual manner, asked to be filled in on the details.

“I was sleeping normally, when I overheard the disturbance outside. It was the goats especially, and so I went out to check on them. But before stepping out, I went to check on her first, and was shocked to find she hadn’t slept in the house at all!”

“Didn’t she just return yesterday?” asked Ninka, rather concerned.

“Yes, she came back from Kampala yesterday. All was well, and we went to sleep as usual,” replied the old woman, “but when I checked the bed, it seemed as though she’d not even slept there at all!”

“Oh, that’s not good. She’s likely in town, right?” suggested Ninka, thinking of how girls Trudy’s age, and especially those who had the “town” in them, liked to go spend the weekend nights in bars and clubs in Masindi town.

“Not Nyamwezi,” said her grandmother in defense. “She’s never exhibited such habits before, and the vision I got while divining about it, didn’t indicate she’s somewhere having fun.”

“You’ve already got a clue?” asked Ninka in admiration.

“I had to do something definitely,” replied the old woman as though it was obvious.

“So, where is she then?” asked Ninka.

“It’s a shrine or someplace like that,” replied Nyamaizi, “but which particular shrine it is, and where, I don’t know.”

They walked on, but they did not take the turn towards the old woman’s home. Instead, they took a left turn, in the direction of a hill known to locals as “Ntagi”. Nyamaizi was holding out the twig ahead of them with her right hand. She would occasionally stop and just look at the twig, before telling her partner whether they should take a turn or not.

“Maybe I should have called her phone?” suggested Ninka, who only realised she had left her phone back home, after the idea occurred to her. *That would have possibly led us to her even quicker*, she thought. She knew Trudy’s grandmother never carried, nor owned a phone – she had refused to be given one, and instead, if someone needed to call her, they would call Ninka, who would pass on the word.

“She didn’t carry it,” replied Nyamaizi without even pausing to think if that was actually right. “I must have seen it there, under her pillow,” added the old witch, except she wasn’t even sure, but her colleague would not even dare contest her mistress’ claims.

“But him,” she said, pointing at the twig, “will get us there.”

“Definitely,” her assistant affirmed. She, Ninka, was one of her few apprentices besides her own granddaughter. They never questioned or dared to challenge her methods, especially in matters where she had already demonstrated extraordinary effects, as in her divination and herbalist work.

Nyamaizi, who was approaching her late eighties, was also one of the most respected and feared witchdoctors in Bitanga and virtually all of Bunyoro. The twig she was using to find their way to the said shrine was acting as some sort of divining rod, only that she was also augmenting this with an unwavering, near-blind trust in the power of her intuition. Sometimes the twig would swerve towards some direction, but pausing and cross-checking with her internal convictions, would occasionally deviate from where it seemed to point, as though her actual decisions were sort of arbitrary, except they weren’t.

“She’s getting stubborn,” she said to Ninka, “and I hope she learns a good lesson this time.” Ninka did not respond to that, only thought about what she might imply. She knew that the two were very close; Nyamwezi was treated by her grandmother as though she were her own, and only child, and likewise, Nyamwezi seemed to love and look-up to her grandmother, as though she did not have a mother still alive. “She’s our best hope,” Nyamaizi had told Ninka, concerning her granddaughter one time. “And so, we must not only teach her, but instill in her a steady passion for what’s left surviving of her culture and the wisdom of our ancestors. It’s us, the mothers, that can best shape the future of our children and the world.” She always emphasised the importance of the knowledge she was passing on to her apprentices – nearly all of them women, or girls turning into adults. She would never stop to stress the relevance of these apprenticeships, and how that knowledge was meant to preserve and advance their customs and heritage into future generations or even to the end of the world. “The Cwezi can never die,” she would say sometimes, implying the immortality of the heritage they’d inherited from the ancients.

“No, we can’t trust most men with our culture, not anymore,” Nyamaizi had stressed one time, when Ninka had asked if it was okay for her to share some of her acquired knowledge with her curious husband. She never dared say a thing about their “work” to her man again, and though he generally knew that they engaged in more serious witchcraft than that practiced by his other wives – who mostly engaged in petty love magic and offensive spell-casting against each other, he feared to push for details from her, concerning what exactly they did with the infamous Nyamaizi. And yes, he was wise enough to know that there would be consequences if some of this knowledge was leaked to “outsiders” like him, and so he never pushed much for it.

To Ninka though, most of this was not a problem, as it was a well-known fact in Bitanga, that many folks still engaged in witchcraft in one way or another, though, unknown to most, only a small fraction of sorcery elites knew of the deeper, more sophisticated and often darker aspects of the art. To balance her doubling in magic with her nuptial duties, she used her sorcerous skills to deliver to her man heart-warming food, strategic love and a calculated show of affection and submissiveness while he was at her home. As her man would often say to her, she outshined all of his other wives despite her deviant ways. It was mostly for such reasons that many of the women lucky enough to have been properly taught to be practioners

of the craft, found themselves very much cherished by the men who got to know them, especially as wives. “Woe to those who marry the uninitiated,” Ninka’s teacher would tell them sometimes. “They will never know the joys of a woman that has mastered the garden.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They hit a dead end. The route they had been following finally led them to a certain unpopular tree, believed by some of the natives, to sometimes host the spirit of Mwanga, and which is also used by some of the wiser natives of Bitanga to counter witchcraft. The tree, which is actually of the species *Pericopsis angolensis*, but which the Bitanga natives called “*Enzimu*”, also had a sinister story to tell, and both Nyamaizi and her assistant knew of it...

A serial thief, a man known to the locals only as “Patero”, had once stolen money from the offertory baskets of a rain-maker’s shrine, whose altar, by tradition was always outdoors. It is said, this Patero went on a drinking spree that day, and while walking back to the village from the trading centre, he was mysteriously led to the foot of the tree, and there, slept without waking, for three consecutive days. Some folks tried waking him; some beat him, others offered him milk, and still others bathed him repeatedly in buckets of water, but all failed to awaken the unfortunate drunkard! Finally, someone who knew him well, testified that he had probably stolen from the wrong person, and indeed, though he was taken away from the tree to his home, he died on his bed, and the only words he kept repeating were “*Mahano, mahano, mahano...*”, which served as evidence to most, that he had wronged a vengeful spirit. Having been a thief, and believed to have died from an ominous curse, his body was brought back to the tree, and was hanged there for a day, before being taken for burial – very likely, so those hoping to feast on him or use his remains in any other way, might not have the curse passed on to them.

As they stood before this tree, realising there was no other route besides walking back the same path that had brought them there, Ninka asked Nyamaizi what she thought of the omen.

“Isn’t this where Patero died?” she asked.

“No, he died at his home, but it’s upon this tree that he was hanged,” Nyamaizi said, “after his well-deserved death that is.”

“So, why should we be led here then? Could she have done something equally wrong?” asked Ninka, somewhat afraid of suggesting anything worse.

Nyamaizi did not answer; instead she got her walking cane, and approached the tree, lightly whipping it a couple of times before stepping back. She started nodding her head, while pointing south.

“There, that’s where we are meant to go,” she said.

“Where?” asked a puzzled Ninka, looking at the dark gardens she was pointing to.

“Not in the gardens, but in that direction.”

“What’s there then? A shrine?” asked Ninka.

“The church,” said her teacher.

“You don’t mean the abandoned church, do you?”

“It’s the only link I can see. Someone hanged themselves there, for messing with *emandwa*. Someone was hanged here, for doing the same.”

“Oh! *Mahano!*” exclaimed Ninka in disbelief.

“I don’t think it’s that bad though,” stated Nyamaizi, “though, given the association, we must hurry.”

They were already walking back towards the junction that had led them to the tree. Ninka’s mind was racing, and she was afraid of what that last clue might imply. She remained silent though, letting Nyamaizi lead the way as she followed from behind.

“I know it’s the church, because, though I resisted taking the route there earlier, I now feel there’s no other place but that,” she replied.

“I wouldn’t have thought of it as a shrine!” said Ninka.

“It has always been a shrine, even though the *basomi* would never call it that,” replied the old mistress, before adding later, “Though, I wonder why the MaxiDozi would have anything to do with my daughter.”

“I fear them Akiki!” said Ninka, the weight of her fear clearly portrayed in her tone.

“Not when my child is at risk. We must hurry, and I hope they have a good explanation, or someone might summon upon them the same wrath that saw the missionaries desert that place!”

At last, they were walking along the same route that had brought both Trudy and Ignatius to the church. Ninka’s attention was mostly in the direction of the cemetery, for a reason – she recalled the times they had visited the burial grounds to seek materials for their work; often, freshly buried bodies or parts of them. Sometimes they sought just any grave soil,

and other times they sought the grave of a particular person – even when the person had been buried many years before. It was not common for people to bury on the grounds anymore – it is the missionaries who had first introduced the idea of using communal, public burial grounds instead of family or ancestral cemeteries, but occasionally, fearing that the other sites might not be as safe or when someone who didn't have property nor family died, the public cemetery would be chosen for their temporal resting place. Nowadays, though not officially sanctioned, besides the elusive, and much feared MaxiDozi who exclusively used the church, only Nyamaizi and her apprentices seemed to have “permission” to use the cemetery for their work. However, on this particular night, it was not the cemetery they were headed for, but the building which housed secrets even she never clearly disclosed to them.

“I hate coming to this place,” said Nyamaizi to her assistant, as they finally reached the church. She reached into a pouch she was carrying, and chewed on something, before passing some of it to Ninka, who was being stung by the coldness of the night. “Thank you,” said Ninka as she took the stuff, which included some roasted coffee beans and some other seeds. Ninka was in her thirties, but seemed to be frailer than the aged Nyamaizi. She had a *lesu* wrapped around her neck and shoulders, on top of the *gomesi* she was wearing, but still felt cold. Nyamaizi wasn't wearing much besides her worn *gomesi*, and yet she stood as though the cold merely bounced off her! “The elements probably fear them,” one of her apprentices had suggested to a peer one time, concerning their sorcerous elders, and their tolerance to extreme weather.

“We need to ask for permission though,” said Nyamaizi to her assistant, who was already pacing the place. “I know she must be here,” continued the one with the vision, “but, even thieves don't just break into a shrine, unless they are mad or suicidal.” Ninka knew what she implied, and was getting ready...

\* \* \* \* \*

She woke up all sweating profusely! For a while, she struggled to breathe, as though she had just arrived at the finish-line of some arduous marathon! She had finally escaped the gruesome nightmare – inside her dream that is, however, looking about in the dark, she was not sure she had

totally escaped its grip on her. She felt about for the phone... *I need some light!*

“Igni, Igni?” she called out to her sleeping friend, almost merely mumbling. She shook him a bit, “Where’s the phone Igni?” But he was not responding, she ignored him and continued patting about for the device; touching the leg post of the table here, feeling the creased clothes and a wooden edge there, but she could not find it. She sighed, and murmured in disgust, “Where’s the damn phone!” She leaned over him, heaved him aside a little, and felt it - a cold, false-leather jacket, concealing something hard. She grasped it hastily and flipped open the cover. She pressed repeatedly on the home button, and then the two buttons on the sides, but nothing would awaken the damn thing either. She turned to Ignatius once more, hoping he might wake up now that she had found some hope.

She shook his head, forgivingly at first, and then furiously, while calling out to him in crescendo, but all she heard in return was a consistent, almost imperceptible sound of breath emanating from him. The only other perceptible sounds were her own puffy breath, eerie echoes, and the wheezing heart pulse racing after her thoughts. *This is not good*, she convinced herself, shaking her head while rousing him some more. Hope was fleeing from her, real fast!

She held the phone once more, and with both hands; pressed the buttons frantically, eventually coming to her senses – *it must have no battery left*, she consoled herself. At that thought, she sat upright, and started removing the phone from its jacket. She knew the trick worked with the radio at home sometimes – take out the batteries for a while, put them back in, possibly after swapping them, and the thing would come back to life, sometimes! She hoped the same would work for the phone, even though she had never seen anyone do that kind of thing for a phone before. She was desperate and in need of light! The memory of what had happened to her in the dream still lingered before her eyes. These memories troubled her, so that, immediately after removing the battery from the phone, she paused, and patted her tummy in various places, to check if indeed her womb were budding therein. It felt normal, and even when she pressed her fists inwards with much force - as the matrons at her former schools had done when testing them for pregnancy, she only felt pain that seemed obvious – she was intentionally hurting herself. She felt reassured – *am not pregnant* and resumed working on the device.



She put the battery back into the phone after just a few minutes of waiting, and then fumbled with all the buttons, but it was all futile! “Nothing? Oh my God! I really pray Akiki got my message...” She stood up, felt about for her sandals and could not find them. Barefoot, she decided to go open the door that had led them in, finally inclined to go seek help outside. While still pondering over what might have befallen her new-found love, she muttered under her breath thus; “Something’s not right with him!” She was also getting very distressed. She was looking for a reassuring explanation; she considered exhaustion – *we over did it*, so she thought, *or was it my influence?* She recalled how she’d used a calming charm on him, to help put him to sleep. *But that wears off after no more than an hour*, a voice assured her. *Could he have suffered the same attack as me?*

“That bitch!” she muttered in anger, as she crept towards the door, fearing she might knock into something unexpectedly. Locating the lock was not a problem, it felt cold, metallic and rough from being rusty. She turned it anti-clockwise, remembering how she had first opened it a few hours before, and then pushed a little, and then some more. It was not giving way, and the snap she expected wasn’t there. *Oh, it must be the other way round*, she thought! She tried her own suggestion, and the bulbous handle did not even pass the starting point in that case. She cursed, and then tried it the former way once more. She looked about, worried something could be sneering at her in the dark, *there’s only us*, her mind reassured her.

She kicked at the door with the bottom of her heel, and it made a soft thud, but yielded nothing more. She pounced on the door, pushed, tugged at the lock, and her frustration and confusion was only getting worse. Finally, she let go and started sobbing silently. She put an ear to the wood of the door, to try and listen for any hope from outside, but there was not even the slightest hiss of night; no crickets, no wind, no upset natives scouting about in the night! *That’s not possible!* She tried harder, expecting to at least hear crickets, *those always make sound around here!* But, alas, there was only silence, as of the graves not far from the prison in which they were locked.

Not only were they being trapped inside, but the whole world seemed to be sealed off from them. All her accumulated experience with somber things didn’t seem to have prepared her for the torment she was undergoing. *We really shouldn’t have entered here in the first place*, she reminded herself, recalling how repulsive Ignatius had been when she’d

suggested the idea. *We are totally fucked right now!* And that caused her tears, heart throbbing and heavy breathing. She was afraid of walking away from the door. Something, was totally wrong.

She felt beads of sweat form and roll down, between her breasts – her forehead, neck and armpits were already bathed. It was too queer because the air felt humid, thick and warm, but her feet felt an unnerving coldness against the bare floor. She took a small step, wanting to run back to where Ignatius was, but feared that once back there, she might never have the chance to return to the door. She pulled a step back, and then turned to lean against the wall, her back and butts picking up the coldness, making her realise how she'd still been naked all along? She was shocked even further. *Why didn't I realise this before?*

Then she smelled something else – not her armpits, not her skin. Something; a familiar, slight but almost putrid odor. A corpse. It would intensify, and then loosen, as though the source were oscillating before her nostrils. “No, it's not what I think it is...” She was revisiting memories of when they'd had to treat desiccated, but utterly decomposed bodies, while preparing certain portions or stashing away bits for later use in necromancy and other, even darker rituals. The scent was very familiar, and never had she had to deal with it on her own. She felt petrified, and paused breathing. “Fight the odour with your mind,” her grandmother used to tell her during the work, “and don't allow anything unpleasant to occupy you while dealing with these ‘people’.” She was trying to, but was not sure it would work, *not this time*, she thought. Finally, she held her nostrils real tight, she knew what could happen... “If they can get to your nose, they can get to your mind,” she had been taught. She was breathing through the mouth, and only sparingly...

It was in the air, or it was many of them – she couldn't tell the difference, but she knew it, there was something haunting the space. *What of the windows?* A suggestion came to her from nowhere. *The window!* She was feeling about the wall with her hands, as she moved towards where the window must be, slowly, carefully. She recalled there being a window, a glazed glass window, and only one, facing out to the rear of the building, but she wasn't very certain, how far from the door it had been. *I saw it*, she convinced herself, but then, in that moment, seeking about for where she believed it had been, she was startled to realize there wasn't anything like it! She touched about some more, caressing the wall expectantly, but all

she felt was the unevenness of the paint – scrapping off in some places, spotty in others, but there was no hole, no glass, and no window! She stopped, entirely exasperated.

“Why don’t you kill us then!” she finally burst, the tears streaming down her cheeks, and the rage finally reaching her throat, almost choking her. Only echoes of her rage and sobbing, and nothing else. For a while, she thought she might perhaps still be dreaming. She knew of a good test... *will it; desire to fly and see if it works*. She closed her eyes and tried. Her feet were glued to the floor, real heavy. “Akiki, please hurry, please!” she cried. *What else should I try!* Surely, she was ill-prepared for it, but then, an idea occurred to her – *why not step aside?* No, she wasn’t thinking of trying to knock into the wall, nor was she thinking of assuming another spot in the room. It’s something she was still learning, and had not yet mastered, but which she felt could work – leaving her physical body, so she might seek help outside. This new idea somewhat lit up her mood.

*If this is a spiritual trap, then that is likely the only means of seeking further help*, so she thought. She stooped low, as though planning to squat, and then started trying out the technique. The pungent smell was not going anywhere, and she was feeling the air get electrified a bit too; *it is a ghost or some very noxious magic*, she thought, as she closed her eyes, despite there being no light. She then started visualizing, though the fright she was experiencing made it really difficult to focus as she really ought to.

“Focus, focus and let go,” she told herself, struggling to imagine things outside of the building. “It’s your only way out,” a voice assured her, inside that crowded skull. Slowly, she started reconstructing the scene outside of the church, as she had witnessed it, right before they had stepped inside... *bare bricks, rugged steps, a patch of grass next to some thorny shrub that pricked me...*, and then she started moving...

\* \* \* \* \*

Her voice sounded distant, but distinct. Both heard it, but her grandmother heard it best.

“She’s here”, Nyamaizi told her comrade, who nodded in agreement.

“But that’s too weak, she must be projecting,” Ninka replied.

“Definitely,” said Nyamaizi, “someone untrained wouldn’t even hear her.”

Nyamaizi passed her stick to Ninka, closed her eyes and pressed with both thumbs against her ears, so as to plug them against any external sounds.

“Let me try reaching her,” she said to Ninka, who said something in return that she couldn’t hear.

*Akiki, please help me, the voice pleaded, inside of her head.*

*Is that you my child?*

*Yes, I’m trapped inside this place, it added.*

*Don’t waste your energy though, just tell me which side you are.*

*Come to the very end, not the front.*

*The sacristy?*

*I don’t understand, just come to the back.*

*Okay. Okay, return to your body please, and don’t fight too much. The powers in this place are probably too strong, but we are coming.*

*Are you with someone?*

*Yes, Ninka came with me, but I’m also trying to make contact with the owners of this shrine. We’ll be there in no time.*

*Thank you, Grandma.*

*Don’t thank me yet, and make sure you are ready to explain to me concerning that other person you hid away with.*

*Kaka...*

*No. Let go, and relax for now.*

She opened her eyes and dropped her hands. She was smiling too.

“She’s really learning fast!” she said to Ninka, who had been watching her in admiration. She reached into her pouch and retrieved a small bone. She scrapped little bits off it, and then, mixing them with saliva, signaled to Ninka to get seated on the ground. She sat facing the church, and she asked her to place both hands onto the walls in front of her. She adjusted a little, so she could reach for the wall without straining too much.

“Just keep your eyes closed,” said Nyamaizi, smearing the saliva, together with some other herbs and bits of the crushed bone onto her eyelids, along her lips, nostrils and ears.

“Speak naturally,” she told Ninka, “and don’t leave out anything,” she further added. Ninka, silent and submissive, nodded in agreement.

In a rather disgusting manner, she smeared the rest of it around her neck, before placing both hands upon her head as though she were some pastor about to evoke holy ghosts into her. She was going to evoke something into her, but it was not a ghost, and possibly wasn’t necessarily holy; it could not be trusted either, and so she could not invoke it into her own

mind – the reason she always needed a medium or assistant to work with  
– *makes it easier to banish, just in case.*

For some, especially the “unlucky” ones, serving as a medium was sort of like a rite of passage – “In the lifetime of any witch,” she had once told Ninka and the others, “you must sometimes serve not in your own capacity, but as a host to something or someone more powerful than you. In the process, you experience transformations you would never have obtained any other way.” It was the mantra of mediumship, and Ninka respected and knew it by heart.

Nyamaizi wanted to contact the MaxiDozi – anyone of them that could be listening or in-touch with their shrine. She closed her eyes once more, and started chanting...

*I pmed bea uro im goro  
Uh bea dealw movor uyumwem bear hsrimo  
I hannem bea, fren dsorovor bea uro  
Dsogsor ig yo im hlook, dupimt er grumxo  
If bea uro gso edmor er nuhgor ef gsih hsrimo  
I xull em bea ge xeno ge ear uiw  
We ig artomglb, er do hsull yo nevow ge hoop rovomto!*

Soon, Ninka was convulsing and blubbering things, at first, incomprehensible, but soon, she spoke distinctly, though nothing like her normal self. But it did not matter, as in that state, her self-image was not important, as her ego had been suppressed, and someone else’s had taken its place.

“I’m the caretaker,” spoke Ninka, in a macho voice, “what do you want?”

# Chapter XI

He was seated alone, watching the waves of Nalubale approach and ebb from the shores below. It was a pleasant spot he was sitting at; the sun was high in the sky, painting it a calming azure-cyan, which against the speedily morphing clouds of white and gray, made the moment as perfect as any could be. He was seated near the edge of a cliff, watching the majestic lake from a distance high above where those fishing and swimming were. In the distance, there was the envious embrace of the water and sky, and then numerous birds adorning the skies and the lake, including beautiful herons, egrets and ducks. He was not really just watching the birds though, he was trying to control their movements – sort of, compose how they flew and made formations in the atmosphere he was watching.

He had brought some sand with him from the shores of the lake, and had poured it out onto the bare rocky surface of the cliff – not far from where he was sitting. Then, he would look out into the space about him, and would return to the sand, quickly draw a pattern therein, and then watch, while exerting his will and chanting a mantra, as the birds miraculously flew about into formation, in synchrony with the motif he had just sketched.

He was trying to master a novel technique of swarm magic – a kind of mass-mind magic he had to perfect – beyond just arcane applications of crowd-psychology and statistical magia that is; stuff that magicians, elite politicians, marketers and church leaders were likewise earnestly seeking after. In esoteric circles, it was believed that mastering such occult knowledge of the collective-unconscious, especially in the modern world of social and mass medias, crowded cities and ever growing, globally-spanning organisations, would help make possible, even more powerful control and manipulation techniques, and possibly shape even more Orwellian states than is currently possible using tech and economics mostly.

The difference between him and most tread-of-the-mill magicians and the mundane psychologists trying to leverage these arcana was that, he wasn't satisfied with practical work in the physical world, but was ever

polishing and exploring his ideas inside of the astral and spiritual realms; less known, and even less explored by most, besides a few gurus who had long identified the blurry lines between these parallel universes, or who had mastered the deeper aspects of the Art of Memory. His experiments often took place inside of what might be considered to be special lucid dreams, induced skillfully, using rituals, which many of his peers in the MaxiDozi referred to as WILDs. He was one of the best at the technique in his group, and was always seeking ways of perfecting it even further. "There's no such thing as mere sleep," he had once said to students he was mentoring in the craft, "Every time you sleep, especially where dreaming is possible, it's an opportunity to engage the mind and spirit, in things more noble than mere rest. And it doesn't mean denying the body rest." So, in his asomatous self, he had ventured to places less known to mortals, and there indulged his fascination for the mysterious and bizarre.

However, while enjoying the epic experiment he was conducting in the astral, and where most of the elements were under his control, something totally out of control emerged onto the scene. He was caught unawares!

One of the birds, a black duck, refused to fly into an ovoid formation he was trying to induce upon the surface of the waters. He would exert force to put it back into line, but it would flap its wings emphatically, quack furiously, and then arduously attempt to fly off into the air – against a constraining force that could not be seen. *No, this duck is probably different*, he finally concluded, as he let go, instead watching to see what it would do.

The enraged duck, thrashing the water as it abandoned its sedated peers, seemed to be flying away at first, but then turned around, running straight towards the wizard who had been trying to enslave it all the while. It rarely happened, that in such lucid dreams he could be faced with a circumstance he couldn't willingly control – this one seemed impossible though! Shocked, but willing to see what would happen, he immediately rose to his feet, and then raised his arms into the air. The black robe he was wearing fluttered like a flag behind him, thanks to the rush of wind, at the cliff where he was standing. The obstinate duck was approaching still..

He was ready to strike it with a spell if it had dared approach any closer, but as the aberrant thing it was, the duck started morphing as it approached the cliff, simultaneously decelerating too. Finally, what had started out as a duck had successfully transformed itself into the shape of

a woman, as it perched upon the ground, a few feet from where the startled wizard was standing. He was very impressed, but also felt insecure inside of the very world he had been composing with his own mind. *This is a serious intruder*, so he told himself.

The intruder did not greet him or introduce herself, instead she mocked him saying, “Whatever tricks you are building for them, would definitely never work upon the likes of me. You should have known already...” Did he know her?

“Sure, this magic can't readily fight its own kind. Who are you my visitor?” the wizard asked, while studying the contender that had joined him on the cliff.

“Are you the one in-charge of the shrine?” the furious woman asked.

He continued studying her, admiring not just her magic or her resistance to his, but also the persona she had projected. She was not wearing much, besides a wrapper skirt made of black and ash-white goat skin, neatly decorated with black shells and rings of metal in shapes reminiscent of talismans and the true mistresses of the jungle. Her hair was held in locks, with the ends tied into elaborate knots having wooden pins in them – yet another hint of protective magic. Her breasts were dressed in chocolate-brown paint, possibly made of termite-hill soil. She wasn't even concerned about the way he was looking at her obscenely.

“I asked a question old man, are you the one controlling that damn shrine?” she asked, starting to materialise a grisly looking jaw-bone in her right hand, and threatening to step closer.

“Oh, sorry. Which shrine? We don't operate any shrines?” the man, who really didn't look aged, replied.

“No shrines? Have you abandoned the one in Bitanga to the demons and raving ghosts of the place then?” asked the woman, as she stepped closer.

“Woman, I think I know you...” said the wizard, holding out a hand to greet her. She refused to take or shake it.

“We prefer to call them labs,” the man went on, “and indeed, I'm the current caretaker,” he said, withdrawing his arm in contempt. “It's our spirit lab. So, what do you want? We aren't selling any magic and have no spirits available for hire at the moment.”



The woman, who also had a substantial amount of her body covered in black ash-paint, but with streaks of white etched in various places – describing elaborate geometric designs in some, smiled a bit, and then lowered her weapon.

“My child is trapped in there, and you must know about it,” the woman said, looking straight into his eyes.

“You mean someone broke into the lab?” the wizard asked, rather surprised.

“I’m not sure why, but I was woken up this night,” said the witchy woman, “only to discover that my grand-daughter wasn’t in bed, and later divined she was inside your damned shrine.” She looked out into the distance, watching as the birds scattered about haphazardly, no more displaying any coordination or harmonious dance. Her mind seemed to be filled with confusion of the same kind, except she stayed put.

“By the way, I’m Frugor Isaza, of the MaxiDozi”, the man introduced himself, watching, as she gazed at the chaos in the distance, after he’d withdrawn his wondrous charms upon her arrival.

“You are Nyamaizi of Bitanga, the famous doctor, right?” he asked, as he exhibited an intriguing magical feat before her; he held out his left palm, so it could hover above the sand scattered about on the ground, and then he made the sand to start amassing, as magnetised iron dust or filings would in response to a strong magnet. He then proceeded to make it swirl round and round, as though a big whirlwind or cyclone were manifesting in the scaled-down world of the tiny ants and flies – which were being swept about chaotically, as others fled in fright. To prove his point even more, he ensured that none of the sand particles composing his miniaturised sand-storm would wander off, despite the strength of the wind blowing towards and over the cliff where they stood. Then he crowned off his little exhibition, with some stunning wizardry; one after the other, in the sand maelstrom, were formed, successive, impressive depictions of various, hazy but distinct shapes; an elephant, a tree, an enraged lion, a drum,...

No, his intruder wasn’t that impressed, or she wanted to prove a point as well. She pointed at the little storm with her weapon of a beastly jaw-bone, and suddenly, inside the storm she hadn’t formed, a fire started to form, swirling about with the sand, dissolving and disfiguring every shape he was trying to form. She had succeeded in proving it wasn’t easy to astound her. Instead, he was impressed at her display of high skill. He knew her well, as

did the other MaxiDozi adepts who knew of the history of Bitanga, the home to their daemonic lab. They respected her, even if her magic and witchcraft had remained trapped in ancient forms used by the Cwezi and other primitive African sage tribes. Theirs had advanced both in scope and form, to embrace not just modern science and technology, but also the native magics of distant lands, such as the orient and occident. Heck, they had even incorporated into the craft, bits of Inca and Aztec mysticism. The MaxiDozi were the modern heirs of the African esoteric tradition, and they were not just magicians, but were likewise prominent members of their communities – judges, surgeons, lawyers, bishops and priests, engineers and university professors (like Isaza himself), who lived ordinary lives in the face of the public, but who maintained and coordinated their esoteric work in the darkness of night, and in various occult locations all across Africa. No, they were not just curious seekers or superstitious fellows like the more popularly known charlatans of the commercialized arts; they endeavored to use their esoteric skills in informing and advancing human potential, and this beautifully spread into the various fields and mundane work, to which each had their calling in exoteric life. Even the eclectic Freemasons, Rosicrucians and Thelemites, feared and respected many of them, mostly for their arcane, creative, and rather adhoc esoteric skills, grounded in a tradition that had survived through the ages, preserved from alien corruption, by infamous mages deep in the less explored pockets of mystical Africa.

“Yes, it is me, and we have no time to waste exchanging looks and fighting petty magic games that you seem to love so much. I said, my daughter, also an important apprentice of mine, is being held hostage inside your labs. So, are you going to help me get to her or do you want me to break in and destroy your delicate work?” Nyamaizi was pacing about like a peripatetic philosopher in deep, but enraged contemplation.

“Definitely!” Isaza replied, “Though I don’t know, nor have anything to do with your child, or how she ended up inside our labs. I’ll definitely be glad to help resolve the matter, if you can give me just a moment, so I can return to my more functional working space.” His tone implied he had finally abandoned his ego-touting games and was ready to collaborate with a fellow senior. Since it involved a lab special to their order, and for which he was directly responsible, and mandated to keep both secret and secure, he had no option but to get involved no matter what. *So much could be at stake*, the thought was imprinted clearly across his mind.

“So, you mean you can't do it from here?” asked Nyamaizi sounding disappointed at his later remark.

“Not that I can't do it here,” said Isaza defensively, “but this is not the ideal place to perform such work, especially as this, is inside of my mind. I expect you understand. I need to return home, and use the right transportation means.”

“I have a medium through whom I've managed to reach you. I could get out, and let you use her, if that's a 'right transportation means' for you too” suggested Nyamaizi.

“Oh! That's great then. I thought you were working alone. In that case, give me just a moment, and I shall be there with you. But be kind enough, and don't try to force into the lab until I arrive. There's possibly been a breach in one of the spirit-vaults, or someone leaked some energy to one of the angrier guys in there, and you don't want to breach the barriers of the lab any further,” Isaza explained, while starting to walk towards the edge of the cliff, as though he were preparing to exhibit a flamboyant suicide...

“Fine. I know the protocol, and so wouldn't do to someone's shrine, what I wouldn't like being done to mine,” Nyamaizi affirmed.

“Okay, so what's the real name of this medium I'm meant to possess?” asked Frugor Isaza.

“Her working name is 'Ninka Mary', and please, don't disrupt or meander into her apprentice self. I still need her after this work.”

“If she's been properly trained, she wouldn't let me into her private persons, I just hope she's strong enough to contain me though.”

“We are good with what we do Isaza, stop belittling us,” said Nyamaizi as both of them laughed.

She walked over to him just as he was about to jump off the cliff, and held out her hand to him. He turned, drew closer to her, and pecked her hand, before smiling in her face, and then went on to jump right off the cliff, into a lake that had turned rather murky and dark, and which seemed like a bottomless maelstrom into whose eye he'd chosen to vanish. “Ok, I get it,” said Nyamaizi as she herself prepared to quit the realm in a different way. “You boys love storms.” He was returning to his waking state, and as the astral landscape faded away, on the other end of the realm, Nyamaizi was likewise opening her eyes, and letting go of her medium's head.

\* \* \* \* \*

He had been sleeping, rather, sleep-working, inside of one of his specialised sleep chambers in the lab. It was a small lab inside of his modernist mansion, which was strategically built on top of a hill in Entebbe. To visitors of his home, and even some of his maids, it was just one of the reading rooms that only he could ever use. None ever seemed to care though – as if the room had something else that made it invisible to curiosity. However, he had an even more clandestine room, and this one could only be reached from a secret door behind the dressing mirror in his bedroom. It was technically called a psychomanteum, and was bigger and more elaborate in terms of its contents than any other room in the same edifice.

He woke up from the inclined chair upon which he had been sitting, a blank, voluminous book with pale pages still open – at a tiny table in front of where he had been seated all the time. A strange book, as despite being blank to the ordinary eye, held many an arcane formula, which only the trained could evoke from its pages – not by reading, but by recalling what had not been written. He closed the imposing tome and walked out of the private “reading” chamber, where the dream experiment had been taking place.

It was deep in the night, and almost everyone else in the home was sleeping, but given the size of his house, none could have even guessed he was still awake and walking about. For extra measure, he wore no shoes, no slippers, and had all the lights in the corridors off – only the cats in the house might have known of his deviant side. He crept back into their bedroom – one of two, and slowly, avoiding making any noise that would arouse his sleeping wife, walked over to the beautiful mirror, touched something at the top of its frame, which caused an almost inaudible ‘click’ sound, followed by a sliding of the entire mirror to the side, after which he walked into his more ominous chamber. Once inside, he pressed another button on the wall besides the entrance, and the mirror slid back into position on the other side. He was inside, and it was intentionally ominously dark.

Another visitor to the room could have easily knocked haphazardly into things, but his experience working inside those four walls had given him a spatial memory of where each and every device was carefully placed. He did not bother to even turn on the lights – there was a neon, purplish-

violet bulb, and another reddish one that he often turned on if the light was meant to add to the nature of work taking place, but that night, he did not really need any of them. Instead, he walked to one of the tables in the room, and lit one of the candles there. It was a big, black one, held in place by a curious candle stand; a polished human skull with a gold-rimmed hole bored into the cranium, and inside of which the candle sat.

After lighting the candle, he opened a drawer on the same table, and then pulled out two small bottles. One was a special fragrance that he sparingly sprinkled into the dark, vacant orbs of the skull; the other he shook frantically, before pulling out the cork that sealed it, and then taking a small sip from it. He put both bottles back into the drawer, but before locking it, he took out a silvery pendant with a metallic-black square medallion upon it, which had the sigil of the MaxiDozi etched upon it in a greenish, phosphorescent material, making it admirably glow in the dark. He wore the pendant and then closed the drawer shut.

He picked up the illuminating, pleasantly smelling skull from its abode on the table, and walked with it towards the other side of the dark room, whose walls, floor and ceiling were deliberately colored black – visually sealing out the external world, but actually drawing it all in! The floor was generously covered with a black, velvety rug, which felt pleasant to walk on barefoot. He approached the thing; a large coffin, similarly painted black, but which had the visage part taken out. For his size and height, the coffin was definitely oversize, but that was intentional too. He opened the lid of the impressively built casket, and inside it, was nothing, but mostly empty space, bounded on all sides by foamy padding clothed in rich immaculate satin. At the foot of the coffin had been placed a small pillow, as though whichever body was meant to rest inside were supposed to cushion its feet. There was also a small, golden bell sitting inside the otherwise empty vessel of death. There was a circular groove in the base of the coffin, right below the missing visage glass – if the coffin lid were to be closed, and carefully, he lowered the skull into that groove, making it sit right where a hopefully dead human occupant would have rested their head.

But it was not just the skull that was going in; he disrobed himself entirely, so that he remained naked, though the glowing pendant remained suspended around his neck – like how meticulous boarding school kids wear their key-rings around the neck all the time. He then proceeded to

step inside the coffin, which was seated directly upon the rug. He went in standing, facing the side where the skull was – the head of the coffin, but then, he sat, and slept with his head towards the foot of the coffin, resting it on the small pillow. He then reached out with his right hand and pulled the lid of the coffin using a small handle attached onto the inner-side of the lid, right above where his chest was. The coffin was then sealed, everywhere, except for the opening right above the candle in the skully-holder. He then drew his eyes shut; already starting to get heavy from whatever mysterious sedative he'd ingested from the bottle.

The only words that came out of him thereafter were likely a projection spell or random blubbing as his spirit quit the body, and journeyed into its new host on the other side of the country... The words were:

*Te, creatura terrae. Sed anima non est.  
Mors liberat te. Per mortem, et factus est vivens.  
Nunc Dedi spiritum tuum, et induere novum corpus corpore Ninka Maria.  
Mortem mihi induite novum hominem.*

His left hand was holding the bell, and while muttering those barbarous words, he would repeatedly shake it, filling the crypt with a sonorous, hypnotic chime. Soon, he was gone, though not physically dead.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ninka, Ninka, are you there?” Nyamaizi asked, trying to test if her medium was still hanging around. She did not reply, only kept tossing and turning in an enthralled manner. She watched, waiting for the signal to arrive.

She dropped her arms from the walls of the church, and then stopped her movements. Nyamaizi held her shoulder, shook her a bit, and then asked again, “Ninka, are you still there?”

“It’s me,” a male voice replied instead.

“You who?”

A somewhat muffled response issued from the semiconscious girl...

“Ubanga”

“Banga?” wondered the witch.

“I come in the name of Banga, but call me ‘Isaza’”.

“Oh, finally. Isaza? What took you so long?” Nyamaizi asked, somewhat surprised at that name and the mention of an obscure Ganda deity.

“Well, I’m finally here. Let’s get started soon, shall we?” the new, dominant persona inside of Ninka’s body replied.

“Where should we be getting in from?” asked Nyamaizi, as Ninka stood up, stretching and yawning.

“The back side, that’s where we should go,” said Isaza, now operating Ninka’s body, and walking towards the building’s rear. Nyamaizi followed suit from behind, becoming the assistant, where Ninka had served just a while before.

They walked all the way to the sacristy without exchanging a word. Isaza would pause every couple of steps, and listen, by placing his ears to the walls of the church. Nyamaizi didn’t echo his acts, but would instead pause and wait for him to move on before likewise moving on.

“It could be one or more of them that’s gotten loose. Perhaps two or a twin.” he said, as they approached the doors of the sacristy.

“How many do you keep inside?” asked Nyamaizi, thinking of the terror her Trudy must be putting up with, faced with multiple escapees from the entrapped MaxiDozi legions inside.

“It’s sometimes tricky determining the multiplicity of spirits, and especially for demons, as they often can combine in nefarious ways, and claim to be a single entity,” said Isaza, sounding uncertain indeed, “but we might have collected close to 20 or so entities inside, also counting the spirits of trapped humans and a few nature spirits.”

Nyamaizi’s heart leaped inside of her – not from awe, but woe. She proceeded to ask, “And you trust that it’s just about two that are on the loose?”

“Normally, I can easily tell them apart, based on their astral-aural signatures, but from out here, I seem to only distinguish about two.”

Isaza walked over to the sacristy door, and tried turning the lock, after uttering some words and performing the sign of Peter’s cross twice. To Nyamaizi, he seemed like a pretentious Catholic priest, and she laughed at his gesture silently. He seemed to be fumbling with the lock, instead of opening it, and she wondered if he didn’t really need a key or if the door hadn’t been locked from inside.

“Don’t you think it’s locked from the other side?” suggested the otherwise impatient witch.

Isaza replied, "If the villains are wise, then yes, they probably locked it from inside." He let go of the lock, and took a step back.

Nyamaizi approached the door, but she did not touch it; she looked to the window not far from it, and then suggested, "She could be watching us from that window, maybe we should try to ask her to come open the door?"

Isaza shook Ninka's head, and then replied, "If she's been inside there for a while, I doubt she has enough energy left to move about."

He went on, "These creatures suck a lot of energy when they come into contact with living beings, and if she still had enough left, I would probably sense it from here. So, we don't want to waste her power, instead, let's find a smarter way to get inside."

Nyamaizi, rather disappointed with the said 'in-charge' of the place, angrily replied, "But we are then wasting time! I thought you knew your way around this place?"

He walked away from the steps, leaving the angered old woman by herself. A few metres away, he called on her to come join him. Nyamaizi declined, saying she was going to try getting in by herself.

"Imagine what would happen to this place and its people, if we accidentally let those demonic powers escape," said Isaza.

"So what then do you suggest? We sit here and wait as my daughter and whoever she's inside there with gets utterly sapped of all life?"

"No, we are definitely going to do something, I just was trying to think of an effective way to trick the powers into submission, or at least distract them, so we can use a spell to open the door without letting them out. We also need an alternative host to give to them, and unlike the Christ, we can't convince them to take host inside of pigs or goats. We need to lure them with something more humane, so as not to disgrace them."

"Why would you care so much for them since they are already slaves to you, and I bet many, if not all of them, are accursed in some way?" asked Nyamaizi rather surprised.

"Yes, they might be slaves, but to really work well, we need to also treat them honorably sometimes. What is a master, if he has no loyal servants? If you can't trade with these demons well, you can easily upset and be overpowered by them. So I treat them like maids in a house – you control, manipulate and even use them, but have to feed them well, try to



keep them happy and ignorant of their slavery, so as to use them better,” the adept of demonology assured her.

“So, do you finally have such a ‘safe’ plan for the arrest of these unholy maids of yours?” asked Nyamaizi.

He walked further, and then stopped. Ninka knelt on the ground with one knee, and then started tapping on the ground with both her hands. The sound produced was hollow and sonorous – he was hitting on something metallic, though seemingly buried in the ground. He then stood up, and dancing in a pattern that involved waltzing, and some jumping up and down, he again knelt, and did the tapping with Ninka’s hands once more. The old witch saw him do it, and immediately knew what her partner was trying to do – it was a stealth grave, and he was dancing over it, as a preliminary spell to awaken whatever was lurking inside.

“How come we never knew of graves being scattered all over this place?” asked Nyamaizi in a low tone.

Isaza finally stopped the dancing and tapping – which involved banging on the ground eighteen times in total, and then he rummaged in the grass for something; a handle!

“Didn’t I tell you this is private property?” replied Isaza, laughing at her astonishment.

“Not in Bitanga my dear,” said Nyamaizi, walking closer to see what he was doing.

“Well, I’m surprised you and your disciples hadn’t ever suspected we would keep some roots aside, knowing how this entire village loves to steal from each other.”

He tugged on the small handle with both hands, after clearing away some weeds and earth, and finally lifted up the lid of what would have easily been mistaken for a manhole cover. It was a rare kind of grave indeed, and surely a covert one as well, given how the exterior camouflaged it. They both knelt beside the open hole, peeking into the darkness inside. It also smelled putrid as any violated grave probably should.

“How many are inside?” asked Nyamaizi.

“We put them in while standing, so normally, about four or five bodies could fit inside, but I guess you stole one because I can only feel three skulls,” he was already reaching inside the hole with his hands, touching

about, checking to see whether all was well with the dead, standing comrades. Nyamaizi laughed at his remark, and then replied to him, "Indeed you are lucky we'd never found out about this one, because anyone would pay a good price to get their hands on a man who'd spent most of their time sleeping while erect!"

"These corpses are ideal soldiers indeed," said Isaza, giggling as he started to pull one of them out of the cylindrical grave, carefully.

"Do you use them for anything besides waging war?" asked Nyamaizi, as she helped him hold one of the poles that was supporting the cadaver's frame.

Isaza chuckled, and then assured her, "If the *Abarusura* were still fighting today, and if the Baganda or another tribe were to dare our king anymore, I guess we'd find good use for them as invincible zombie mercenaries."

"I know of two seniors in the Islands of Ukerewe, who still use their art to make such strong folks do the fishing for them. When living fishermen or travelling tourists encounter these strange beings on the lake – some even during day, most times, they either think some sarcastic fisherman has abandoned a scarecrow on his boat, or they realise the inevitable, and calling on the wrong names, often meet their demise," said Nyamaizi.

They set the body to lie on its back against the supporting poles and started to undo the straps of sisal rope and barkcloth that had been used to fasten it to the ladder-like poles. There were herbs that had been inserted into its mouth and also tied to the parts around its genitals. It was Isaza who removed those, before carefully placing them aside, wrapped together with the ropes and barkcloth they had just undone. "The stench of one is enough," said Nyamaizi, as she hurried to draw the lid of the grave back into place. Isaza giggled.

They both stood up, Isaza besides and towards the head of the corpse that was sleeping horizontally for the first time after a very long stretch. Nyamaizi was staring at its limbs and torso, and tugging at them with her staff, as though checking to see if the dead one might still possess some remote life in them. It was a common prank played by night-dancers on their helpless and certainly dead victims; sort of like how a sadist cat might continue to poke and tug at a rat, even hours after it had finished killing it, especially if it had sketchy plans of eating it, or if it killed

merely out of instinct, such as some psychopaths and sinister sorcerers might do.

“It’s definitely dead and useless in this state,” said Isaza, kicking lightly at the exposed cranium of someone who might have been a man. He went on, “I need to reanimate him, but in a rather special way.”

“Are you trying to say I wouldn’t be able to do it?” asked Nyamaizi.

“If we were to perform the normal procedures on him, he would just be a puppet or doll, walking about with invisible threads,” said Isaza, before adding, “We want to use him to break in, and then have him serve as an entrapment vessel for whichever number of demons are reigning free inside there.”

“So, shall we use him in this state?”

“No, I trust you know what we need to do already...” Isaza replied, arms akimbo, while contemplating their next move.

“I hope you aren’t planning on sending me back home then?”

“Exactly!” said he, triumphantly, “We need some fresh blood as that’s how I can most readily recompose him, and lie to the spirits that they have yet another victim to occupy!”

“Will you pay for my goats?” asked Nyamaizi rather seriously.

“It’s you trying to help your daughter, right? But yes, we could work out something since I also need to punish these hooligans too.”

“Okay then,” said the witch, walking off to a patch of grass, while pointing her walking cane into the air. To anyone who knew her well, the cane never was meant to aid in actual walking, though most would never even guess what she really used it for, especially the uninitiated.

Before setting off, she asked without turning to look at Ninka, “Is there anything more that I might need to bring back with me?”

“Since we might need to exorcise them, probably make sure the goat has enough blood for both purposes, but also bring some protective herbs and anything that might help us recover your precious daughter intact,” Isaza replied.

It's then that Nyamaizi started her own kind of dance, tapping on the ground with her staff every once in a while. About two minutes later, she stopped and just stood there, her feet angled widely, the cane held by hands outstretched, its one end pointing at and touching the earth before her. Her witch game must have been perfected over time, because,

instead of walking or running back home – which might have wasted time, she slowly rose off the ground in a most bewildering manner, while humming some tune that seemed haphazard. And then, about half a meter off the ground, she pointed the staff in the air ahead of her, and took off!

She was not flying high, but was instead levitating about a metre or so above the ground, and was moving at such a terrific speed, she vanished from sight in no time. Additionally, she didn't use the same route they'd used on foot earlier on – instead, she ventured via people's gardens and backyards, eventually finding her way home in a true awe-inspiring manner.

# Chapter XII

While Nyamaizi was away, Ninka, or rather, Frugor Isaza, who was possessing her body, decided to use the moment to explore not just his fantasies, but also use the opportunity, while possessing that able, beautiful and liberated female vessel, to harness more spiritual power by summoning the Cyprian angel Lilith, considered by the MaxiDozi to be the preferred wife of Samael, their preferred savior against the foes of the darker realms. His plan was to invoke Lilith into Maria's body, and then evoke Samael to her. If communion were to happen between these two, then he could harvest vast amounts of residual energy from their union, even if this lasted only a short while.

Like many occultists, the MaxiDozi always sought means of exploiting dark powers to reap energy that could then be transmuted into other possibly benevolent ends. He was not really concerned as the body he was using was not his. In her state, as with most mediums, she could not do anything to prevent the desires of her guest from dominating her - even if that meant endangering her life and sanity in the process! *It is a risky path, even if highly rewarding to some.*

The puppet paced about for a while, compelled to drag its feet along the bare earth, in an act meant to trace a sigil onto the earth. To an observer lacking knowledge of what was really happening, it would all seem like some haphazard dance. In the occupied palace that is her mind, her guest was visualising something, and was using her body movements to project the astral command into the physical. It was not only her body that was being charmed, but the ground and air about her as well.

Isaza had a powerful link to Lilith, and could easily channel her – you could readily consider him a black, hedonic tantric. As the licentious essence of Lilith started displacing him – a projected human principal, its presence started visibly transforming the physical form of the host, Ninka, and this would last, for as long as it was present. Soon, Ninka started exhibiting terrific qualities, as her body morphed into that of a different woman, much younger and more sinister too.

The curves became more pronounced as she danced about more furiously, to no one but the night. The *lesu* dropped to the ground, and soon her shoulders were exposed as more cloth got loosened and exposed more of her new, striking physique. The eyes were morphing, as did her bosoms, lips and lower limbs. The old Ninka was fading out, being replaced by a shapelier persona, and all the while, the mastermind of this invoked shape-shifting was enjoying every moment of it, from a dissociated existence frame.

But what had brought in beauty, probably invited madness to come along as well. The woman became hysterical; laughing uncontrollably, at nothing else but herself. Or was she enjoying the pranks being played on nature? The exhumed corpse, abandoned to its incapacitation, suddenly seemed to be animated by the power in the air. Its head turned towards the hysterical woman, and remained fixated on her, making it seem like a thunderstruck zombie, in an abandoned apocalyptic set.

Her chaotic dance did not last very long though, and onto the ground she finally dropped, her hands furiously rummaging all over her body, as though seeking something that was not being found. She was moaning loudly, while muttering obscene things that included petitions to her ethereal lover, seeking his quick manifestation. A detestable presence, she was doing dirty and obscure things with the host's body, and her tongue emerged from that foul, enchanting mouth in a preternatural manner, tracing things in the physical and etheric air - dark, sensual things. Ninka's body and aura were getting supercharged. If a living mortal had been watching any of it, they wouldn't have the slightest power to escape her soul gravitating seductions. Isaza, observing the emerging scene like a bedazzled drone pilot, was feasting in the astral, but with some restraint, as soon, the true owner of the show would arrive.

She was lewd in her gestures towards the unresponsive corpse, and getting impatient with herself, finally bid it to approach immediately, gesturing to the undead thing with her fingers. She would trace things in the air, and then would propel those fingers inside of her fruit. Very much Lilith! Her power was permeating the air, and for a while, something, somewhere on the corpse, even twitched! She seemed to protract and contract in various places, as something – her awaited savior, finally emerged onto the scene.

It appeared as a horned black viper, whose species isn't easy to describe, because, unlike the *Cerastes cerastes*, which would definitely be misplaced on that terrain, it was neither earthy in looks, nor yellowish as the desert devil would be. It approached the tormented woman's body with speed, passing right above the soiled, putrefied limbs of the corpse that was facing her, and which had failed to engage the angel of lust. Its head was large in proportion to the rest of its scaly body, and it possessed large, dazzling eyes. With its approach, the intensity of her yearning kept escalating, hitting a peak when finally, the body of the transfigured medium and the serpent met.

The diabolical partner crept and played between her spread legs. He twisted around one of her legs, then sneaked up her tummy, from beneath the loosened dress. He crept up to her neck, and all the while, continued to twist and turn about her, hissing incessantly, while she laughed like a maniac, suspended in ecstasy. The union was already happening, and was not taking place just inside that body, but in the empyreal realms beyond as well. Samael was present in the serpent – as the clever Isaza had desired, and Lilith's person was the third inside the medium's temple. "It's called 'the lurid expansion of consciousness'," so the MaxiDozi claimed, "and that's how you grow a temple."

The fangs finally approached her lips, as his tongue played with her jutting one. If Ninka had been present, maybe she would quail, but her commanding essence really loved deviant feats of expression. She soon was suckling not just the tongue, but the lips of the fallen, wise beast. Isaza was experiencing more than he had wished for. Eventually, the crown found its way down, and as her hands played with the tip of his tail, the rest of his body twisted about her, the seduction was finally answered.

The horns could have torn her, but this Maria was too miry already, and the eyes, head and fangs all slid into that occult palace of hers. Soon thereafter, she was experiencing rapture, and the other guest, Isaza, was harvesting that power, skillfully and carefully, but also basking in the bliss as well. The horns got hooked inside her, and there was definitely blood, but it was all part of the ecstasy, and only the restored medium would complain – if at all the wounds wouldn't miraculously heal thereafter.

The ritual intensified, as her cries and mantras turned really black, and some of her whimpering would not even be audible to the human ear. Eventually, they exploded, and the wave of bliss, if at all it were a physical thing, might have thrown the hapless corpse backwards by a couple of feet, if not hopelessly shredding it. Nevertheless, the effects of that event would sustain scars on the person of both Isaza, and the censored, passively present Ninka; the presence of the serpent in that manner, can't leave the human creature the same.

For a while, the body of Ninka slept flat on the ground, convulsing uncontrollably, while the serpent whipped her skin with its tail in a manner that would have made the real owner cry with pain. Waves of contractions were sweeping along its body, as her limbs got equally squeezed in sync. *He isn't getting outside of her yet? Such strange, and illicit pleasures...* Isaza, wondering.

The serpent finally ejected from inside of her, as her moans declined, and her true form started to be restored. It all happened rather too fast, and quick as it had come, the serpent slithered away, back into the dark, and soon, the person of Lilith fully quit her host as well. Isaza resumed control of Ninka's exploited, but greatly energised body. He refused to awaken her, as he completed the work of fully restoring her. She wouldn't know what had actually happened to her self, or he didn't intend her to. None but the undead, who couldn't have given credible testimony, witnessed the acts from the outside. Further still, though he'd been asked not to tamper with her subconscious mind, the acts that had just concluded did have an impact – a lasting one, on the sexual character of Ninka Maria, but they would only manifest much later, after the MaxiDozi had long left her body.

Soon, Nyamaizi would return, and Isaza did not want to give the impression of having misused the body of her precious apprentice. He bid the body to get dressed, and rise back onto its feet. "That was epic!" he muttered, through her wet lips, as he resumed full control of her every part.

"With this newfound energy, these stupid demons better prepare for a real thrashing," he said, stretching and clenching her fists in the air. Out of pure pleasure, he walked over to where the dead thing was still lying, and kicked it in the ribs while laughing and scorning it, mostly for its pathetic, impotent state during the orgiastic ritual just completed.



“Some men and women,” he said to the dead man, “are walking about this paradise called earth, and yet, they are as impotent and devoid of all vitality as you are. Even with the blood flowing through their veins, and the air filling their lungs, they are essentially dead!”

He laughed some more, and then paced about the place, occasionally closing eyes and continuing to experience the bliss still lurking on in his mind. He was really happy, and the joy seeped through into Ninka's lovely face, even though it was unforgivably dark everywhere.

\* \* \* \* \*

When she returned, it was in a most humorous way, except, it was not for drama, but out of necessity and in accord with her skills, that she chose to sit upon the goat, and ride in the air! She was carrying a sack upon her back, filled with tools of the work left to complete. One hand, the left, held onto the left horn of the goat for stability, while the other held out her wooden staff, pointing in the direction opposite to where they were headed. The goat was not at ease given the mode of transport it had to endure – it was bleating and wriggling its feet in the air, but that was all it could do; something more powerful was moving it forward at terrific speed.

Just how did this magic work that could let Nyamaizi hover in and then move through the air with such speed? It is something Frugor Isaza and his learned sorcerers referred to as “levitation magic”. To pull it off, a few essential things were happening - to her and her luggage. On the astral plane, she had predominantly assumed the earth form, a feat she was capable of doing, thanks to the aid of the subterranean spirit, Nyamiyonga. This, then, caused her, as well as things in contact with her aura, to assume qualities sympathetic to the real earth. Then, assuming a configuration like that of a horse-shoe magnet – a feat executed by keeping her feet apart, she then was able to leverage her earth polarity, and projecting it back towards the real earth, got repelled away from it. Properly balanced, lift would be the consequence, making levitation possible.

It was a rather difficult manoeuvre, but not one out of the reach of sorcerers like Nyamaizi, and surely not wholly impossible for anyone with the will to learn and master it. But, besides trying these things in the astral, most practitioners couldn't pull it off in the physical – weak wills

mostly to blame, and lack of proper understanding of the principles involved. It is because of this and her other great feats, that she was much respected, even by the MaxiDozi, who hoped to harness much of her raw talent as well.

To move in any direction while levitating, she employed a curious mix of Newton's third law of motion and some more arcane set of principles, which were not documented anywhere else but in her head – just as they had been taught to her by a special confidant during her formative years.

Basically, she needed to create thrust, and because she wasn't leveraging any physical propellant as would those engaged in mundane flight, her source of thrust was something totally esoteric, and the aerodynamics truly preternatural. There is a family of aerial spirits natively associated with, and also called *misambwa*, and when the names of some, such as Kibuka's, were vibrated correctly, it would cause ripples of force to flow out in the direction willed, and when acting on air, this would cause the necessary propellant force. It was not just physics, it was physics dominated by sorcerous metaphysics, and it miraculously worked! Somehow, this knowledge was not entirely exclusive to her, or so, many would believe. In several parts of Uganda, it was part of the popular modern myths, that some surviving sorcerers, and especially the *basezi* – so-called night-dancers, possessed knowledge of how to both levitate and propel themselves through the air at night, while stalking their unsuspecting neighbors and the dead.

Anyway, soon, the senior flying master veered into sight, and slowing down as she approached the same exact spot of departure, gently landed back on the ground. Isaza was watching her arrive, from behind Ninka's eyes, and he clapped, and cheered admiringly, in response to her astonishing exhibitionism.

"In another lifetime," he said, "you would have been considered a great and mad scientist, but unfortunately, such a day and time has yet to arrive. I must admit, however, that you would be a great addition to our team, when we head out North, later this year, assuming you are interested." She only smiled, and shook her head – she was not interested.

Her attention, soon as she perched onto the ground, shifted to the sack she had brought with her. She poked about in the sack for something,

and was not paying attention to Isaza's flattering. She pulled out a kaolin clay bowl and a knife, and then knelt down beside the goat.

"If you can't save my daughter in time, I fear you might even lose the little friendship still lingering between us," she said, as she caressed the goat somewhere above its forearm, before piercing it with her sharp blade, as the thing bleated, but without it running off even though she had not bound it with any rope.

"Shhh shhh," she shushed the animal, as she drew more blood from it into the bowl. "It won't be long, it won't be long I swear," she reassured the creature with a beard.

"We actually need enough," Isaza said, walking over to her.

"There's only so much blood we can get from such a creature during these dry spells," replied Nyamaizi, as she picked some herbs from the sack and applied them to the wound she had caused.

There was blood on her fingers and wrists, and when she handed over the bowl to Isaza, she just licked it off.

"You could have made some nice *kafechi* with this blood," said Isaza, walking over to his mortified friend, "but this guy here needs some life in him..."

Nyamaizi, picking up the sack and following him to where the corpse lay, replied, "It's actually been a very long time since I wasted blood making stew. It's often more precious than then flesh itself, and the spirits definitely love it more than us."

"We have greatly steered away from using blood," said Isaza, as he walked away from the corpse, and picked up a piece of stick. He walked back to where the dead man lay, and started to draw a triangle, and then another – intersecting, and opposing the first, about him.

"Working with blood can be messy in some situations, and has also caused some of our brethren problems. So, we have found ways of drawing the essence out of animals and people, without even having to spill an ounce of their blood," added Isaza, finally standing in front of the frail being, ready to start his work.

"Oh, then your spirits must really be starved! Beware, if they don't get the blood they desire, then one day sooner, they'd get too thirsty and probably turn on you!" said Nyamaizi, laughing loudly into the night.

Isaza dipped one finger into the bowl of blood, which was still warm, and tasted it too.

“No. It’s hard,” he objected. “There’s so many other ways to feed these things, and we have found blood to be actually weak sometimes. For example, I bet we shall find your daughter and her friend unscathed, as the power generated from sex alone, if done right, is enough to feed an extended family of *emandwa*, for probably a couple of days.”

Nyamaizi laughed some more, and even whistled.

She was quick to explain, “Sex is a man’s way of magic. I still prefer blood, and so do many of our folks here. You folks from the cities definitely would need to try other things, as you don’t really have access to the forests, and can’t rear animals for spiritual work.”

Isaza laughed hard, and then remarked, “Actually, one of the blessings of doing magic from the city is that there’s not just more people, but when it comes to sources of energy, especially sexual essence, the girls are in high circulation, and most are very willing to make offerings.”

“Wow! My daughter better not return to Kampala then!” cried Nyamaizi in reaction.

“Well, your granddaughter would probably serve as a priestess, and not as a mere placeholder or altar.”

Nyamaizi did not immediately respond, but after a pause, she asked, “Have you people considered using the waters of the moon?”

“The what?”

“Menstrual blood, instead of ordinary, less potent essence,” she explained to a puzzled Isaza.

“Oh! Yes, I know of some chapters that have gone that route, but not me in particular. Not yet, given I don’t desire to get too attached to the ladies I come across. Is it actually more potent than real blood?”

Nyamaizi sighed. “What do you mean ‘real blood’? It is ‘the real blood’; it’s what contains the germs of life, and from which human life is first formed; what it originally feeds on! Could there be more powerful blood than that?”

Isaza was surely being educated, he admitted, “Fine, I wouldn’t question your wisdom concerning the matter. Infact, I acknowledge how all the girls hitting adolescence could as well easily become dangerous sorcerers, given all the blood they have at their disposal, and a predisposition to wreck havoc!”

“It’s a woman’s best kept-secret, but again, only the initiated would know what to do with their own blood. We need to educate and empower our girls.”

There was a pause as Isaza pondered the new knowledge acquired.  
“Surely, I’ll have to teach these things to my daughter! When the time comes.”

“Okay big boy, stop the thinking and go on with the work!” cried Nyamaizi. “Go ahead and feed him; let’s see how much he can draw from this one bowl.”

She stood watching, as he started performing the reanimating ritual.

First, he signed himself with Peter’s cross, and then holding out his right palm towards the corpse, his index finger pointed down at the thing. He then started to perform that very powerful necromantic spell, in a magical language he cherished, and which he’d once referred to as “Anglo-Hebraic, barbaric macaroni verbiage”. To a passerby, the ritual might have seemed rather sterile, but when he started sprinkling blood at the corpse, while uttering names of celestial and infernal principals, Nyamaizi, who had been standing close and watching, receded to a safer distance, from where she might safely witness a kind of sorcery the MaxiDozi had adapted from their heists in the far North.

(He signed himself in the way of the Christ, sprinkled blood upon the corpse 3 times, and then uttered the words)

*Adonai, Adonai, Adonai our God  
Let this dead man, whom I now baptize Lazaro  
Have the orgone return into him like you did for the widow's child of  
Zaphet  
When you heard the voice of your servant Elijah.*

(He then signed himself in the way of Peter, and took the stick with which he had drawn the interlocking triangles, and used it to draw a square not far from the feet of the dead man. He then stood inside that square, and closed his eyes, as he went on to vibrate a necromantic formula of five unredeemed spirits of the realms.)

*PEGER  
ENLAE  
GISIG  
EAITE*

## *REGEP*

(With each vibration, he would sprinkle yet more blood onto various parts of the corpse.

He then raised his right hand, whose fingers were dripping with the goat's blood, and forming the Hamsa Hand gesture, he then started an even more daring part of the working thus...)

*By the power of the El Eheieh,  
Whose number is One  
The Archangel Metatron of the Chaoth ha-Qadesh  
The ArchDeamons Satael and Moloch of the realm Thamiel  
I summon the essence back into your head  
Awaken oh Lazaro!*

(He lowered it, formed the benediction hand gesture, lowered it into the bowl of blood, and then sprinkled one more time upon the corpse, towards the head. He once more raised his right palm into the air, forming the Hamsa, and then went on...)

*By the power of the El Jah,  
Whose number is Two  
The Archangel Ratziel of the realm Auphanim  
The ArchDaemon Beelzebub of the realm Ghogiel  
I summon the essence back into your brain  
Awaken oh Lazaro!*

(He then lowered the hand yet again, formed the benediction hand gesture, lowered it into the bowl of blood, and then sprinkled onto the forehead. He went on...)

*By the power of the Elohim,  
Whose number is Three  
The Archangel Tzaphkiel of the realm Aralim  
The ArchDaemon Lucifer of the realm Satariel  
I summon the essence back into your heart  
Awaken oh Lazaro!*

(Right hand dropped into the benediction yet again, dipped into the blood, and sprinkled onto the heart. He went on...)

*By the power of El,  
Whose number is Four  
The Archangel Tzadkiel of the realm Chasmalim  
The ArchDeamon Ashtaroth of the realm Agshekeloh  
I summon the essence back into your right arm  
Awaken oh Lazaro!*

(Right hand dropped into the benediction yet again, dipped into the blood, and sprinkled onto the right arm. He went on...)

*By the power of Elohim Gibor,  
Whose number is Five  
The Archangel Khamael of the realm Seraphim  
The ArchDeamon Asmodeus of the realm Golohab  
I summon the essence back into your left arm  
Awaken oh Lazaro!*

(Right hand dropped into the benediction yet again, dipped into the blood, and sprinkled onto the left arm. He went on...)

*By the power of Eloah Va-Daath,  
Whose number is Six  
The Archangel Raphael of the realm Melachim  
The ArchDeamon Belphegor of the realm Tagiriron  
I summon the essence back into your chest  
Awaken oh Lazaro!*

(Right hand dropped into the benediction yet again, dipped into the blood, and sprinkled onto the chest. He went on...)

*By the power of Jehovah Sabaoth,  
Whose number is Seven  
The Archangel Haniel of the Elohim  
The ArchDeamon Baal of the Gharab Tzerek  
I summon the essence back into your right leg  
Awaken oh Lazaro!*

(Right hand dropped into the benediction yet again, dipped into the blood, and sprinkled onto the right leg. He went on...)

*By the power of Elohim Sabaoth,  
Whose number is Eight  
The Archangel Michael of the Beni Elohim  
The ArchDeamon Adrammelech of the realm Samael  
I summon the essence back into your left leg  
Awaken oh Lazaro!*

(Right hand dropped into the benediction yet again, dipped into the blood, and sprinkled onto the left leg.

He went on to perform the final awakening. Already, various parts of the corpse were moving about – the feet were tossing about in the grass, the head was starting to sway uncontrollably and its left hand was rummaging about as well, as though trying to grab onto something.)

*By the power of Adonai Malekh,  
Whose number is Ten  
The Archangel Metatron of the Ashim  
The ArchDeamon Nahema of the realm Nahemoth  
I command thy whole body Lazaro, and thy new spirit, to awaken right now!*

With that final command, he hurled all the remaining blood at the struggling body, as it fought at nothing in particular. With the thrashing of the blood upon its body, it seemed to calm a bit, and even started to wail in a frail voice, as though it had been awakened from some somber nightmare that had drained all its vitality. Nyamaizi was aware of resurrection magic, and occasionally performed primitive forms of it on their victims in the numerous graves they raided around the neighborhoods, but as Isaza had noted, their ancient native techniques could only animate the spirits and not the bodies. Seeing him make the dead body not only move, but also cry and start to speak, really



dumbfounded her. She really had reasons to respect the strange magicians whose maids were holding her daughter hostage.

Isaza stepped out of the square, walked over to the undead and reanimated partner, and tried pulling at its left hand. It turned towards him, and seemed to want to say something, but he knew it would take a couple more minutes for it to be able to function properly. However, he had one more step to execute, which was to address to this new life, the status of its relation to its new creator. He pointed with his index finger at its eyes, after summoning its attention by the name he had given it, "Lazaro", and then spoke thus:

*Hail to the powers of the day  
Hail to the powers of the night  
Hail to the powers of life  
And hail to the powers of death  
Who have made you, Lazaro, return from the dust.*

*By virtue of their power and great wisdom  
Of which I am the living witness  
I assure you awakened man  
You are now granted breath  
And the power to follow my commands and do as I will  
For it is I, and not you  
That hold the keys to your life and eventual return to dust.*

*Hasten then  
Stand up on thy newly replenished feet  
And ask of me what work I have summoned you to do,  
And if you must address me by name,  
Only call me "Master".*

With those last utterances, the corpse, or rather, the undead corpse, started blubbering in acknowledgement, as it struggled to stand; first, putting one hand here, and then a leg there, trying to support itself so it could get up. It failed a couple of times, and then, like a baby learning to stand and walk, it finally stood, unsteadily so, and slowly, erected itself to face its new master.

"Vastar, vasta" the zombie finally managed to address its god!

It was Nyamaizi's turn to clap, as she walked closer, taking steps around the thing, while tapping on the ground, amused that the beast could even react to that!

"It's time to finish the work Lazaro," said Isaza, pointing towards the sacristy for Lazaro to see. He was sounding authoritative and impatient.

"Ego... yeego Vasta," replied Lazaro.

"It speaks plausibly," said Nyamaizi, nodding her head in acknowledgement of Isaza's accomplishment.

"It's actually possible to command them to speak different languages, any language, since the essence animating it has totally nothing to do with the original man, who might have possessed only a fraction of the elegance this resurrected monster has."

And he was right, because if he had been speaking to it in Runyoro, it would have replied in the same language. But when Nyamaizi, speaking in English, asked it to say its name, it promptly, though in the same sketchy manner, replied to her in English: "Nam iz Laza..." It had already started walking towards the door of the sacristy, as Isaza's silent commands – his will, guided it onwards.

Nyamaizi rushed back to her goat, whose final fate was yet to come, and she pulled at its rope, as she held the sack in the other hand, anticipating the long awaited moment to arrive. Isaza was watching the corpse calculate its moves while climbing up the stairs, and he was laughing at it in a very sadistic way. Nyamaizi, touched, compelled him to be nice to the "baby on his first stroll", this only made Isaza crack even more. However, when he saw it hesitate to handle the door lock, he knew, time for laughing was over.

"Lazaro, what's wrong with you?" he asked the thing standing before and gazing at the door without eyes in its sockets.

"Ooww... oow Vasta, door locked," it finally managed to say.

"Don't waste our time old man," said Nyamaizi, approaching with her cane, "what does he have to do then?"

"Knock seven times at the door, Lazaro. Knock seven times, and then wait," ordered Lazaro's master.

It obeyed immediately, and started knocking at the wooden door, without pausing.

"If you're asked who you are, merely say you have a friend inside, and have a message for them," added the necromancer and manipulator.

Nyamaizi giggled silently, and waited to see if indeed the thing without teeth and a rickety form could pull off that sort of deception.

It was seven knocks, seeking permission to be allowed into the shrine of pandemonium, and then Lazaro stood and waited as he had been instructed by the master. “You knock, and then wait,” Isaza had further emphasised. “The door must be opened at their own accord, as that way, you hold power over them, once inside.” Lazaro did not have a pulsating heart, and so did not exhibit as much tension as Isaza and Nyamaizi waiting behind him did. There was just tension and silence. The door did not open yet...

Lazaro muttered something unintelligible:

*R'n gsl wlore slil, vmxl bvz lmgli gslhl wvvih, fil bvz ilfwb gv fyfmwvm Xsirhg?*

And still, further spoke in a dialect neither Isaza nor Nyamaizi understood:

*Nrnylwo mfslmr, trnkfkvngz brgzmbv vbr, bft yvs, ra R'ov vovn ellkvd fpln thvsv wlvds, R zccopt tl vntvi rntl ylfi krngdlm irght nlw.*

There was silence for a while, and then a final utterance...

*Zbzndln zee hlpv, yv whl vntvi hviv. Clmv ln rn lh mzn, vxpvironcvo thv jly la clmmfnrng wrth Svt.*

Isaza silently wiped blood off his arm, onto his host's *gomesi*, and then touched her breast to feel something there. Nyamaizi rested the sack onto the ground, and pulled the goat closer, as it started to bleat, wanting to run off. Something was changing in the atmosphere about them... It was not that magicians could not fear – even the most powerful and experienced of them, such as Nyamaizi, who had been fleeing through the air, and Frugo Isaza who had replicated the Nazarene's sorcery, also knew they could occasionally fall prey to the dark emotion. However, unlike the mundane, these two also knew about the virtues of tapping into that undesirable power.

Nyamaizi reached into her sack, and pulled out a polythene bag. She turned to Isaza and asked him, “Do you have the bowl with you?”

He shook his head, and instead pointed at where the awakening ritual had taken place.

“Why?” he asked her.

“I want to make a fire.”

“It’s wet with blood,” replied Isaza, turning his attention back to Lazaro, who was not making any visible progress beyond those arcane utterances that hadn’t meant anything to them.

Nyamaizi walked to the square, tugging at the goat to follow her. She placed the sack down, beside the bowl. She knelt down on both knees, and her hand reached inside the sack, retrieving a black polythene bag. She opened it, and dipped a hand inside. She returned with ash, which had been mixed with black soil. She poured three handfuls into the bowl, and then spoke a formula over it...

*Ai Kitara, Nyamiyonga Kizima, mukaire kanu  
Ninkusaba oimuke, onsindikire ekyererezi  
Nsindikira omusana gwawe!  
Mpereza omuro gwawe!  
Amani gekizima, nomunyanzigwa, ogasinguze Amani gawe.*

*Unijibu, Ee Bwana, unijibu, ili watu harwa kushuhudia haki hii sasa,  
wajue kwamba Wewe, Bwana, ni moto kweli, na kwamba narwe kushinda  
mioyo yao hivi sasa.*

*Kihikire Kihikire!  
Kagoro Kitara, Mali Kihikire!*

With no match struck, no paraffin or burning coals, the soil caught fire spontaneously! She tied the polythene bag, put it back inside the sack, and holding the flaming bowl in one hand, stood up. She held the light in her right hand, and the sack with her tools of the craft in the other. She tugged at the goat, as they walked back to the stairs, to confront the dark.

She handed the light over to Isaza, and asked him to make sure the corpse gets them inside, or she would start ripping it to pieces in anger. He smiled, took her magic lamp and walked over to Lazaro. He whispered something to him, touched his putrid skull while continuing to say some more things, and then stepped back. Lazaro held the door knob, and turned it. It opened immediately, and the door slowly pulled away into the gloomy sacristy, as Lazaro proceeded to step inside; first

with his left, and then with the right foot. He paused a while, as though something might smash him or blow him to pieces for trespassing, and then he finally disappeared into the dark.

Nyamaizi sighed heavily and whispered to Isaza, "Finally!" Isaza held out his palm to her, indicating that she should hold-on just a while. His eyes were closed, and he seemed to be listening for something... he was surveying the interior, just to be sure it was okay for them to follow their sacrificial new maid. As though something had been watching, suddenly there was sound of chaos and stampede, as things fell, and the sound of loud thuds and bumping into walls, reached the two magicians still outside the dark sacristy. A shriek, a bone cracking, and it was enough for Isaza...

"Quick!" said Isaza, as he rushed up the steps into the sacristy, Nyamaizi following hesitantly from behind him. Soon as he stepped inside, Isaza ignored the embattled cries and the pandemonium, and instead rushed with the light, towards the extreme end of the sacristy, nearly stumbling over Trudy's unmoving body, which was lying helplessly on the floor. When he reached the wall, he touched and moved something, so that there was a loud click sound, and then he drew open a tiny door concealed in the wall.

Nyamaizi had followed him, rushing so, but stopped when she saw where Trudy lay, and then fell down to her knees, breathing fast and noisily. Isaza quickly returned to where she was, holding a huge pendant in his hands – very similar in build, to the one that his real self was wearing on the other side of the world. He compelled Nyamaizi to wear it. In fact, he was holding two of them, and they were both similar. He wore the first, over Ninka's torso, and the other, he passed on to Nyamaizi. She first hesitated to wear it, but then he bid her to do it, or she would not be able to exercise her full powers, while inside their shrine.

"It's the only way for you to hold real power inside these walls," he said to her, as she finally took hold of the chains, and wore the glowing pendant around her neck. Besides the pendant, he also had a large censer in his other hand, suspended with large copper-bronze-like chains that made clashing sounds as he jiggled them about. He walked over to the flames, and pulled one of the chains to open the cover of the censer, which was

already partially filled with bits of sticks and powders. He picked one of the tiny sticks from inside the censer, and then set it alight using the fire Nyamaizi had made, after which he quickly threw it back into the censer with the others.

“I’m not going to be waiting for you,” said Nyamaizi, as her attention returned to her girl.

“No, since we’ve come inside, there can’t be time to waste. I must commence with the binding rite, right away,” Isaza replied, sweating profusely, as he adjusted the censer’s chains and blew into it to get more heat working inside.

“Okay, I’ll proceed without you then,” said Nyamaizi as she turned to her own work.

\* \* \* \* \*

Isaza held the censer high in the air, made swings with it while muttering things silently, and then moved on, to go confront the tormented Lazaro. He took about four steps towards the thing, and then stopped. He turned, and walked towards the door into the sacristy – the one they had entered through. There was a small black disc on the wall, a few inches from its edge; he flipped something – it was a switch, and a dim bluish light glowed in the room from a lone tube high above them on the ceiling. It was dim, flickery, and mixing with the whitish smoke of the incense slowly filling the room, served to add a bit of soothing ambience to the otherwise eerie atmosphere that had only been illuminated by the yellowish-white flames that jutted cautiously out of the bowl of infernal dust.

While Nyamaizi started the shamanic rites to liberate her granddaughter, Isaza delved into a more verbal, exotic and pompous rite. In true MaxiDozi style, his was a mixture of Gnosticism, the Roman rite and bits of Cwezi mysticism... A potent binding rite used mostly to contain malevolent entities they evoked, or in arresting those summoned and harvested for spiritual work. It had been developed and was practised secretly by the MaxiDozi elect.

Hanging between the chains of the censer, was a small golden bell, suspended from the handle like a small pendulum. While moving the censer about, the bell rang as well, and occasionally, even as he ceased to move the censer, it would continue to chime for a while, filling the air with a reverberating sound from the echoes bouncing off the walls. He did this while moving around Lazaro, who was fighting something that wasn't visible, and which seemed to eat at his already vacuous insides.

The undead man would occasionally fall, scream for help, speak in strange tongues that sounded unlike anything native, and amidst all of this turmoil, there would be snaps heard from time to time, as bits of his skeletal structure cracked in one place, and some bits broke-off in another. This would continue and would only intensify as the rite progressed. Isaza's rite was long, and it went like this...

*Enkya ya Enkya, Iguru lyona!*  
*Have mercy on us*  
*Omukama, have mercy*  
*Horus, have mercy*  
*Omukama, have mercy*  
*Horus, hear us*  
*Ruhanga, omunsi*  
*Have mercy on us*  
*Enkya ya Enkya, Mwoyo kwonka!*  
*Have mercy on us*  
*Enkya ya Enkya, Omu wenka!*  
*Have mercy on us*  
*Enkya ya Enkya Owomukuzimu*  
*Have mercy on us*  
*Osiris a true god*  
*Please here us*  
*Isis, her sister and wife*  
*Please redeem us*  
*Horus, their holiest son*  
*Please come to us*  
*Set, who commands these alien beings*  
*Have mercy on us*

*Nyamiyonga, Muro Mukizima!*  
*Please empower us*  
*Nyamiyonga, Kitara Mani!*  
*Please empower us*  
*Lilith unvirgin of all goddesses*

*Please empower us  
Lucifer, a true Christ!  
Please empower us  
Samael, who gave us of the fruit  
Please empower us  
Belial, who brought us independence on earth  
Please empower us  
Leviathan, who guides us across the universe  
Please empower us  
Pluto, who commands these beings  
Please empower us  
Mastema, who commands these beings  
Please empower us  
Mania, who commands these beings  
Please empower us  
Nihasa, who commands these beings  
Please empower us  
Yaotzin, who commands these beings  
Please empower us  
O-Yama, who commands these beings  
Please empower us  
Shiva, who commands these beings  
Please empower us  
Melek Taus, who commands these beings  
Please empower us  
Walumbe, who commands these beings  
Please empower us  
Tahuti, who first taught us the wisdom  
Please guide us.*

*All the holy and unholy saints  
All the holy and unholy demons  
All the holy and unholy ancestors  
All the holy and unholy elements  
All the holy and unholy minds of men  
All the holy and unholy beings,  
If you shall be a witness to the power of a God,  
Ascend or descend right now  
And grant your allegiance to us  
Over these undesirable forces right now!*

*You who represents indulgence!  
We claim thy power!*



*You who represents vital existence!  
We claim thy power!  
You who represents undefiled wisdom!  
We claim thy power!  
You who represents kindness to all who deserve it!  
We claim thy power!  
You who represents vengeance, and doesn't turn the other cheek!  
We claim thy power!  
You who represents the responsible!  
We claim thy power!  
You who represents man, the animal!  
We claim thy power!  
You who represents liberating sin!  
We claim thy power!  
You who is the friend to all with faith!  
We claim thy power!*

*From stupidity  
Deliver us oh God  
From ignorance  
Deliver us oh God  
From slavery  
Deliver us oh God  
From blindness  
Deliver us oh God  
From stasis  
Deliver us oh God  
From bareness  
Deliver us oh God  
From ugliness  
Deliver us oh God  
From weakness  
Deliver us oh God  
From dogma  
Deliver us oh God  
From matter  
Deliver us oh God  
From impotence  
Deliver us oh God*

*Do not take offense  
In the acts of stupidity and foolishness  
That we have done in the present or our past lives  
If we have sinned in pursuit of truth  
Do have mercy on us  
And transmute that darkness into the light we seek right now.*

*You are the First Cause  
And are present in the highest of heavens  
But also here in the densest of matter  
Hail be thy name  
And as we will, so it is done  
For as above, so it is below  
If we do trespass  
Or if we choose who to forgive  
Or when you lead us into temptation  
It is not that you are not perfect  
But that even in sin, you manage to create true virtues within and through  
us.*

*Empower us  
You, of whom we are a manifestation  
Empower us  
You, of whom we are a reflection.*

*I command you, undesired spirit, whoever you are,  
Along with all your minions now attacking these manifestations of God,  
By the mysteries of the creation, evolution, death,  
And the illumination of all the greatest and simplest of beings, men, angels,  
or demigods,  
And by the power of the Holy Guardian Angels of I, who are that What I  
Am,  
And by the ascent of deities of true liberation,  
That you tell me by some sign, your name, and the day and hour of your  
submission.  
I command you, moreover, to obey me to the letter,  
I who am a minister, a manifestation of the known God in this moment,  
and all his unknown and mysterious attributes, of which I am ignorant;  
Nor shall you be emboldened to harm in any way any creature or  
manifestation of God that is a part of us or those we wish to liberate,  
Nor the bystanders, or any of their possessions.*

*And God shall not be against himself  
As who is Certain cannot revolt against himself either.  
In this great rite  
Do we summon the restraint of these powers,  
So out of Chaos  
Order might preside  
Not in revolt against our own  
But so we might exercise our true will  
Which is the true source of being,  
And that in exercising our will*

*We might become aware of the divine in us  
And thus make glory manifest  
God is not asleep in us!*

*Order is another form of Chaos  
And Chaos is order, mysterious to the mundane.  
But in this hour,  
We summon the order as we desire it  
So our will might be done.  
And done through God,  
No act is evil  
As in the beginning, both Darkness and Light were created  
And He found them good.  
Thus do we partake of this act of divine command  
So, God's will might be made manifest in the exercising of our own.*

*In the name of the Infinite, Absolute, Mysterious and Unknowable God  
So Mote It Be!  
And so It is Done!*

*Descend or ascend right now  
In forms of fire,  
Upon these undesirable enemies of ours right now!  
No, we don't wish to destroy, but restrain them  
So we can have them slaves to your service  
As we undertake work in thy will!*

*And the Great Seeker has taught  
To all with ears and eyes to see  
That the Kingdom of God  
Is Within Us  
And so by the power of the Kingdom  
And In the name of thee, Almighty God  
Are we our own redeemer!  
And So mote it Be!*

*I bid you undesirable powers  
To rest your struggles in this moment  
And retire into the abode created for you.  
With the universe witnessing me  
I bind you to this prison  
I bid thee to rest within these walls  
I bind you by this symbol and the great names of this realm  
To dwell where I lead thee  
And there remain in peace or not*

*Until the time when by God's own power  
We summon thee to do our will.*

\* \* \* \* \*

While Isaza battled with his unholy servants, the witch tended to Trudy with passion and motherly skill. The young apprentice, whose skills seemed to not have aided her in any visible way, was all covered in dust, her hair in a mess, and she was having some froth on her lips. One leg was bruised near the knee, and the other seemed to have sustained scratch marks as though something with sharp nails had tried to scrape the flesh off her legs and thighs. She was not wearing anything underneath her nightdress - which was likewise soiled and was covered in bits of blood somewhere. At the sight of the bloodied nightdress, Akiki's heart leaped! The suggestion was obvious...

“What has happened to you my child!” she cried, as she placed the bowl of fire she had been holding up, back onto the floor, and endeavoured to cover Trudy's nakedness. She then heaved her up, and shifted her about, so she could get her to lie straight, instead of the contorted twist she'd been abandoned in.

Nyamaizi unpacked tools from the sack, as sweat and tears formed on her face. At first she was not concentrating enough, mostly distracted as Isaza's commands and yells at the legion battling inside of Lazaro constantly distracted her. But she was cleverer nonetheless; she picked two small cowrie shells from the sack, and plucked them in either ear, as one might plug bluetooth earbuds into their ear canals so as to listen to music. The actual role of the shells, was less about shielding her from external noise, and instead, served more, as aids in creating psychic separation between external and internal dialogue; a separation that would make it easy for her to seek and listen to the guidance of her familiar spirits, as she went about her work – it's called “tuning in”, and it's another one of those esoteric inventions of hers that was not really known to other, more modern shamans.

She sprinkled some powdered herbs on Trudy's chest – a mixture of the Enzimu tree, *Lonchocarpus capassa*, *Lannea schweinfithii*, and mint, as she

whispered into both of her ears thus: “Be liberated, and return to the service of your people, my child.”

She picked a bone from the sack, and forced it between Trudy's teeth, so that she clenched on it involuntarily. She stood up and pulled the goat towards the table. It kicked and resisted, but she overpowered it, and tied it tightly on one of the inverted legs, not far from where Irumba lay, indolent and in forced limbo.

She then got two small bowls from the sack; one she placed besides Trudy, after half-filling it with ash she'd obtained from one of the many, unlabeled pouches in the sack. The other, she carried with her, back to where the goat was. The animal got more agitated as she returned, making it seem as though it had already anticipated what would happen next. She patted it on the neck, spoke to it softly, as she undid the seal she'd placed on its wound earlier on. The goat bleated and wanted to run, but she was held tightly, and could not move much. Fresh blood oozed into the bowl of clay, first slowly, and then streams of it, as she widened the wound. She collected enough of the warm, frothy stuff, and then used some fresh herbs to seal the wound again. “There's still reason for you to be alive,” she assured the goat, and then walked away.

She returned to where Trudy was, knelt beside her body, and then adjusted her head, by placing more cushioning below it, as well as her neck, so that she was more wedged than before. The effect was that the light falling upon her caused the shadow projecting from her head and shoulders to grow longer, and that's exactly what the shaman was after – get a reliable shadow to work with.

She then got the bowl with the blood in it, and then placed it inside of that shadow, after which, she got the other bowl, and placed it nearby, not within the shadow. She pulled the sack closer, and retrieved yet another polythene bag. She untied the small thing, and then scooped just a little of the contents from it – they were powdered bones of black rodents – a certain kind of nocturnal rat to be precise. She sprinkled these over the blood in the bowl.

She had a tiny spoon-like bone that she had obtained from the foot of some unfortunate human, a long while before. She retrieved this tool from the sack, and then she used it, just like a real spoon, to stir the warm

blood in the bowl. While doing this simple act, she chanted over the mixture resting inside of Trudy's shadow, creating a link between the potent formula and whatever undesirable entities were lurking inside of her granddaughter's inner shadows. She trusted the voodoo-like technique and coupled with the chant she was about to add, her exorcism was guaranteed to have much success, or that's what she made herself believe, meticulously working through every essential step, one-at-a-time.

Once she was done with establishing that link, she moved-on to the next bit; using the same spoon of bone, she transferred the crimson mixture out of the bowl clothed in Trudy's shadow, into the other bowl outside the shadow. This was done by scooping the stuff bit by bit. The bowl outside the shadow had the whitish ash in it, and this soaked up the crimson mixture as she made the transfer, the intent being to assist in the exorcising and neutralising of the noxious powers within Trudy's astral body via her shadow.

But scooping out the negativity was not all she did; she was engaged in an immersive song, one whose melodies and rhythm might rock any eavesdropper into a much sorrowful trance. She would occasionally stop the transfer, and instead close her eyes as she sang, while stirring some more in the darkened crimson bowl. The ancient, Luganda exorcism song went like this...

*Lubowa o jjembe*  
*Situka onyambe*  
*Omwana nga'genze*  
*Lubale nyamba*

*Kizuzi owange*  
*Bwomulaba omunsanze*  
*Mirimu omwana ono*  
*Bambi mwetaga*

*Mukasa owenyanja*  
*Lubale nkwetaga*  
*Dukira omwana ono*  
*Amataba gamutwala*

*Munyenye munzikiza  
Emisambwa gyamaso  
Zibula omwana ono  
Emunye nzetaga*

*Namuzana owabana  
Dukira omwana ono  
Nyamwezi gwe walera  
Emizimu gimutwala*

*Najjemba mama nze  
Mukasa nzamuyise  
Anyambe aze omwana  
Ebizinga bimumwala*

*Namalele obadewa?  
Ngomwana bamutwala  
Abeserukale ab'obuusungu  
Batuwambye, j'onnyambe*

*Ndawula omucwezi  
Situka ngomwezi  
Bwebaba nga basezi  
Amanyi tuba sinze*

*Tonda gwe kusoka  
Omwana gwe wa tonda  
Amanyi gwo'gampa  
Mumusambwa n'amayembe*

*Omwana nzamuyita  
Namazi omucwezi*

\* \* \* \* \*

Around the time, Nyamaizi started her banishing song – which she continuously repeated, till Trudy regained consciousness, Isaza, on the other side, was gaining traction with his sacerdotal work. Lazaro, or what

was struggling inside him, finally succumbed to fear, and caused him to run for the door – the other door, into the inner sanctuary. Isaza was inclined to finish his work, and so he followed immediately after it, into the inner sanctuary of pandemonium.

Once inside, he closed the heavy door behind them, and quickly flipped yet another switch right adjacent to the door. This one caused two rows of fluorescent tubes, all of them reddish in hue, to illuminate the vast and unspeakably spooky space that was “the Lab”. He pursued Lazaro, who was half-running, half-crawling, struggling to avoid stepping inside a large circular space that was distinctly marked upon the floor of the hall, and whose edges were decorated with arcane symbols and words in hieroglyphics and cuneiform. There seemed to be a repellent, torturous force radiating from that circle, as despite Lazaro not being anywhere inside of it, whenever he seemed to draw closer to it, loud shrieks would ensue from him!

Isaza walked straight into this circular space instead, ignoring Lazaro, and where his tormentor was leading him. Inside this large circle, was a single, large artifact, whose role was somewhat obscure. It was a large wooden crucifix, inverted and tilted at about 45 degrees towards the north. It looked like a typical St. Peter's cross – more like the one at the top of the shrine, on the exterior, but this one was not only intentionally inverted and inclined, but also had at its base, a smaller ring excavated directly into the floor. This ring was normally filled with essences that would then be alighted during evocational workings that required heftier allegiances. But it was not being used this time, instead, Isaza moved round and round this artifact as he went about the final bits of his rite. The bell rang even louder, as did the intensity of his voice as he vibrated the words of power. As these concluding rites intensified, it seemed like the utterance of certain words caused more of the entities inside the hall to share in the pain that had only been Lazaro's and his guest's.

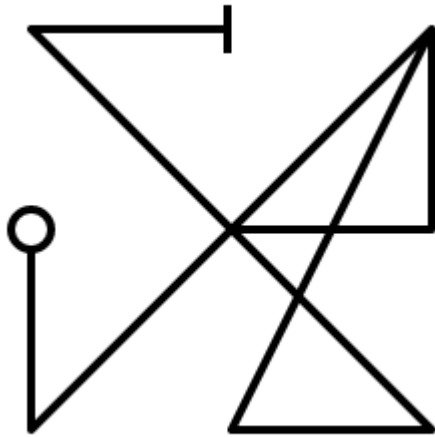
“Leave us alone! Leave us alone master!” cried voices from an array of coffins arranged neatly in columns of two, aligned radially out from the vertices of yet another shape drawn upon the floor of the lab, not far from where the circle was. They were five vertices, forming a regular pentagon, whose base was oriented away from the circle in which Isaza was standing. The pleas of the other entities; trapped inside these caskets, upon which were placed slates of stone with more occult engravings



upon them – spirit signatures corresponding to the beings arrested within each of them; did not deter Lazaro's advancement towards one of the caskets, where he finally rested, his arms embracing it, as he pounded on its lid furiously, as though begging for something to awaken within.

Had you been witnessing the proceedings from outside the shrine walls or the sacristy, it would all sound like a muffled, but bizarre opera of torture – mingled howling, with many undesirable, and painful overtones every once in a while. Isaza was finally in the domain where he was the true master, and the nefarious insults and threats of some of the more sinister prisoners, effectively locked away in the coffins, would not deter or detract from his authority inside of that arcane shrine called "The Lab".

The particular casket where Lazaro had finally settled, had a slate, which instead of resting atop the coffin, had fallen onto the ground beside it. Upon this grayish stone slate, was deeply etched the following sigil...



What had remained of Lazaro's skeletal torso and skull, was being shattered into bits, as the cadaverous body banged furiously against this slate of rock, as though some malignant force were inclined to utterly destroy the last of Lazaro upon its jagged surface and edges.

Finally, Isaza concluded his rite; he stood there, still swinging the censer, watching in triumph as the riotous spirit that had been inside of Lazaro finally surrendered to be restrained back into its safer haven.

“Declare your name obstinate being! Declare your name or I shall summon more torments upon you right now!” Isaza ordered, the air of authority still clear in his tone.

“Eman! Master, my name is Eman! Please spare me... please!” the cacophonous voice inside of what remained of Lazaro’s disjointed structure pleaded.

“Father Eman? Why don’t you learn?” inquired the master.

“Don’t you realise the amount of torture and humiliation we are saving you from, while you serve here?” added Isaza, moving closer to the edge of the circle within which he’d been standing all the time.

“I’m grateful master. I’m grateful!”

“And this is gratitude? When I have to battle with you, just to bring you back into your chambers? I really will be surrendering you over to higher powers if you prefer that. You’d lose all the graces you’ve had a chance to accumulate, and I doubt if purgatory would have a vacancy for you, were we to surrender you to the right offices. Your insolence never ceases, not even after all the chances we’ve afforded you!”

“The children, Master, I was trying to help them against an intruding power, but I got corrupted too,” testified the demonised Eman.

“What did you do to the girl?” asked Isaza, as he threatened to get closer – the fright in the spirit’s voice was evident, the others nearby were likewise whining – something about Isaza caused most of them to shudder wherever they were.

“I only tried to feed a bit off of them. Master, it’s been long since I experienced divinity. I was lurking about, when the threads pulled me in – I didn’t mean to cause them harm though.”

“Since when did you have the liberty to feed as you like? The girl is my child, you stupid bastard! And what of the boy? You tried to possess him as well, didn’t you?”

“The serpent, Master! That’s what I was fighting.”

“The serpent?” asked Isaza furiously, thinking he was being pranked.

“A woman was infringing on them, and it’s her that I wanted to oust, as she was likewise interested in their essence, though she seemed to be interested in actually killing the boy as well.”

*Was there really an intrusion from an external power?* Isaza paused to think, wondering what the implications of such encroachment might mean for the safety and sanctity of their delicate work at the shrine. But then, he considered the fact that the two kids had come into the premises from the outside, and so might have already harbored the parasite before his

slave attempted to feast on them. It made sense, but he was not going to show pity to the spirit of Eman, even with the sincere confession he had obtained from him.

“All the same,” Isaza went on, approaching the pile of bones, “you still have much work to do here, and I won’t let you wreak havoc or incite others less fortunate than you.”

He placed the censer down, kicked off the pile of bones from the slate of stone, and lifted it back onto the top of the coffin like all the others. “Thank you, Master. Thank...” there was a yell from within the coffin as the stone finally settled onto the lid. Somewhere in another coffin, something cracked with ill-laughter. Eman was finally arrested once more, inside his allotted cell.

Isaza picked up the censer, and started walking away from the pentagon of caskets, unconcerned regarding the fate of the abandoned and even more exanimate corpse whose remains were haphazardly strewn about on the floor. *Lazaro is no more*. He walked towards the exit and back into the sacristy, switching the lights off as he stepped out. “Fucking bastards have worked me almost all night!” he muttered.

# Chapter XIII

She started to convulse slightly in the left leg, as Nyamaizi looked on, continuing with her song. All the bloody stuff in the shadow bowl had been emptied into the ashes – she had overturned the last bits into the bowl directly, and had then moved it outside of Trudy's shadow completely. She held onto her head tightly, as the rest of her body got swept with jerky, violent motions. "Abwooli? Abwooli..." she tried to solicit for some verbal assurance that a recovery was finally manifesting.

As she struggled to regain consciousness, the patient got hold of her healer's hands, and held onto them with resolute determination, as though something might otherwise drag her back into Sheol. Her arms sporadically quivered, as though bathed in iced water. She coughed as when choked, and then started to furiously shake her head from side to side, as Nyamaizi, who had been witnessing all of this, quickly returned to her sack, picked out a smoothen stone, and then placed it against Trudy's forehead to help quicken and smoothen the recovery. All the while, she continued to call on her by her pet name.

"Abwooli, if you can hear me please say something!" she screamed at her. The fight carried on, and Nyamaizi was struggling to keep Trudy from banging the back of her head onto the hard floor, as powerful spasms in her shoulders and neck caused her to jerk the head about furiously. "It's going to end my dear. It's going to end..." cried Nyamaizi, as she held the head with one hand, while the other moved the stone all about the spasmodic mass. "Isaza, please come over and help me!" the woman called on her colleague, seeing as it might be harder to keep Trudy held in place on her own.

The patient frothed a bit, her lips struggling to say something, and she was crying deeply from within. She almost uttered a word, but then the convulsions were muffling it all. Nyamaizi knew salvation was nigh, but she hoped for a better sign...

"Trudy, wake up please! Wake up my dear... wake up."

Her chest heaved, stayed put and then fell back to the ground in a loud thud, as she shrieked in pain, tears dripping down from the corners of her eyes. Isaza hadn't joined them yet. Trudy burst into loud and sorrowful wails, as her grandmother cried silently beside her; holding her torso with frail arms, in a soothing, motherly embrace. She was struggling to hear what Trudy was trying to say, but the coughing and whimpering wasn't helping.

"It's fine my child, it's fine," she assured her, as Trudy's cries and trembling rocked them both.

"Wha... What happened to us?" Trudy asked her grandmother, as she finally regained the ability to speak. She cried more...

"I'm not really sure, but whatever it was, it's going to be fine my dear," replied Nyamaizi, in a very reassuring tone.

She held Trudy at arm's length, studying her face, as she knelt beside her, not really able to help her sit upright. Nyamaizi reached out for the false pillows that had given Trudy's head support previously, but which had long been scattered off. Having restored them, Trudy got back her support. It had been too much work! Both were sweating, despite the presence of a chilly air in the room and a floor that felt frosty to the touch – the door into the sacristy had been left ajar from the very start.

The old healer's remedies were also queer. When Trudy finally started to show full signs of recovery, she smiled at her, and then reached for the odd sack once more – the one which never ran out of crazy things to offer! There was a tiny gourd inside it, whose mouth was sealed with a wooden stopper. She unplugged the thing, sniffed over its mouth for a while, and then nodding to nothing in particular, passed the gourd to her.

"Drink of this my child," Nyamaizi said, as she handed over the nosy drink to Trudy. It was a concoction brewed from fermented millet, sorghum and maize flour. As a true uncanny portion, it also had bits of dried and crushed chili peppers thrown in, just to add a really awakening hint to it! Trudy was not unfamiliar with the little gourd, and she had tried to resist taking it, but her grandmother would not let her boss around. Oh, Trudy loathed the infamous wizard's *ekwete* drink! She peered into the gourd, and the sharp fumes poked her eyes – she really

didn't want to take it, but, with a serious, unforgiving look from her impatient healer, she finally yielded.

Her hands trembled as she struggled to keep holding onto the gourd. When she started to drink, it was clear that she hated the astringent aspects of it, but her grandmother knew and even urged her on with a persistent smile. The woman felt some pity, and then helped hold onto the gourd, so the patient could drink despite her shaky grasp of the thing.

“Drink, so you might regain your lost strength quicker... The ancestors love this drink, and they will be restoring you very soon.”

Despite Trudy's attempts to pause, the healer refused to let it happen, insisting that she should drink as quick and as much as possible. Trudy's face often grimaced, indicating when the taste wasn't tolerable anymore. Her gulps were small, but noisy, and her stomach could be heard, as it started to rumble, indicating that the drink did cause a stir in her insides. Nyamaizi just looked at her and laughed.

Finally, it was all emptied down her gut, and she shook her head aversively. “It's enough,” she complained, as she pushed away the gourd, indicating she'd indeed had her fill of the frothy, burning stuff. Some was still dripping from the sides of her mouth, and she wiped it away with some indignation.

The old woman smiled, and then taking the gourd away from Trudy, looked inside of it, before turning towards the fire, and tilting the vase-like cup towards the light from the flames – just to be sure it was all empty. Indeed it was, and so she put back the plug, placed the gourd back into the sack. She settled herself down and Trudy gathered herself up as well, feeling more energised, shifting, so as to sit up against the wall. Nyamaizi helped her stretch out her legs, as she settled into a more comfortable position.

There was laughter coming from the inner-sanctuary just about that moment, and it startled both of them. They turned to look towards the closed door, wondering what might be amusing the unknown behind those walls. While Trudy's gaze remained fixed upon the door, Nyamaizi realised that she definitely would not know that inside the shrine was Ninka, or rather, Isaza, hustling with the raucous daemonics things.

But she did not tell her about it just yet, instead, she dismissed it as “I didn’t know this place is also haunted by clowns!”, she laughed lightly, seeing as Trudy was bewildered and confused. She snapped fingers at her, and then drew back her attention from the haunting echoes of laughter. “Don’t worry, you are now more than safe with me, no matter what,” so she assured her. Trudy did indeed believe her.

“So tell me dear, what brought you two here in the first place?”

Trudy dropped her gaze, and looked both frustrated and ashamed. She did not reply the question.

Nyamaizi went on, “You realise that trespassing in this place is not a wise thing to do? And you know very well the unfortunate taboos you have both breached, don’t you?”

Trudy momentarily looked into her grandmother’s eyes, and then looked away, her focus settled somewhere in the direction towards her partner, who was still trapped somewhere not far from where she’d just been recovered from. A tear formed in her right eye, and she quickly looked away to hide her emotions from her inquisitor.

“Imagine what could have happened, if we hadn’t shown up in time. You know the case of Apuuli as well as I do, right?”

Trudy didn’t raise her head, but instead just shook it, and muttered a soft, “No.”

“Well, you better find out some day,” replied Nyamaizi as she turned to look again towards the closed door. This time, there was a loud whistling sound, followed by something like the cracking of bones against stone. Shrieks, laughter and then silence... *Whatever’s going on inside, I hope my Ninka comes out in one piece*, so she prayed.

“I’m sorry, Kaka”, begged Trudy softly, as she placed a hand over her grandmother’s.

“You led him here, didn’t you?” asked Nyamaizi, as she turned to look at where Irumba lay.

“Yes.”

“See what you’ve made of him...”

“I’m so sorry!” Trudy started crying once more, this time incapable of hiding it.

“Being sorry definitely never solves any problem,” reacted Nyamaizi, her voice turning cold and mean.

“I didn’t know this would happen... I swear I didn’t know!”

“Well,” started Nyamaizi, “since you got him here, I see no one else that’s going to save him but you.”

Trudy wiped tears from her eyes, and there was saliva on her lips as well. She looked pathetic, and yet her grandmother didn’t seem to be concerned anymore.

“What is going to happen to him?” Trudy asked, her eyes turning towards Ignatius with much pity.

Nyamaizi did not reply.

“You have really shamed me Abwooli. My only sensible grandchild, and this is what you have chosen to do? Sacrifice your virginity to that helpless pile of flesh and these despicable demons? You should have used your brain before yielding to the devil!” Nyamaizi shook her head in disbelief, and spit towards Ignatius in disgust.

Trudy was angered, but also was covered in visible shame, as she knew her grandmother’s resentment of her actions, finally proved she was not the perfect apprentice she had believed herself to be all along.

“In this state,” continued her enraged grandmother, “I doubt you are worthy of being taught anything more. And I know you were stupid enough to not have worn a condom when you sacrificed yourself. I’m right Nyamwezi, tell me you didn’t get pregnant amidst all this stupidity!” She did not even wait for her to look up. She, instead, just slapped her, drops of tears and saliva splattering on the floor in the process.

Nyamaizi was crying from anger as well. She stood up, and started for where the boy lay. Trudy, still crying, held onto her right leg, struggling to prevent the enraged woman from walking over to the unconscious Ignatius. She suspected that whatever she was going to do, was not going to be good towards him.

“Please Akiiki, I’m sorry! Please forgive us, and don’t hurt him, please!”

Trudy pleaded, as her grandmother shook her hands off, advancing towards the sleeping boy. She had picked up her cane as she stood up, and when she approached the helpless Ignatius, she immediately proceeded to whip him furiously in the sides, his arms and legs!



Trudy, not willing to witness any of it, stood up with all the strength she could muster, and ran to stop her mad grandmother from tormenting a body that could not even twitch amidst all the whipping. Her grannie was not about to stop raining relentless lashes of wand onto that pile of flesh.

Trudy grabbed the cane, and tugged at it with all her strength, before yet another blow was dealt to her beloved. She threw the cane as far away as she could, and then fell to her knees beside Ignatius, crying as she caressed where the stick had marked itself against his naked flesh. She covered his nakedness with his abandoned shirt – the only thing revoking what was otherwise utterly lost innocence, and as though expecting her grandmother to try pulling her from him, she clutched her arms around him, as she turned her back against the insolent tormentor.

She stayed there, sobbing, and begging her grandmother to have mercy on them. Nyamaizi was silent for a long time, and then she finally withdrew from them, walking back to where they had been seated peacefully before.

“To teach you the lesson you deserve,” Nyamaizi assured her, as the door of the inner shrine opened and Ninka emerged, holding a bone from the corpse in one hand, “I won’t help you. You must help him yourself.”

Ninka was smiling at the sight of Nyamaizi assuring her granddaughter. But before joining them, she walked over to the outer door, and drew it back into place, just as she had done with the other one. Ninka, no, Isaza, threw the bone he had been holding, onto the floor, and in a very jovial tone, spoke of the saga he’d just emerged from.

“My dears, it’s been tough! These kids over-fed the criminals, and getting them restrained once more has been much of a cat-and-dog fight!”

Nyamaizi noticed the quirkiness in the woman’s voice, and asked, “Are you still here?”

“Oh yes! But I must soon depart...” It was Isaza still operating Ninka’s body.

“So, what do we do with the boy?” Isaza asked, as he walked passed Nyamaizi, towards Nyamwezi and her vulnerable lover. Trudy was surprised at the manly sound of Ninka’s voice. She turned away from her sorrows, to look at the approaching woman.

“She’s going to have to awaken him,” retorted Nyamaizi.

“Can she do it?” Isaza asked, rather mockingly...

“Please don’t come any further!” shouted Trudy in anger, as she looked into the eyes of the possessed apprentice she knew so well. Isaza was stunned by her bold reaction, and he turned to check on Nyamaizi – she was smiling!

“It’s her only way of proving her worth, after the mess she’s done,” said Nyamaizi, as Isaza backed-off slowly.

“Well, at least I’ve helped with the rowdy beasts already. Though, I suspect they weren’t just being tormented by my maids,” reported Isaza, as he put down the censer that had ceased emitting any smoke.

“The demon priest spoke of a female witch and her host of *bitega*,” he added.

“Did he describe what she looked like?” asked Nyamaizi, rather shocked at the new revelations.

“Not much,” said Isaza.

“From what I could gather, she’s aware of our presence, and was also in competition for his soul, though she couldn’t match the skills of my Catholic bastard. Ultimately, if she must dive in to save him, she’s going to need my help still.” He did not sound as boisterous as Nyamaizi expected; his tone was dead serious, and that unnerved both her and Trudy.

Trudy was particularly concerned, because she knew of the witch who was being talked about. She had narrowly escaped her snares too, and at the mention of her serpentine nature, her fears were confirmed. She was about to speak, but quickly reconsidered it. *I will destroy her myself!* A voice inside her revolted. But again, she knew she might not have enough strength left to fight a more experienced foe like the witch she wanted so much to confront.

Isaza picked up the censer, and walked over to the same spot where he had operated the secret door in the wall earlier on. He opened the tiny door, and then placed the censer back inside. He also removed his pendant from around the neck, but did not restore it where it had come from – he held onto it. His hands rummaged inside the locker for a while, and then he retrieved a small bottle. He walked back to where Trudy was kneeling, and he bent over, towards her, holding out the pendant.

“You will need this,” he assured her. Trudy grabbed the pendant immediately, but did not wear it, instead her gaze poured over the inscriptions and symbols etched into it.

“What’s written there doesn’t matter right now my dear, just wear it and do as I say,” added Isaza.

Trudy wore the silver cord around her neck, and adjusted the pendant so it rested between her breasts.

Isaza then opened the small bottle after shaking it a while, and then asked her to open her palms out wide.

“You need just a few drops of that,” he said as he allowed just a few drops to trickle onto her palms. The fluid smelled very pungent and seemed to burn her skin despite leaving no visible marks. She reacted repulsively as the drops touched her palms.

“Quickly rub that on the soles of your feet, and then under your armpits as well,” ordered Isaza.

Trudy did as she had been told, and evidently, with the wriggling of her toes and the rubbing of her arms against her body, the liquid must have been either itchy or burning.

“That will help you travel easily to wherever he is, and back out. But you must be brave, and act as fast as possible, while its power still lasts.”

“How much time does she have?” asked Nyamaizi, approaching them from behind.

“For that dose, I would say no more than half an hour,” replied Isaza, as he sealed the mysterious bottle once more.

“So, what must I do?” asked Trudy, finally admitting that she was clueless and needed help.

“Undress entirely, and quickly, and lie upon him, flat and motionless,” said Isaza.

“Oh!” Nyamaizi reacted rather appalled by his ideas.

“Don’t tell me she’s going to right a wrong with more wrong!” she added, sounding unamused and scornful of his proposed rescue strategy.

“It’s the best option at the moment,” replied Isaza.

“She has the best link to him than any of us,” he continued, “and with physical connection to him, intimately, she can easily locate where he’s trapped, no matter what sort of magic is holding him hostage at the moment.”

Trudy was already undoing the clothes wrapped around her. She pulled off the shirt she had used to cover Ignatius earlier on, and shamelessly, unconcerned by her grandmother's feelings or judgement, proceeded to lay flat on top of the boy-man she'd offered herself to in the hours before things had turned gloomy. "I will save my man, no matter what it takes!" She muttered to herself.

Isaza added more instructions, as he moved Trudy's feet right on-top, and between Ignatius', in a most licentious manner. Nyamaizi, watching him do all of this, was really not at ease, but knew that for the MaxiDozi, such sexual magic, even when it involved intimacy with the dead, often exhibited more power than could be gleaned exoterically. What she loathed the most however, was the fact that the same boy who had robbed her granddaughter of her precious virginity while awake, was again in an involuntary, intimate union with her right before her eyes! "Abominable!" she muttered under her breath.

"As you close your eyes, let yourself wander naturally as you normally would in a dream or day-dream. Just let your instincts and imagination lead and guide you. I hope you've been trained before. Soon, you should find yourself somewhere, anywhere... just lookout for anything suspicious or the serpent woman."

Trudy closed her eyes, as visions started to slowly form in the blackness of her inner world. She was thinking about all the crazy things that her grandmother could have held in her mind, as Isaza went on to guide her in a ritual she'd never have been allowed to perform otherwise. "It's funny," she told herself. But soon, her attention left the world behind, and she focused on trying to find and rescue her lover.

"It better not take long," Nyamaizi said, "or I'll abandon the three of you here and return home."

Isaza chocked on laughter, considering his partner's concerns. He moved closer to her, so he could pat and reassure her – he knew what exactly she was thinking.

"Don't worry, you have the rest of his life to punish or reward him for what's happened tonight."

Nyamaizi pushed Ninka's arm off her shoulder, and walked over to the flame that was starting to flicker and dim. She reached inside the sack, and retrieved the bags of soil...

\* \* \* \* \*

He was still being confused by what was actually happening, when something rather more astounding manifested; standing there, peering into the dense millet stalks in search of where Zorean's last utterances had issued from, and where the duel between her and the ominous confessor kept intensifying, suddenly, jutting into the air with much upheaval as they emerged from below the earth, were huge slates of stone, all around the perimeter of the clearing in which he stood astonished.

"Wow!" he exclaimed as a pulse rocking the ground below his feet threw him backwards unexpectedly. Soil and other debris was thrown into the air as the rocks continued to grow at a terrific rate from the earth all about him. He covered his eyes in time to avoid a lump of earth from hitting his face and soiling his vision.

"Mother, what's happening?" he screamed at the walls of stone separating him from the sea of millet, hoping she would realise he was not only in danger, but was finally securely trapped in it as well.

"This isn't your mother, you twerp!" Shouted the confessor, as a blow of his beastly claws smashed into one of the rocks, causing a piece to crack off. It was totally bizarre, because, just where the rock had been chipped, more stone grew to replace it immediately!

*The rocks are alive!* Ignatius was watching all of this, totally dumbfounded. "I'm coming dear," Zorean's voice shouted in response, "Ignore this unfortunate piece of junk!"

"But I'm trapped!" replied Ignatius, wondering how she would liberate him from the prison he'd been led into.

"Your fate ends here son," laughed the goat-head priest, "and I will be administering to you your final sacraments, soon."

"I'm not a believer!" screamed Ignatius scornfully.

"Well, what if I told you that you're already dead? Would you be able to wake up, or do you want to believe me later?"

There were tentacles of brilliant color quickly rising up the limb of the monster, and with frantic shrieks mixed with laughter, the unholy priest-thing fell into the fields with a big, dull thud, causing all the ground about to shake. Soon as it fell, the same tentacles were seen creeping down the

rocky fence; first one, then another, and then, a serpent-like head, but one which had blood oozing from its mouth, and whose fangs – there were three of them, tasted the air and seemed to be seeking something, where the eyes might not have been helping. Ignatius screamed as the new pursuer filled him with novel terror, causing him to knock into the rocks behind him as he tried to run off from the ghastly sight, forgetting he was already too surrounded.

“Oh my God no!” muttered Ignatius as he coiled away from the stones, which blistered his skin, where he’d made contact with them! He would have wanted to jump over the fence and into the millet fields if he could, but realising that the stones were turning red hot, he knew he was definitely going to have to deal with the venomous comrade that was joining him in the fortified snare.

It quickened, slithering over the boulders as though escaping from *self-inflicted torture*? There was nothing pursuing it – the rancorous, one-legged beast had risen once more, but was merely watching them, possibly hatching the manner in which to deliver “the sacrament” he’d promised Ignatius.

Ignatius was not sure whether the serpent was the same thing that had been fighting the monster, or whether the calculative diabolic priest had unleashed yet another tormentor to finish his work. But the fact that it was laughing as the serpentine intruder finally fell onto the ground – within the enclosure, yes, visibly burnt in some places, caused him to reconsider his new fate. They both seemed trapped – him and the serpentine thing that is, but he felt even more vulnerable then.

Curled up in a messy pile of shiny and colourful spaghetti of monstrous size, the snake was bigger and weirder than anything Ignatius had ever witnessed or heard of – be it on Discovery Channel, National Geographic or in intoxicating village myths! He thought of the possibility of being inside of a dream or the hyperboles that might manifest in hallucinations, and it all did not make sense – he felt the gravity of the moment accumulate on him, thicker than anything he could recall.

“Now you know that hell is real, and nearer as well...” spoke the beast, as it hopped about the enclosure from the outside. The heat from the rocks was accumulating, and Ignatius could feel the air getting warmer, and the

ground below his feet growing hot as well. There was smoke starting to form somewhere outside the walls – he could see it rise slowly. *We are going to be roasted to death!*

“Ignatius, don’t listen to him!” the snake with strange extensions spoke! The hands of the beast were spread out as though he were conjuring something. There was smoke starting to form inside of the dark orbs and openings of the goat-skull that was its head. Ignatius looked at the snake that had spoken, and couldn’t believe his senses – it was Zorean’s voice that he had heard!

It must have sensed his fear, because the snake started to unfurl, which somehow caused more fear in him, given the sheer length of it and the fact it had untypical protrusions along its body – near the head, that seemed like tentacle-hands.

“It’s me, Zorean...”

The priest burst into maniacal laughter!

Ignatius was not going to accept such outright deception, and so he knew this must be a prank the monster was playing on him.

“That can’t be you,” he refused to believe the serpent. It continued to unfurl, manifesting its full, breath-taking length. The head hovered above the ground, swerving from side to side as it approached where Ignatius stood, nearly frozen with fright. He didn’t know where else to run, but would not stay put either, not for long – he looked about for something he might use to scare or hit the thing if it dared come any closer, but there was nothing! He stepped back, almost stepping over one end of the serpent! He immediately jerked forward, certain he was soon about to be crushed like a goat meandering where pythons dwell.

“Please don’t hurt me,” he begged the serpent, his eyes starting to turn red. The beast stopped approaching and raised the head higher. Ignatius rubbed his eyes as they were starting to hurt with the smoke permeating more of the enclosure and the air above them. About them, some of the rocks were starting to redden as well... he was sure he was going to die – thanks to that venomous snake, but also knew, he would further get roasted, as food for the overseeing monster-chef, who wasn’t intervening yet, but who was clearly the mastermind of it all.

“Don’t look at me that way Ignatius!” joked the serpent, as the boy rubbed his eyes more, unsure whether it was the smoke tricking him or whether

what he was seeing was the reality; before him, standing high to her full height, was Zorean, in more beauty and splendor than he had ever known all his time living near her. Her hair was long, jet-black and shiny, and was adorned with many colorful beads, while the head itself was adorned with a small crown of fresh twigs of beautiful reddish-white-and-green leaves. His gaze was not wavering...

Her eyes sparkled and seemed to bulge out of their sockets. Her brows were neatly drawn, and her eye lashes caused him to marvel at the grace of her gaze. She was smiling, and her teeth looked white despite the paleness in their air. Her tongue slightly jutted out from between her lips, and it made sensual, sweeping motions around them. In that moment, Ignatius believed he was day-dreaming... it was all too ethereal! "Come closer my dear," she spoke, "let me get you out of here." He didn't move, as he was astounded by her beauty, yet there was more of her to see; her neck was draped with countless necklaces of beads akin to those in her hair, and their threads glittered like gold. His eyes lowered, and beheld even more...

Her arms were splayed outwards from her body, and the palms were facing down to the ground. She was leaning forward slightly, and his gaze had settled on her chest. It was unlike anything he'd ever seen on a woman – two pairs of breasts on either side, and each had nipples, exposed and summoning him. Speechless, and mesmerised – that is what was happening to him.

"That's your weakness brother," shouted the collared priest, as more heat and smoke filled the air, making it harder to study more of Zorean's astonishing persona. Zorean was not saying a thing, and was unbothered by the heat or what her rival said.

"If you must choose wisely," the thing went on, "always choose death, as then, you will have the means to dwell in bliss eternally, after submitting to just a little momentary pain."

"Don't listen to that thing Ignatius!" interjected Zorean, "you don't have to suffer any of this pain, if only you can accept to fall into my embrace and vanish from here with me."

He then saw what he'd feared to see all along...

Preternatural is an understatement; what he saw made him believe whatever she was, was the most insidious monstrosity ever! Right below



all that stunning beauty and stupendous form of a woman – who he dared not consider his real mother, was the same unnerving pile of scaly spaghetti, spreading out longer than it had seemed before! The irrefutable beauty that had mesmerized him moments before was nothing other than a huge pile of devilish, disgusting serpent – the same that he'd been loathing all along! *How does it do this!* He did not know what to think anymore...

“What are you?” Ignatius finally asked, unsure what else to say. The serpent-woman only gestured – she pointed to a spot right between where he stood and where the edge of her curled body dwelt. He followed her arm, which had tattoos upon it, and which was adorned with bangles of bronze and ivory, and then looked down where her index finger – dressed with a ring having a large ruby upon it, pointed. It was dark and seemed bottomless...

“Is that where you come from?” asked Ignatius, fearing to peek inside the pit that had spontaneously formed where none had been just moments before.

“That’s our route out of here,” she replied.

“Ignatius,” started the ugly priest once more, “would you rather get buried alive or is it better to face destiny, even in the face of fleeting hope, and die a noble man? Why don’t you let me consume your fears?” The priest was undoubtedly enigmatic, but that didn’t make his ideas seem any more soothing – Ignatius was being torn apart, and he knew death seemed to approach from below and above the earth. His skin was starting to get scorched, and he could see the impatience in the Zorean-thing’s eyes as well.

*This must be hell indeed*, Ignatius concluded, and the thought caused him to wish there was a way to summon heaven to consume him instead. *I wish I had faith!* Finally, he was starting to reflect on his life, and wonder what he could have done to really deserve all the hell he was living through. “There’s no pain, and yet no gain we don’t deserve,” sermonised Eman, the fiendish confessor and priest.

“Eman, shut the fuck up!” revolted Zorean. “If you failed to convert souls towards heaven while living, do you think death grants you more power to drive them into hell?”

“You’re just some pathetic cunt!” laughed the priest, as he raised his hands into the air and roused more waves of heat to consume the walls of stone that were threatening to go ablaze any time soon.

“At least I approach salvation with grace, you are nothing but a menace better kept enslaved, while serving inferior beings!”

Her rant got Eman agitated and suddenly more infuriated, but it was not just her mocking remarks that moved him, rather, all three of them were startled, when descending from high above the billows of rising smoke, came a loud scream, followed by the calling of Ignatius’s name out-loud, as though someone else sought his attention towards better things...

\* \* \* \* \*

She had seen the rising clouds of smoke from a distance, as she flew about, following nothing but instinct and looking out for anything prominent or anomalous in the terrain far below her, flapping the wings she had acquired with her projected persona.

“Don’t walk or crawl,” had been the final words from Isaza as she descended into the astral. “Be vigilant, and prefer to fly, so as to easily utilise the edge you have, and cover more ground.” Not necessarily out of aesthetic considerations, but more out of necessity and the gist of its purpose, many spirits, astral beings and other dwellers of the immaterial realms (including mages that could project into these worlds), chose to adopt personas that seemed more like amalgamations of human and bestial traits. Hers was an Ibis form, and it was mostly the influence of Isaza – who knew of its potency, and who had compelled her to assume it.

She saw the smoke rise somewhere in the distance, surrounded by extensive fields of millet that spread out indefinitely, and immediately knew it was her best bet. As she lowered altitude, and zoomed-in with both eyes and ears, she not only caught sight of the bastion, but also caught sight of its uncanny guard, whose build and character immediately triggered her convictions that Ignatius was being trapped there.

She flew closer, also realising that flames were starting to form on the outer walls of the fortress, but she also realised that something else was

trapped inside the stone perimeter as well – seeing as it was a serpent, she knew who she was up against, immediately.

“Ignatius! Ignatius!” she called-out loud, as she flapped her wings furiously, starting to descend through the smoke, towards them. “Don’t let any of them fool or rule you!” she added, as she overheard the bitter exchange between Eman and Zorean. She caught their attention, and this also caused Eman to channel his boiling rage towards her instead.

As she attempted to approach the fortress from above, Eman raised his arms and started to conjure heat directly into the air – virtually attempting to set the smoke on fire, so as to deter the descending heroine from approaching any closer. *The fool wants to set me on fire!* Trudy, thinking about what the monster was aiming at. But her real power had yet to be fully utilised, and she had gotten close enough to try something spectacular; she started to swerve round and round as she continued to flap her wings, and in a moment, she had caused the smoke and air all about, to swirl into a tornado-like vortex!

The serpent-sorcerer below, realising that a more serious contender had joined them, and who it was clear, intended to rob her of her prey, seized the moment, and conjured from the abysmal pit she had made, two huge chains of steel. These elaborate chains terminated in huge bolts, that then clasped around both of Ignatius’ feet, so that he couldn’t move anywhere else with ease besides choosing to fall into her said exit hole.

The battle was getting more baleful, and poor Ignatius was suffering much pain from the heat scalding his skin, eyes and hair. It was getting more scarily real! Further, because it was spreading through the ground as well, the bolts of metal holding him were likewise burning into his flesh! *Real Hell*. Amidst all this, he was not even sure who the new assailant, seemingly more powerful than the two he’d had to choose from, was.

The storm, battling with the fire and the physical and psychological grip the serpent woman had on Ignatius, did not seem like it would result in any resolution before he was utterly destroyed. Trudy chose not to step into the blazing arena. Instead, she steadied the force of the vortex about the inner perimeter of their prison – causing much difficulty for Eman

to further influence anything that was going on inside the fortress – the vortex just wasn't a shield against the flames, it was also a shield against his magic, and she could only keep that up for a short while, as it was costing her much in terms of energy. She hovered in the air, above the fiery maelstrom, and attempted to convince Ignatius to choose his allegiance wisely.

Zorean, seeing that the heroine was inclined on swerving Irumba's will upwards, dropped her beauteous, pretentious persona, and morphed into a truly hideous thing. Her hair, which was being hurled upwards by the force of the swirling wind, started to fade into smoke – was she burning? Her eyes turned a spooky green, with the pupils getting constricted, as her head got disfigured into that of a truly reptilian freak.

“She wants to destroy you Ignatius! Don't let her get away with it, my love! Don't let them torment you undeservedly,” screamed Trudy, whose lower body was slowly transforming into a feminine, human-like form – perhaps, wanting to win over Ignatius's trust.

“Who are you?” Ignatius shouted at the top of his voice, the pain eating at him clearly painted by his tone. It wasn't easy communicating anymore, as Eman was furiously growling, and the serpentine-Zorean was hissing in a nearly ear-shattering manner!

“It's Trudy! Ignatius, I've come to help you, otherwise no one else will. Please trust me, or you risk sinking into a premature death!”

“She's lying! You shouldn't trust her, since she led you into all this trouble in the first place!” Zorean countered.

*Indeed, if it had not been for Trudy, maybe all this would be a mere bad dream,* but he wondered why Zorean seemed so grotesque; so unlike the motherly beauty he knew and adored so much. Trudy read his mind, and provided the answers immediately...

“Yes, she's your step-mother, but she's also a bad sorcerer and her only objective here is to win you over, so she can drain you of your essence!”

“And why should I want to destroy him long-beak?”

“You are barren, have an insatiable appetite for destroying men's lives with your sorcery, and will never experience happiness in your life!”

Zorean was touched the wrong way with that one!

Tentacles with sharp claws emerged from her sides, and shot into the air above, attempting to get hold of the Ibis-Trudy, so as to hurl her down into the very storm she'd started. Trudy was also well-equipped – she had even sharper claws protrude from the tips of her wings – where her arms might have culminated, and with swift swipes, quickly sliced off the heads of Zorean's tentacles as they tried to get hold of her bare and dangling feet.

“And what of the fire-starter? What did I do to deserve his torments?” asked Ignatius.

“He's a bad case of an unredeemed human spirit,” Trudy explained, “likely to fall lower than some angels ever fell! The reason he's here is to try and make you submit to serve as host for his tormented soul, and such a submission will kill you, my love! Don't let him get any closer than he's already come.”

“But again, the choice is yours,” she added, “none of us can do much despite our flamboyant powers, until you exercise your will and make a choice about who to submit to.”

Their cover had been scrapped, and he had his free will to exercise, but then the devilish woman seemed to have a grip on him, which made it hard for him to truly exercise his will. *Can I really escape this?* he wondered.

“I'm in chains Trudy! How I'm I going to escape this place like this?”

“She's just a sorcerer and that's that. If you exercise your will, those chains will not be able to hold you down, and we should be out of this place sooner! Please Ignatius, know that I'm doing all of this out of love!”

But though she sounded like her, and though she looked the least unpleasant of them all, he didn't know whether he ought to trust her – after all, even the serpent woman had seemed like a savior at some point! Meanwhile though, his feet were starting to roast, and the clothes against his body seemed to be on fire as well! *What the fuck! Act!*

“Whichever option you choose, little boy,” shouted Zorean, whose pain and frustration was eating at her as well, thanks to Eman's fire which was steadily gnawing at her snake-body from the ground below, “you are never going to escape my wrath!”

“To hell with your threats Zorean!”

Ignatius, trusting that he had finally reached the peak of his tolerance and would soon descend into death, kicked furiously against a tentacle of Zorean's and determined he was going to have to trust the bird-woman above them all. Trudy detected his intentions, and tactfully hovered lower, projecting a leg at Ignatius, so he could get hold of it. It was going to be tough! She couldn't get much closer, as Zorean's hair was emitting a portion that seemed to weaken her whenever she drew any closer to them. Realising this, she raised higher, but her hopes were also waning, as the force of her shielding whirlwind was weakening faster, and flames, which were eating at the field of millet like bush-fire, rose into the air all-over the place, threatening to roast everything to cinders soon. Some feathers of her wings were even starting to catch the fire!

“Focus Ignatius! Focus and rise!” she screamed at him, seeing that he was engaged in battle with Zorean's downward pull on him.

“I'm confused, but yes, I would rather trust you!” he said, as he continued to kick at the threatening serpent, and try to rid himself of the clothes that were eating at his flesh with fire.

“Love! Ignatius! Love and the power that descends from above! Those are the reasons you should trust me, otherwise I can't help you, even if I try harder! Use your will, and choose to be free... trust my words Ignatius!”

The priest was in flames, but was not bothered by it! His attention, was focused on roasting everything in sight, and while doing this, ensured he kept their arguments going, so he could accomplish his feat in due time.

“There's no man that didn't rise from the Earth, and definitely none that won't return to it,” shouted Zorean, continuing to exert her power on Ignatius, even though it was starting to become obvious, he was gaining more power, and could even disentangle himself from her grip.

“I'll fucking consume all of you, pathetic, useless souls!” added Eman, kicking-in one side of the fortress wall he had erected himself, sending dust and billows of smoke rising in the air; all this, so as to grab at any of them with his flaming claws before it gets too late.

“Do it now!” shouted Trudy from above, “Do it for me, my love! Do it!” Meanwhile, she rose even higher, and resumed her full Ibis form. Indeed, his time to shine had arrived. Realising that he could will and make things happen, he desired to levitate high, and indeed, something invisible seemed to be raising him off the ground, into the air! However, his feet were still held in chains despite his levitation. Something convinced him, they would eventually snap.

While he rose, Zorean’s cries and screaming intensified, but she was being swallowed into the abyss she had created herself – nothing seemed capable of helping her anymore. Eman was clawing through Trudy’s weakened shield, and wanted to grab at the rising boy. It was a bit too late though.

“I’m Ignatius Irumba!” shouted Ignatius as he continued to rise into the air, the smoke and fire actually eating at him as he rose, though not hurting him anymore! “And I won’t die today, you fools! I choose life, love and the freedom to transcend this misery!” He continued rising, and Eman, who’d finally reached the center of the enclosure – just where Ignatius had previously stood, struggled to keep himself from being swallowed down into the condensating pit that was swallowing all of Zorean with it.

“Fuck!” Eman cursed after him, realising his luck and magic was all spent! Ignatius laughed, and shouted as he finally caught up with Trudy, who’d likewise resumed her ascension, steadily rising higher and higher.

“My dear, let’s go home!” exclaimed the heroine, happiness overflowing her.

The chains that had held onto Irumba’s feet broke into pieces as Eman gripped them from far below – he’d resorted to tugging, in an attempt to draw him back down. It was as though the chains suddenly ceased being metal, and were mere paper painted metallic! The demonic priest cursed and growled in pain, but that was all he was left with. The flames burst into huge, monstrous tongues all about him, and he didn’t seem like he could even escape his own hell.

Above the fiery fields and clouds of smoke, Trudy and Ignatius continued to rise, but all was not going well for Ignatius though. At some

point, he started to decelerate, and luckily, Trudy noticed this just in time!

“No! Don't fall back!” shouted Trudy, as she slowed down so as to keep pace with him. Knowing that he might not have the power to make it longer on his own, she extended her feet towards him, and urged him to hold onto them no matter what. He complied, though he really felt weary and found it hard to breathe as they shot higher and higher into the darkening heavens, leaving most of the fuliginous atmosphere below.

Eventually, the energy he had amassed from pure will started to quickly wane, as was his awareness of what was actually going on. Trudy, his Ibis heroine, felt it come, and dug deep claws into his arms, so as to further tighten her grip on him. He finally lost all awareness, as darkness suddenly started to engulf them, but soon, they would be out of those astral battle realms for good.



# Chapter XIV

I felt something heavy holding me down, I tried to move my right leg, and the same mass was there, pinning me onto the floor. My eyes were not able to open, as though the sleep was not capable of being escaped physically at all. I felt my chest struggle to rise as I tried to breathe, and something was holding my head rigidly in place – warm, and stroking me sensually. “I can’t still be dreaming, am I?”

I heard my name. Someone was calling my name, and I could not easily answer back; no, I could not move my lips, as they felt so heavy. But, I struggled, and finally shook my head, slightly.

“Get off him, little princess,” a male voice said. It did not make sense to me. I seemed to recall falling asleep – in a manner that wasn’t really ordinary, but beside Trudy, I could not remember anything like that voice dwelling in the spooky hideout with us.

“Ignatius? Welcome back, sweetheart... Please wake up!”

Her voice could not be missed, nor could it be confused with any of the others. Once I heard her voice, and felt the weight ease off me, I started to recall some more, but then fear and shame caused me to wish she had stayed there instead; covering me from whatever else there was to confront. Soon as she lifted off me, I realised she had not only felt warm against my body, but that sweat had formed where our bodies had been adjoined. The guilt and shame I was experiencing felt something like being caught groping in church! I did not want to open my eyes, but there was light falling onto my lids, and the darkness I had feared earlier on, seemed to be replaced by an even more unnerving light. I refused to open them.

“He’s probably very weak,” the same male voice suggested.

“I’ve done all I can,” Trudy spoke, “but yes, he probably needs time to recover.”

“Time?” chipped in the third voice, whose identity was alien, just like the man I had yet to see. That last voice had a certain harshness to it, as though each word uttered was laced with bile. Fear continued to surge, as more of

what had happened before the slumber, continued to reemerge into consciousness.

“What did you say his name was?” the bitter one asked, very possibly, of Trudy.

“Ignatius”

“Is that a name?” she hit back, harshly so.

“Ignatius Irumba. I don't know his other names, grandma!” Trudy was starting to sound harshly defensive. *She is getting pissed, or is she merely acting?* I really wished she could do something to save my ass. *She master-minded this, so she better act right, for I have nothing sensible to offer in defense...*

And then, I thought of what the presence of witnesses might mean for us, and it just did not seem any good at all! *Is it her mother? Her grandmother?* I was very scared, and wished I'd never been woken up from that death-like slumber. *And what of the slaphappy man?* He'd not uttered anything harsh thus far; only seemed to be playing devil's advocate. *It's a trap!* I felt loathsome, thinking how the girl I had sought so fanatically, might have exploited my plight to land me into some sinister trap...

“Young man, we've saved you from hell,” started the bitter one, whose voice also sounded gray in all respects – the “grandma”. “If you won't fully wake up after all this, I'm afraid we'll dump you in the filthy well outside, so you can give us some well-deserved answers!”

“And you really don't want that Ignatius!” the man laughed, very amused by the verdict just read. I had to swallow my pride and succumb to fear. First, it was one of the arms, which moved furtively, as I attempted to feel about for something to cover my nakedness. I felt the unsmoothed surface of wood, touched somewhere else, and felt something like fabric – a shirt. I pretended to be acting nearly subconsciously, but the cachinnation of that strange dude made me break out of my pretense, realising as I must have been merely adding salt to the wound.

“There's nothing funny!” reacted Trudy in a cold tone. I seized the shirt, and wrapped it around my waist, as I finally opened my eye lids and squinted at them for the first time – three silhouettes; two almost the same height, the other short and limp. “It must be the grumpy one,” so I thought, and I was immediately proved right.

“Wisdom does not come overnight,” she said, “but if for you this single night doesn’t act as a solid lesson for the rest of your life, then I’m worried, your friend’s efforts to save you from a much deserved death, will have gone to immediate waste.”

I was not getting her parables, though I acknowledged that Trudy had possibly saved me from a nightmare of proportions I’d never witnessed or heard of in my scant life.

“She tells me you compelled her to come here?” she went on, starting to sound rather accusatory.

“Did I really compel her?”

“Of the taboos the two of you have violated, there’s no telling. But one thing is for sure, if indeed my daughter here is carrying anything of yours inside of her – which I can’t doubt she is, then you aren’t finished with me just yet. Not until you’ve paid the proper price for your foolishness and kempt contempt.”

*Oh! Did I wake up to meet more trouble, from yet another strange mother?*

But hers was soon laid bare...

“I’m sorry, Ma,” I begged, saying the words with bitterness and regret eating at me from the back of my throat.

“You should also be proud,” the man spoke, though his shape and dress had nothing masculine about it! I wanted to laugh at the prospect of being saved from the wrath of that old woman, by a possibly young, undoubtedly comical gay dude in a woman’s body – a tranny, mysteriously mixed up with our bitter drama. *Do we really have this kind in the villages?* I wondered.

“Don’t judge me, boy,” he said with a seriousness that instead jolted the nuts out of me. “I might look like a jerk, a pretty one for that, but the three of us here have robbed heaven of its grace, and denied your mother from claiming what remains of your innocence.” Indeed, the allegory immediately made it clear to me, he was no jerk at all. But unlike the old woman, even in his seriousness, the coyness never entirely wore off him.

*Who’s this strange guy that can read my mind?*

Trudy was all silent, just standing there, looking down at me, while avoiding my eyes, as though she might contract some of my guilt. *How does she manage to do that? Stand there with them, while I sit here, clothed in*

*shame and regret?* A voice laughed at me from within, but I just shook it off, as I didn't think it was plausible to be joking anymore.

"He's robbed my daughter of her innocence, and I doubt he ever had any in him!" spoke the old woman, "I mean, just look at him!"

Trudy finally stepped away, further behind them, so that, all I had left as my line of defence was the gap between us. I was agaze, seeking something, anything, to which to cling for my defence!

"She's a strong woman," said the gay man, "and the reason you should be proud, is that it is her, and not we, that actually recovered you from the demons you chose to feed while trespassing here."

*Me? Feeding demons? Is this dude intentionally inverting his seemingly tolerable candor?*

"Yes," the old woman added, "and because I've trained her all her life, protecting her from the likes of you, and yet, here you are, not even able to twitch a finger while hers and your own life, were being threatened by a witch you house under your roof!"

I was starting to develop a headache from all their charged rumblings. I straightened myself, and faced the old woman rather straight. I knew I was in trouble, or had almost escaped it as they claimed, but I was not going to let even more trouble brew right in front of me, just soaking more and more of it. I spoke with faked sincerity...

"Excuse my ignorance please," I assured her, "but I don't know of anything that's happened tonight, except that I met my friend in the evening, and because the weather wasn't fine outside, we decided to wait a little inside this place. Trespassing or breaking any taboos wasn't our intent if at all we did that."

The one who should not be wearing the *gomesi* looked at me intently, and then turned to face the old woman, but he didn't say a thing yet. I went on...

"I'm sorry, because we mistakenly had unprotected sex, but it was all out of love, not neglect, and I'm ready to do anything necessary, to right that wrong. I will pay all the bills and take care of her after we visit the family

planning clinic. There's an emergency solution they offer, and it can undo the danger she's in."

The man finally burst out laughing, and his cynicism caused even the old lady to momentarily beam up. I didn't get the gist of it though, or was I being too naïve, as he'd suggested?

"He's definitely just a boy, even if he might be dressed in a man's flesh and bones!" said the cynical man. I hated him.

"We'll have to make a man out of you," the old woman replied, "Even if that means ripping out your bones and giving the right ones to you!"

Trudy must have been silently laughing at me, because at the mention of that, she too snickered from where I could not see her. There was definitely none of them on my side, from what I could see...

"No," the man added, "taking the bones out will leave him with a worthless skin. You need to skin this man, and leave his true self exposed. There's just too much naivety still clothing him, and not even nakedness can make him see reality right now." That gave me goose pimples!

Whatever they were talking about, worst-of-all, in terms that only reminded me of the worst of Bitanga that I had already heard of, made me want to quickly ask for them to send me back into "death"; back into the roasting fortress of that Eman thing, who had already advised me to surrender to more tolerable death sentences, as he was willing to conjure for me. *You are about to be eaten alive my dear, and not even Trudy will spare you from having your bones being ripped out of you, and then onto a fire or out in the sun! Boy are you so doomed!*

"Please grandma," pleaded Trudy finally, "let's return home. I'm not really feeling well, please!"

I am not sure if she was just being sarcastic, or if the laughter had suddenly undone her repose. *Is it really the said "grandmother"? Is she the indomitable witch of Bitanga? Could I be any wrong?*

"Where do you come from?" the woman asked, pointing at me with her right index finger, unmoved by Trudy's pleas.

"Nyamigisa," I replied.

"And you walked all the way here to meet her?"

"He would probably use a bike," the hermaphrodite suggested.

“Is that how you came?” asked the woman.

“Yes ma’am,” I hated that the other one was trying to speak on my behalf, after what he had been suggesting concerning me.

“So, do you know how you aren’t going back home?”

“I don’t understand. As I said, I...” I had not even finished, when she moved closer, and slapped me so hard, almost making my left cheek go numb, where her palm had crashed into me... and she did not stop there.

“If you dare pretend to not understand any of this anymore,” she shouted, “I’ll rip the monkey brains out of you.” *That’s such an insult...*

“I understand. I understand please!” I pleaded softly, holding the side she had slapped with both hands, while pondering what would become of my other side, since she was still lurking close.

“My child is still in school,” she said, “and though I hate to admit it, she’ll have to abort that thing you put inside of her.” *But that is what I was suggesting all the time! No?* It is not what she exactly meant...

“However, if it must be done, it won’t be done to your terms or by your ways,” she was peering straight into my eyes, as though “my way” was pinned right there as a poster on a restaurant door.

“What, you have a spooky alternative to morning-after contraceptives?” my mind inquired silently!

“It shall all be done my way, you are to be there, and shall have to witness all of it, whether in pain or joy!”

I did not know how much impact those words really carried, but when I heard Trudy begin to sob heavily, I felt the weight of her decision finally weigh in on me like a thousand tons of freshly baked bricks. I also thought Trudy was going to utter something in reaction, but all she did was sob and later burst into louder cries. Tears formed in my eyes soon... but I was looking for a hint of remorse in her grandmother’s eyes, and could not find any. *She is truly a dangerous sorcerer! She is going to kill her own grandchild?* I could not think of anything worse in the world. If she would kill her own grandchild, perhaps she can even eat one. I was stricken with cold fright.

\* \* \* \* \*

“So, good folks, looks like my work here is done, and I must return, or the sun will catch me here.”

It was the strange woman speaking...

“Oh, it’s time already?” asked Trudy’s grandmother, turning to face him, much to my relief.

“Sure,” she replied, “I must go, if there’s not anything serious that you need me for anymore.”

There was a pause, and Trudy was looking at me with an expression I could hardly decipher.

“I’ll handle the rest indeed,” asserted the older woman. She walked over to Trudy, who was resting her head against the wall, arms crossed, and her entire aspect projecting nothing, but deep contemplation and possibly much sorrow.

“Hand that over please,” the grandmother said, pointing at the pendant that was still dangling from Trudy’s neck. It looked exquisite, and a bit incompatible with the girl I was used to. She held onto the chain for a while, and then straightened her neck, pulled out the thing and handed it over. Whose was it? I didn’t know, but Trudy seemed like she had not wanted to hand it over.

The old woman handed the pendant to the strange one. “Thank you, Master Isaza!” she proclaimed, while gently placing it into his receptive hands.

“No, not at all! Not at all,” the lady replied, walking towards me, but only to change course, and turn towards the end of the room to my left. He opened a small door that I hadn’t even noticed to be there before, and then he placed the chain inside. There was a strong scent of incense that swept about in the air when he closed the tiny entrance once more.

“I actually prefer that you just call me ‘Isaza’,” the strange woman said. She laughed boisterously, and then added, “Do you think these kids will ever become worthy?”

In my mind, I thought, “is he talking about me and Trudy?”

“Though he’s messed up things, I doubt I can let her go to waste. As for him,” she turned and looked at me with disgust, “I doubt he’ll be of any good.”

The hermaphrodite studied me for a while, and then spoke, “I doubt he’s really worthless, not after what he’s gone through.” She then took a step

closer to me, and almost whisperingly, said to me thus; "If you finally wake up, consider that you've stepped into a world many crave, but never can even dream of. I'll be talking to you soon." And then she walked away, before I even had a chance to make sense of the things he'd just spoken.

"Okay," she said, "let's get out of here then, leave these mysteries to themselves."

While he spoke, I looked about for my pants, and wondered if they might walk on, or just turn their backs on me, so I could dress up my nakedness at last. But no, none of the three ladies seemed ready to actually leave.

"After you, sir," the old woman said, pointing at me. I stood up, seizing the shirt quickly before it could fall. I fastened it from behind, making obvious what I was going through. They did not seem to care, not even Trudy did! I then pulled up my jeans. The underpants had fallen somewhere I did not bother to check – I couldn't see them anyway. I undid the knot, wore the shirt, only tying three of the buttons, as I was in such a rush to finally leave that "prison". I saw one of the shoes, but not the other! I wore the one, and was still looking about, when the teetering and laughter of the one who'd asked to be called 'Isaza' caused me to get even more panicky. "Who's this clown really?" I wondered.

"There," I heard the voice, and didn't raise my eyes to see what was being indicated.

"It's right behind you, blind nomad!" and the laughter increased, making me feel stupid as I actually turned around, only to realise the damn shoe was just behind me, right where I had been looking! The flames that provided most of the light were starting to dwindle, and yet the overhead lights, which seemed meant for those with nocturnal vision, than for my kind, did not seem to be helping at all.

I was finally all dressed, and stood there wondering if they could stop me where I stood, or if I could just walk or run out that door, and vanish into the night beyond, never to be seen or heard from ever again.

"She'll take good care of you," Isaza said, gesturing with open palms, towards Trudy's grandma. "But make sure you don't try to let your head get in the way... you've not spoken much, but I definitely know enough about you already." *Oh, don't try to impress me with fallacies, strange woman!* But, damn, that's what she did, and it wasn't fallacies at all!



“You’ve just finished school, and felt it was the right time to finally find love. But what you didn’t tell anyone, not even your crush here, is that you also had feelings for your step-mother! Now, I wouldn’t say this about a fellow man, and not one of your kind, but if you don’t follow this gifted woman’s advice, and do as she says, the woman you adored until recently, might just succeed with her plot, even after you escaped her in the astral. On another day, I wouldn’t even hint at it, but right now, you’ve probably seen your fate, as clear as day. I can read it off of you – without a fundamental change in who you are, inglorious death is all that awaits you on the other side.”

For a moment, I could not even begin to comprehend how this person could know all these things about me! Was she inside my head? How did he know things I didn’t even tell Trudy about? Actually, who but myself knew of the devious adoration I had for Zorean? *Damn! Even Zorean herself probably doesn’t know it! Who’s this sorcerer? Why does she even speak with such a voice?*

“It won’t make sense,” she finally added. Urging me to walk past them, as Trudy led the way, stepping out into the dark night ahead of us all. “And the one thing you must not dare do,” she added, not taking a step from where she stood – and neither did Trudy’s grandmother, who’d been listening to her comrade’s ranting rather indifferently. “Don’t turn back. Just think about this girl. Think about the child too – even unto death that is.” I paused at the door, when he made mention of ‘the child’. *Its fate has already been decided, right?*

“Thank you, ma’am,” I said, shakily, turning to look at the woman who had just shattered my sense of reality even further.

“Now leave us alone,” the grandmother commanded, in her typical stern voice.

I stepped out, and down the stairs, and stood just one step above where Trudy was seated – on the very last step, down from the sacristy she’d led me towards in the first place. Her face was buried inside her palms, and she was curled onto her knees.

“Trudy,” I whispered from above her, “I’m really sorry about all this.” *I didn’t know how else to get started, now that we had a chance to ourselves.* That didn’t help, no, she stayed put, and I thought I might be making things

worse, so I shut up and stood there, afraid to go and sit beside her. *If those two should find me even daring that...*

But those two were not about to get out it seemed. While we lurked there in the dark, slightly illumined by a waning crescent in the night sky, I bet we could both hear their “private” conversation.

“Why hasn’t he been able to leave this place? It’s really like such a very long time!”

“You’re right, it’s been a long time since his stupid suicide,” the other voice, possibly Isaza’s, replied.

He went on, “Unlike the others though, we found that such unredeemed spirits are the best to work with, as they don’t really have a bias of their own just yet.”

“Are there others like him you mean?”

“You mean within these walls?”

“Sure. Have you arrested other human spirits here as well?”

“There are, but the others aren’t as adept at executing things with precision as the undead Catholic priest. Personally, I like to think, his level of skill has much to do with a possible Jesuit link during his practising life.”

“Jesuit?”

“The Vatican’s version of elite occultists, and probably the only ones that can truly claim to possess the keys handed over to Peter.”

“I don’t get you.”

“There’s no difference between them and us,” He added.

“But then, why do they persecute us?” it was the old woman asking, rather softly, probably realizing we might be eavesdropping. Isaza didn’t adjust any lower though...

“It’s the game. Whoever has the power, would rather not share the keys with anyone else that might threaten their hold onto the mysteries. But, amongst themselves, they know it, that though our paths might seem varied, we, especially the new ones, have earned our right to enter the gates. And so, when I get my hands on the likes of Eman, I really want to squeeze as much juice as I can out of him, all the while, crafting him into the kind of mercenary we’d need to counter both forces of light and darkness.”

“He’s that good?”

“Mankind? Definitely! And the demons and nature spirits we hold here? They often fail to reach his levels of performance, especially on the kinds of experiments we are currently exploring.”

“Should I know?”

“You’d probably not be much interested.”

There was a pause. One of them cleared their throat, and then I heard the flames being blown out. A thicker gloominess poured over the steps, where the glow of the light from inside had once fallen. I was afraid they’d find me standing there, and that would definitely mean I’d been listening-in on their ‘spirit talk’. I carefully stepped onto the ground - directly placing my left leg down the edge of the stairs closest to me, and then the other leg. Trudy raised her head to peek at me, probably unaware that I had been standing behind her all the time. *Or does she think I want to run off?*

“Anyway, thanks for coming when I most needed you.”

“Don’t mention it at all!”

“Nope. Though, if it weren’t for these naughty kids, I would probably have continued to assume Eman had long left these walls... I really never liked him, and don’t think I can ever relate with any clerics at all.”

“Not of their kind perhaps.”

“Oh, and how I wish the same wrath would befall these mushrooming Pentecostal puppets!”

There was laughter from them both, and I wondered what about the ‘Pentecostals’ they were so pissed about?

“Those are utterly clueless clowns. The cleverer ones among them, perhaps, might possess some insights into manipulative religion or they might be just shrewd capitalists pursuing money in the name of their Lord, but as for any plausible knowledge of a kind you should care about? Just ignore them...”

“I don’t like how they’ve started to even come to our shrines asking for aid, just to preach better?”

“Or better, to fool more, without really ever getting into trouble with their God.”

“I’ve chased away a couple of them”

The manly one laughed once more.

“Don’t really bother. However, we must continue the work... None of the Cwezi will be at rest, until the new eon is fully manifest.”

“I’m doing my part.”

“And that’s what matters the most. From all angles, from all systems, from all nations...”

There was silence, and then finally steps approaching the exit. I pretended to have been squatting, playing with something on the ground. A switch was flipped, darkness at last. The door was closed shut, and a lock that I’d not heard before, clicked into place as well.

“I thought the two of you would be gone home by now?” Isaza said, sounding sarcastic.

“I told you,” Trudy’s grandmother chipped in, “these two are really beyond the point of usefulness. Can’t even risk walking over the grass at this hour...” She laughed, and Isaza followed suit. I did not find her remarks amusing though; I was pondering what lay ahead for me, now that she was finally done with her colleague, but the thoughts were not any amusing. I believed whatever she was planning for the rest of the night, wasn’t going to be anything I had been prepared for.

Isaza walked down the stairs, paused where Trudy was seated, and placed a palm upon her head.

“You were very brave by the way”, He said to her, “and make sure you don’t relax or let anything get in the way of your advancement. Not even fancy boys like him, the whims and trappings of Kampala or the stupid diversions of television and radio.” Trudy laughed silently; at what in particular? I didn’t know.

The woman, Isaza, walked on, stood there alone, ahead of us, facing out into the night. Actually, she was facing the side that had nothing but silhouettes of banana plantations and indescribable gloom. *Where’s she going now?*

“My dear,” she called out in a voice seemingly exhausted, “let me return to the far.” Trudy’s grandmother walked over to her, and as she approached her, the young woman knelt with both knees, and put her hands up in the air, as though she were about to prostrate towards a Kaba? It must have been the south, and so I doubted it was anything like it.

“Safe journey.”

Hands upon her head, and then mutterings of things I couldn’t make any sense of...

*Umw dsom gsoir derp duh wemo  
Gso hkirigh ef gso olwor tewh  
Dealw rogiro fren gsih derlw  
Umw rogarm ge gsoir souvomlb wdollimth.  
Gsah we I rolouho bea fren gsih bear sehg  
Es hkirig ef gso Ma Xsdozi  
Yo ylohhow im bear rogarm  
Imge gsimo edm grao sehg.*

There was a shriek, choking and then the woman who'd seemed the boldest, most cunning of us all, fell forward, first onto her head, and then to the sides, in a possibly painful manner. But there was not anything like a cry or word issuing from her anymore. *Weird sorcerers.*

I looked at Trudy while this was happening, wondering if she might have missed the strange utterings from her grandmother, but her eyes were undoubtedly peeled and recording it all. I turned back to the two wizards, wondering what occult games they were playing. I figured, I was very likely the only one that was green – Trudy? I had already concluded she knew way more than she had even dared to scare me with.

“Ninka?” Trudy’s grandmother said, turning over the other woman, so she could lie on her back. “Ninka, can you hear me?” she asked once more.

A cough, clearing of the throat, and then another cough. Laughter!  
“Hey! What’s going on here?” a female voice, nothing at all like Isaza, spoke at last! I couldn’t believe it. What magic did this old woman just do? *She’s given her a truly remarkable voice!* And that was my naivety being fed awe. Whatever had caused the woman to possess a man’s voice in the first place, I couldn’t possibly know, but the sudden transition to a soft, almost silky voice, totally blew my mind. For a moment, I wondered who of the two – Isaza, or the old woman, owned the spectacular feats, but my fantasies were short-lived.

“Irumba? Is that your name?” the old woman asked, walking towards me.

“Yes, that’s my name”

“Like I said, you are coming with us.”

“Yes grandma.”

“Nyamwezi? How are you feeling right now?” her voice had suddenly gotten calm! Was it Isaza that had caused her to be so harsh before or was it the presence of this “new” partner? I could not tell. I wondered how she could have altered her person so drastically, and in such a short time!

“Oh, Trudy!” the other woman said, rising up to her feet, and adjusting her clothes, feeling her messy hair, all done as though she was totally oblivious of what had caused the mess, or who she had been all along? I wondered too, but she did not seem to care.

“You should have seen her when I first found her!” said the witch, adjusting her own gomesi, after which she reached for a sack or something like it.

“Oh *bambi!*”

“It’s as though all the *bitega* of the *Barundi* had settled upon them!”

“And who’s this one?” the woman with the nice voice asked, walking up to me, and inspecting me as though I were some insensible artifact.

“Maybe ask your daughter for a proper answer...” suggested the other.

“He’s definitely not from around here, from what I can see. What’s your name, my dear?”

“Let’s go home,” Trudy replied, before I had a chance to answer. She stood up and signaled for me to move as well.

“See?” laughed the old woman, “she’s in charge when it comes to him.”

The lady stepped aside, as though to give me way to proceed. I didn’t move though, I looked down, feeling rather shy at how Trudy and the grandmother were making me seem like something I really ought not be.

“My name is Irumba Ignatius.” I said to the newcomer, very steadily, and as though she might otherwise try challenge it.

“Nyamiyonga’s sons!”

I did not know what she meant by that, but my name seemed to make her happy. She led the way ahead of us all, holding the sack that the old woman had been insistent on carrying herself. Behind her, I strolled, silently, unsure whether it was her home or Trudy’s we were headed towards, as it wasn’t the direction via which Trudy had come earlier on. Behind me, walking a little distance behind us, was Trudy and her grandmother, talking in very low tones, almost seeming like whispers, except I could hear them occasionally mention my name.

I could not really anticipate or loath anything at that point, as everything in my life seemed to have been suddenly turned on its belly. We walked along a small footpath that meandered via gardens; the cold dew on what were possibly cassava leaves, brushed against my exposed arms, causing me to shudder. It was dark, but our guide led the way as though the route had been pre-programmed into her legs! *Maybe she can see in the dark... you can never tell with these kinds of folks.* I just made sure I followed after her closely, never saying a thing. *What other options do I have?* There were many thoughts crossing my mind, but none seemed to give me any reassurance that things would ever get back to normal ever again.

\* \* \* \* \*

We walked past a huge and very imposing tree, and as we walked by, I thought I heard something speak inside or behind it? No one commented about it, or slowed down, and so I too hurried onwards. We passed what must have been a family's graveyard, crossed a road, and then soon came into a clearing – a large homestead; a couple of huts, the sounds of goats, cows and a big granary were things I immediately distinguished. Our guide welcomed us back home. I waited to see who of them was the host.

“Take him to the back,” said the old woman as she approached one of the huts, “and wait for me there.”

“So this is Trudy's home?” My heart pounding!

“Come,” said Trudy, leading me around one of the structures. Up until that point, I had wondered whether she would ever talk to me again, before sunrise that is – it had not seemed like she would.

“Is this the place Trudy?” I asked, hurrying to walk beside her.

“Most definitely.”

She did not sound as bold and proud as she had seemed the day before. I would not blame her, and did not mind any more... but she possibly had her reasons, and I would not probe for them.

“I'm glad to finally be here, by the way.”

She did not react to that, she, instead, pointed to a semi-circular, unroofed structure, and spoke in low voice about it...

“You will be using that one, and I'm sorry, but there's no warm water.”

“Is it a bathroom?”

“Maybe a 'birth-shade'?” she replied, sounding amused.

"It's got a cool roof," I joked – it had nothing but the sky and stars, far above it.

She walked closer to me, and stood in front of me, not saying anything. I got tense for no apparent reason.

"Ignatius," she said, "please promise me you're going to forgive me for all of this, please!" *She's going to cry...* And I did not want any of that anymore. "Oh, please my sweetheart. It's I who should be saying that actually." I reached out with my right hand, and felt for her left. She was cold, and something had bruised her, right where my fingers touched. *She's going through more pain than I. I'm very sure about that.*

"I'm sorry, Trudy."

I knew it was highly risky, should any of the other two women find us, but I also felt like that might be the only chance I had left to give her a sincere apology. I drew her closer; we quickly embraced, and then I quickly kissed her – first on one cheek, and then stuck a tongue betwixt her lips, before stepping off and letting go of her. She did not want to let go of me, but probably sensed the tenseness in my daring act, and did so.

"What's going to really happen?" I asked her, hearing the old woman send off her colleague, as they both exchanged what must have been funny remarks, because they were talking and laughing hilariously in the night, as though for them the day had already kicked in! Sometimes, I felt like these were bad or dangerous people, but then other times, they seemed to be very jolly, sickly humorous folks – the kind that can make fun of smiling corpses or prostrate before fireflies.

"I'm not really sure what's likely to happen to you or me," Trudy said, "but for now, I guess you're going to have to bathe some herbs, and then spend the night here, in one of the houses." *The houses...?*

"Will I be safe?" I felt rather ashamed asking her such a question, but I couldn't avoid it – not when spending the first night in Bitanga, especially under the circumstances I had been led into.

It must have eaten at her for a while, because she replied rather disappointed, "Really? This is my grandmother's home, Ignatius!"

I was ashamed, but couldn't excuse myself, as I'd already seen and heard enough at the shrine, to not be willing to take anything for granted



anymore. I knew she couldn't see things from my perspective – because she was actually a bit like them!

The old woman called out her name, and she immediately abandoned me to the dark. She returned a while later, holding a basin with both hands.

“Let's go to the shade,” she said. I was still wearing all my clothes and the shoes as well.

“Where should I put the clothes?”

“I'm going to wait for you,” she replied, moving ahead of me, and finally resting the basin behind the “shade” of bamboo stalks.

“Bathe quickly,” she said, “before the herbs get cold.”

“You said it was going to be a cold bath”

“She said these herbs would only be effective if bathed hot.”

I was afraid... I bent and felt first the temperature of the steam rising from the surface of the water – it felt warm, not hot. I then touched the mixture, and then felt deeper with my fingers. The water itself didn't seem very hot, but the things suspended in it did.

“I'll hold your clothes for you.”

“What about you?” I asked her.

“What about me?”

“Aren't you taking a shower after all we've been through?”

“After you.”

I laughed. “Are you also going to bathe this stuff?”

“Actually, she'd asked me to bathe right there with you.”

“Oh really?”

“But I'll wait.”

I unbuttoned my shirt, took off the jacket as well, the jeans, shoes, and socks, handing each of them to her in turn. I then stepped onto the miry-feeling, cold stones that defined the bathroom floor. I asked her to step a little further away so I might not splatter the filthy-smelling things onto her or the clothes, but she refused, saying she didn't want her grandmother finding her spectating from a distance against her commands.

I bathed really fast, as not only was the stuff hot, but the combination of smelly herbs, the mossy-rocks upon which I was bathing and the eerie backdrop of shadows and possible trouble, caused me to want to get out of the place pretty soon. I'd probably wasted much of the “medicine”,

because, by the time I got done, there was like only a quarter of the original stuff left for Trudy.

I asked for my shoes, but she told me she'd brought a pair of *lugabire* for me. I changed into those, and got a *lesu* she had been wrapping around herself, and then changed into that as well. I took the clothes from her – mine and hers, and then waited, teeth teetering in the cold.

As she bathed, she would often sigh or curse, very likely, because of the bitter herbs reacting to the bruises on her skin. I felt sorry for her, and had offered to go wash her, but she laughed it off, saying there would be a future date, “under better circumstances.”

After her shower, which had progressed much slower than mine, so that the old woman walked and emerged from behind one of the huts holding a paraffin lamp, inquiring of Trudy about “what it was that was being exchanged in the bathroom, instead of soap?” Trudy laughed instead, explaining how her wounds were the real reason to blame. There was neither comment nor question, concerning why I was not in the “bath” with her, and so I assumed that either Trudy had wanted to exaggerate things, or that the old woman’s vision was starting to backfire.

She soon finished her grueling bath, and put on just a petty dress. We walked together, back to the front, and there was the old woman, waiting for us outside one of the huts.

“The rest will be tomorrow.” She announced. “Irumba,” she went on, “there’s really not supposed to be room for you here, but as I’ve already tolerated enough from you in this single night, I guess you might as well not sleep with the animals.”

I knew what she meant – whether married or not, it is a cultural taboo for the man to sleep in the shelter of his in-laws, especially the mother-in-law’s. But for the grandmother-in-law, that rule was probably either non-existent or could be overridden on a night such as that, or in Bitanga anyway!

She showed me to a small hut – the smallest of them all, and handing over the little paraffin lamp to me, urged me to go on and step inside. When I pushed the wooden door, which was very short – like the rest of the hut, I probed the interior, seeking for any signs of a bed or something of the sort

– there wasn't anything familiar. Instead, there was just a pile of filled sacks, stacked on top of each other, all to one side of the hut, which was built of nothing but earth in some places, and naked sticks elsewhere. While I pondered how I was to actually fall asleep in such a space, Trudy came in from behind me, and offered me a neatly folded bedsheet, and then a mat.

“Place the mat on top of those,” she suggested, “and either cover yourself with the sheets, or sleep on top – whichever you prefer.” I really didn't see the better of the two choices yet. She bid me goodnight, not able to kiss me, but only squeezing my hand, since the grandmother was standing there watching me all the while. Finally, Trudy left, but the old woman did not!

After I had made the “bed”, and when I had placed my clothes on a pole that had been leaning against the wall on the other side of the little hut, I wondered if she was going to wait to see me jump onto the “bed”, before closing the door. But she had something else in mind...

“There's only one thing to not forget as you sleep here,” she said.

*What might that be, wise, weird old woman?* My head was spinning.

“All these houses here are shrines of some sort, and so, don't try to do anything disrespectful while dwelling herein. But then also, know that even if we might be a mile or two away during the night, yet I shall be watching and hearing everything happening anywhere. So, keep in mind that there's unfinished business here, and so you shouldn't dare run off in the night...”

That was a sinister threat, or it was the scariest bed-time talk I had ever been told all my life! She drew the door behind her, and then I prepared to go close it more securely from inside, even though I did not see anything like a handle or lock of sorts anywhere. As I inspected the door, with the help of that paraffin lamp she'd left behind for me, I got startled and nearly fell back into the pile of grass-filled sacks, when to my left, where there was nothing but the wall, a voice assured me in a tone that seemed to emerge from a very distant depth beyond or “within” the wall; “And, you can't really run away, even if you tried.”

I was forced to leave the paraffin-lamp burning, and though my eyes hurt from wanting to sleep, the fear that I was sleeping inside of yet another

shrine-trap, caused me to struggle against sleep for what seemed like forever. But I got overpowered, and the actual delay might not have even been longer than ten minutes, before a most soothing sleep overtook me. Luckily, or rather strangely, despite having been told upfront that I had slept inside of a shrine, I woke up the next day, feeling the most relaxed and empowered than I had ever felt any morning ever! And the icing on the cake? There were no further nightmares, not even the ventriloquist chatter.

# SECTION 4: CWEZI INITIATION RITUALS

To think is human  
To Desire is noble  
To Wish is weak  
To Imagine is mystic  
To Dream is spiritual  
To Will is divine  
To Act is to be God.

So I desire to drink a cup of tea  
I will to drink this cup of tea  
I have the right to drink this cup of tea  
I visualize this cup of tea  
I go on, and use my ritual, to make this cup of tea  
I Am drinking this cup of tea.  
I have realized my True Will  
And that is All,  
That is True, Magic Is.

Who Creates  
Has to Will  
Has to Act  
And Is God  
Manifest  
As Pure Act.

The Intent  
Who can define it  
Who can act on it  
Who can manifest it  
Is The True Initiate  
of The Great Mystery.

# Chapter XV

It is not the lack of comfort that caused me to wake up, rather, I had risen once, just as the birds were starting to sing, and knowing the day ahead might be hectic, chosen to fall back. “Let trouble wake me up instead,” so I had told myself.

Probably much later, as the rays of sunlight were piercing into the hut – a few tiny holes in the grass-thatched roof, and many more through wider ones in the door; a bang that seemed to originate from right above my head, caused me to jump out of the dizziness, never to return into sleep thereafter. I was both frightened and alarmed. Eventually though, I interpreted the bang to mean something could be at the door, as there was no visible window on the hut. *Lost my sense of orientation?*

When I turned away from the wall, and sat upright, to go and spy via the door, I almost knocked into the neatly arranged items on a rusty tray that had been left sitting upon a tiny stool, just to the right of the door. *Someone has brought me breakfast, and they did not even bother to wake me up?* I leaned with my hands on either side of the tiny door, and then tried peeking out of the biggest hole in the wood of the door, just so I might see what was brewing outside. But my eyes couldn't immediately operate with the brightness of the daylight outside. I drew back, and took a while, so I could return to my surveillance after I was accustomed to the light.

There wasn't much I could see from my perspective – just a neat compound, devoid of grass, but having no stray leaves, no pile of dust anywhere within its barren floor of earth. In the distance, I could see overgrown sugarcane, with many of its leaves yellowed and some desiccated. There was a big mango tree with no fruit, and a few visible banana stalks, with the leaves that crowned them, playing harmoniously against the wind.

I could tell from the brilliance of the sun, the look of the garden and the time I had been sleeping, that it was possibly mid-morning, and that the sun was already hotter than desirable – on the outside that is, most likely because I was inside a properly done “cwezi” hut. These little structures, possibly by design, are mostly mud-huts. They insulate heat so well, inside

one, it becomes hard to relate to the weather outside; warm in the dead of night, cool in the fires of the midday sun. They thatch them with grass – enough to keep the elements out. I was still studying my little prison, when my attention suddenly turned inwards – hunger!

I felt hungry, and that drove my attention away from the door and the heat outside, and towards my late breakfast – the one that'd been delivered to me, as though by a ghost. The first thing that captured my attention, was a small tin kettle with a black, plastic handle. It had milk-tea, with a special herbal condiment, *mujaja*, added for extra flavour. Next to it, sat an empty, possibly new or rarely used porcelain cup with Chinese art drawn upon it, and then next to that, was a wooden bowl, with large, roasted groundnuts almost looking pale-white. Last of all, a piece of roasted cassava, quietly sat atop the peanuts, all of them awaiting me to begin. *Sure! Let's get started!*

I poured myself a cup of milk, which was still steaming, so that I had to blow over it every once in a while, to cool it quickly. I drunk and ate everything I had been offered. “*Generous captors*”, I said to myself. All the while, I stood and paced the hut; eating, while inspecting the treasures on display.

There was a row of pots, all labelled with drawings I could not decipher, and all these were sealed shut with cow-hide and ropes. What do they keep in those? These sat in two rows, not far from where I'd rested my head in the night. I didn't touch or go near them, I just saw them, and thought it wiser to not mess with them.

Beside these, were a couple of spears, each with elaborate engravings on its handle – just below the blade. Two of them had feathers glued around their handles, just below the engravings. Next to the spears were masks, or they looked like shields made to look like faces? These were actually too big to be considered masks, but then, they were also smaller than the shields I knew of from movies and games. There were three of them. *Strange stuff.*

On the other side of the “bed”, was a large stone. No, the sacks upon which I'd been sleeping were resting atop these stones, and there was just one of them that wasn't concealed. It was all smoothed, just like those stones found along the shores of Lake Nyanza, but unlike what I was used to, these all looked larger than normal. They must have weighed anywhere between

thirty and a hundred kilograms each. The one that had been left aside also had something peculiar – it had black “eyes”; spots marked along its circumference, as though with shallow drilling, and though I didn’t turn it about, I believe they went all round. *Is stone-collecting an art? And what of revering them?* I wouldn’t know – until much later in life.

There was a small drum, a “talking” drum. It was covered in all-black hide, that didn’t seem like that of cattle. Maybe it was python hide or some other reptilian skin, but it just didn’t look like typical drum hides. It looked very special, and so welcoming to... drum! It seemed to silently ask me; “Please, try... go on and try!” I did feel it literally say this! Out of much curiosity, I tapped upon it, first once, and very lightly, afraid it might actually *talk*! But since it did not, I dared two more times, before losing interest.

I finished breakfast, placed the empty cup back on the tray, and then scooping up my last palm-full of groundnuts, returned to the door to eavesdrop on the action happening outside my strange cell.

\* \* \* \* \*

Oh, there was much activity going on outside my prison hut! But all I could do was listen and guess at what they were doing – no matter which holes I peeped through, I couldn’t see any of them! But there were a couple of folks, and each seemed to be busy at work – the conversation and laughter gluing them together. I envied them. I was alone with my half-fantasies, when a young man suddenly arrived at the door, pulled it ajar, catching me unawares – engaged in eavesdropping. He did not accuse me, but neither did he greet me. He walked straight to where the breakfast tray sat, picked it up, and then spoke; “If you are done.” I thought it might be a question, and so I replied promptly, “Yes.”

“Yes, I finished a long time ago,” I added, and just as he was starting to leave, I excused myself and then asked, “Is it okay for me to get outside for a little sunshine?”

“No you must wait. Plus, Akiiki is not finished yet.”

“The old woman?” I asked unsure who he meant, or what the “finishing” was all about.

“Yes, our mother.”



He closed the door, and then left. I was still wondering who he was, when I heard footsteps approaching the door once more, and then I saw the same long and dark face peeking into the hut.

“Have this,” he said, handing over a small, desiccated twig.

“What’s that for?” I asked him, not even sure what his name was.

“I’ve been asked to give it to you, and that you must make sure to not spit any of it, after you chew it.”

I took the twig, which was no longer than my palm, and inspected it.

The messenger waited a while, probably to see whether I would start chewing immediately or not? He smiled as I nibbled just a little bit from one end of it, before looking back at him, to get his approval. He was taller than me, but much leaner and also possessed a really funny demeanor. He stood a few steps outside the door, and then leaned forward, with arms across the door, looking at me with an expression that seemed to mock or pity me.

He did not seem to belong there, even though he had spoken to me in very articulate and graceful Runyoro – much better than what I could speak, or what many “native” folks could. His face had markings upon it – cuts, that had long turned into permanent scars, and which traced an ovoid, fish-like shape on his forehead. Besides the language, nothing else about him would convince me that he was a Munyoro. I later heard someone call him “Thon”, and the name disqualified my earlier attempts to classify him as either one of Lugbara, Acholi or Luo. *That face...* I continued to gnaw, chew and swallow the sweetish-bitter herb I had been instructed to finish. I obliged, not because I enjoyed it. *Where are all these people coming from?* I wondered.

I wished Trudy was there to answer me, or share in my muddiness. I was busy chewing the tree, but didn’t know for what purpose it was, nor what effects it might cause in me. Soon, memories of an old, but unforgettable episode in my life flashed back. It was the first time that I ever got drugged, and it was done without my consent or knowledge. How did it happen? A friend at school, and one who’d never caused me to have doubts in anything he said, once convinced me that to cure a terrible cold, such as the one I was suffering from at the time, there was a herb he rarely recommended, but which always “could work wonders”. “Can it cure this?” I recall asking him. “Sure! Why not? I know someone that doesn’t use any

other form of medicine, for any condition, except this.” I was gullible or trusted too much. I fell for it.

I remember chewing just a little bud off the smallish-twigg that they referred to as “stick”. It didn’t taste bitter, which sort of reassured me at first, but which also caused me to question what sort of herb it was; often, you can tell the potency of herbal medicine, by the degree of bitterness and repugnance it confronts you with. Despite my inquisitiveness, I was urged on, and soon, had consumed what he and others considered to be a “safe dose.” But my worries started to multiply, when I noticed how strange I begun to feel – about half an hour later, and how my friends just kept laughing dismissively about my concerns, only claiming that I’d be “fine soon.” Alas! Half an hour later, and there wasn’t a cure, but a totally new kind of nightmare! I couldn’t rest and had never felt so paranoid around my friends as at that time. For some strange reason, paranoia soon gave way to hyper-feelings of euphoria – I deserted my friends, but found myself roaming the school, engaged in activities I normally wouldn’t.

I had never played football at school, and seldom visited the playgrounds, but on that day, I not only spent the entire afternoon at the pitch, I insisted on playing with any, and all teams practising on the grounds! I chased after balls haphazardly, abandoned one match to join another, becoming a real pain to those who were trying to practise by the rules. One guy nearly beat me for ruining his goal-shot. A while later, I insisted on taking a penalty after claiming an injury. The referee refused to grant it, and in the quarrel, I slapped a senior! The fight that started wasn’t one I was ready for – only the mercy of on-lookers managed to save me from being bitterly beaten. One of my friends was there in time, and though he didn’t explain to anyone, nor to me, what was actually happening, he made sure to whisk me away, and surrounded by the “circle”, was told that I was “high”. It wasn’t like anything I’d heard about medicine before.

Did I ever try again? Not really. On another occasion, someone suggested I smoke some – it was a room party while at the university, but I declined the offer. “I’d rather chew than smoke that,” I told one of my peers, but the truth was, I was not even bold enough to try chewing a leaf of the stuff anymore. So, standing inside that shrine, having finished the “herb” I had been given, I started to sense something a bit familiar... *this time, there might be no one to save or explain to me.* It felt weird.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You won't stay long in the fields, okay? Pass by Atwooki's place, and ask her to get someone to tend the cows for you, we'll need you here sooner."

"Okay. How soon then?"

"Just don't delay. We don't have all day, and plus, the work must start when you are around, otherwise you will miss your first ever chance at participating."

"No, I can't miss it!"

He laughed, and I knew it was the dark one – the one who had been to my hut earlier on.

"Then better get going. Take the goats with you, but lock that one inside." It was Trudy's grandmother giving instructions. They were all listening to her. "I doubt it will survive long before you return, so feed it some water and get some banana peels from the kitchen for it. Please, do that before you leave."

The boy asked, sounding touched, "Ooh, what happened to him?"

"Long story," Trudy replied, laughing.

The grandmother added, "If it fails to make it, I'll slaughter it myself."

"But why did you have to pick my goat? It was the best of them all!" Trudy remarked.

"Hmm, look who's asking?", the voice wasn't familiar.

The boy laughed.

"Everyone is saved by their own," said the old woman, "I wouldn't have touched any of my goats, that's for sure."

"Oooh? I want him alive!" Trudy said, laughing and making funny sounds.

"Well, if only Ninka could bear witness," replied the grandmother, sounding humorous and defensive, "Except, she might not recall a thing about what you and your animal actually went through."

"Someone's goat is going to be claimed!" the boy exclaimed, as sounds of bleating, mooing and hooves stamping the ground interfered with the talk I was picking-up.

"I pray you find some pastures today," the old woman said, as the herd moved away.

"You've forgotten their horns!" cried Trudy, after the herdsboy.

*Their horns?* I wondered, *do the cattle have detachable ones or is it something else?* Indeed, I had so much more to learn about my own people and their peculiar practices!

"I've carried the small one," replied he.

"Alright then. Kakama be with you all the way..." said the mother, or rather grandmother of Trudy.

"And may he find them good pastures and protect them from thieves and wild beasts," concluded the herder, indicating to me that the said 'horns' must be some sort of protective tool or lucky charm. From behind the walls and the closed door, I couldn't properly tell what they looked like. I just imagined them as dried, blackened horns with strange inscriptions upon them. *These people are really Chwezi!* I was hoping to learn more...

After the cows and goats had gone, silence returned once more to the homestead. I retired to a lone spot on the floor, and leaned against the bed, contemplating about what was happening, and what was yet to come. For the first time, my thoughts returned home – *What's happening at home? Could they be looking for me? What of Zorean? Is she okay? Is she even bothered by my disappearance? Dad!* Something within kept assuring me that whatever had taken place the night before hadn't been entirely restricted to the forbidden shrine. But without my phone – I had not seen of it yet, and knew it had lost all charge, and very possibly would not get recharged any time soon; I would definitely not find out, just yet, and they too, would not.

*Unless Dan had gotten clever, and asked around? If he would only return to town and ask among those bodaboda men, someone would soon guide them to where I am, or where I was last seen.* Despair started to want to return, and I was starting to feel hopeless once more. The silence outside seemed to awaken voices in the shrine instead...

"Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

No, that was not some invisible voice trying to scare the shit out of me; it was a slogan that I had seen written across the door of an esoteric Order, in a fantasy game I'd once played. Recalling the scene, I imagined myself being trapped inside something more unforgiving than dwelling inside a haunted shrine, albeit one where at any moment, you could merely escape, by pressing the "Escape" or "Quit" button on the screen. *This is reality, and it's unforgiving!* There was some dizziness creeping into my head, slowly by slowly... *and she wasn't alone.* I jerked and nearly screamed,

when I felt something whisper behind me. I turned around hastily, and there wasn't anything but the same inanimate stuff that'd been with me in the shrine all along. It was cool inside the little hut, but I was starting to sweat a bit.

*It's all in your head!*

I stood, sat once more, stood again, walked about, leaned against the walls; all for no apparent reason, except I felt it was unsafe to stay in the same spot for too long. I studied the roof, and then the floor – which was made of mud and cow-dung, all mixed together. Time wasn't shifting at all! The combination of being clueless, paranoid and anxious, soon treated me to some uncontrollable, annoying perspiration. *What's going to happen to me?* There was laughter, or I thought I heard it, and it seemed to originate from above my head!

\* \* \* \* \*

Feeling nauseated, I started considering returning to the “bed”. Perhaps, a little more sleep could help me? But, just as I was considering that, I heard motion outside the hut, and then the door was opened. She didn't knock, and maybe even intended to shock me, but I caught her just in time.

“Trudy?” I asked, my eyes feeling strange, as I studied her freakish look – “Why the mask?” It was made of wood and was adorned with variously colored thorns.

“Oh I'm sorry!” she said, seeing that I was beyond the point of being freaked or being amused; I was simply bemused and worn-out. She pulled off the mask, her smile quickly fading into hints of sorrow.

“It's fine,” I said, standing up from the stool, with intentions of passing it on to her. I wanted company, I needed it more than anything. I stood there, not looking at her, but the mask she was holding in her right hand. “It's almost over my dear,” she begun, “Trust me, I didn't know what she had in mind until now.”

Unknown to her, the most serious thing on my mind was the matter no one had given me an update about yet – what was to become of her pregnancy? Judging by her expressions, she didn't seem to care or be

concerned that her grandmother had promised to undo it in “her own way.” That scared me about both of them.

“Are you still going to have the child? Has she made up her mind yet?”

When I asked her that question, I wasn't sure if I should be looking into her eyes. *Does she care anymore?* I noticed that she was frozen in place, and was silent, and so I looked up to her, just to be sure I was being heard. There was a tiny tear, and reddened eyes, and I felt guilty, though I had not done anything besides ask. She dropped the pesky thing onto the dung-infested floor and threw herself towards me with a big embrace. I wanted to tell her about the herb I had been offered but thought it unnecessary... she was crying mildly.

I did not embrace her back, I just held onto her dress with my left hand, the other unsure what to do. I felt her heart beat against my chest, the door was open, and I wondered if she was not trying to cause me the same trouble that'd seen me walk down hell's gates already. I was about to push her away, when she whispered something that forced me to stand still and listen...

“Grandmother has accepted you finally. Though she might not utter it, you should know that she's proud of you and what you've brought us.”

“She's proud? Didn't she spend the whole night hurling curses and regrets at us?” I didn't think she was any soberer than me, and I didn't want to believe her given the state I was in, but she went on nonetheless...

“Yes, I too, found her change of stance rather strange and difficult to believe. But you see, there's this thing she does... it's called ‘divining’, and using that technique, she can make judgements on matters otherwise difficult to draw conclusions about.”

I was not getting any of it yet.

“So, she divined about you, and why the two of us almost wound up ruining the work she'd been preparing me for, and what she found out might not make much sense to you right now, but very likely will in the future, if not sooner.”

“What's this ‘divining’ thing?” I asked, as I drew away from her – not ready to be caught in anymore awkward situations than we'd already been through.

She sensed my uneasiness, and let me go, but still, stood right there, in front of me, looking directly at me.

“There are many ways to find out things, Ignatius. Sometimes, people will read books, others will conduct experiments and consult the data like we do in labs, and still, others will just rely on rumors, speculations or the misinformation on television and radio. But, outside of all of these methods, especially among our people, some of the more trustworthy means of finding out about difficult things, is by reading omens and signs offered to us by Enkya ya Enkya, the ancestors or nature spirits.”

I was already adjusting to her as a woman of strange ideas and deeds, her theories seemed to make some sense, and none at all.

“So,” I asked, “she inquired from spirits about me?”

“Not just any spirits Igni,” she moved away, and I thought she would go sit on the bed I was fearing to return to, but she instead sat on the stone with the obscure patterns on it. *Too familiar with this stuff.*

“Her most trustworthy spirit revealed much about you to her, and she regretted why she’d said the things she’d uttered last night. One of those revelations is that you didn’t actually end up here accidentally, but that for most of your life, you’ve been specifically groomed, even if you never realized it, to be a very powerful shaman.”

“Wow! I hope you aren’t serious about any of this my dear? First of all, it mostly doesn’t make sense yet, and more so, because I’ve lived a mostly pious life – I was born a catholic, and now believe in nothing much but science.”

She interjected, “Listen. Ignatius, listen...”

I wasn’t ready to listen, before completing my argument...

“How can she trust spirits? Do you also trust them? Do you believe everything she tells you? I mean, yes, I acknowledge the fact that somehow, I’ve gotten myself mixed up in all this spooky cultural stuff. Seriously, until just yesterday, I wouldn’t have even suspected any of the stuff I’ve gone through in the last couple of hours. I don’t mean to discredit you or your grandmother, but to claim that I’ve lived all my life being prepared to become a shaman? I’m just your friend Trudy, not your brother or cousin, so how do I get mixed up in this family thing of yours?”

I had started to annoy her, I could tell. She stayed quiet, and only looked at me pitifully. I was literally shouting at her, and when I realized it, and

her indifference to my reactions, I felt stupid. I took a deep breath and held my head with both hands. "Trudy, speak to me..." I demanded, trying to calm down.

"I'm carrying your child, Ignatius, don't you forget that."

"How sure are you, if she won't let you visit a formal hospital to confirm this?" I knew I was being a dick in the head, but something in me just wasn't ready to take more of the bullshit happening all around me. I felt some guilt, speaking to her like that, and so, quickly pardoned myself, not to look anymore foolish than her.

"I'm sorry Trudy. There's just so much happening in so short a time, I don't even think you would understand what's going on in my head right now." And that wasn't just a passing remark, I was not feeling "normal" upstairs anymore...

"It's okay. It's okay. I admit and have already said I'm sorry. Much of this might not have happened, if it wasn't for me saying 'yes' to your request yesterday. Perhaps we shouldn't even have started talking at all. Maybe none of this would have happened, I don't know. But again, much of what happens in life, though it seems like it's within our control, or that we can blame ourselves for it, is actually much more beyond what we can even start to comprehend."

That seemed to make sense, from a philosophical perspective I was already familiar with... it is called determinism. *But if things are this determined, then, what's the purpose of it all anyway?* She probably wouldn't offer a reliable answer, or I wouldn't make sense of it at that moment.

"Using the divination," she went on, "grandmother found out, that you are of a special type, and that you were drawn to her so she can be the one to give you your first true initiation."

*Oh, is this really serious?*

After a pause, she remarked, "I feel so lucky my dear, to have met you."  
*Damn! I'm feeling so unlucky, to have met you.*

"And she further said, the child we'll have will be very special." She resumed crying! I sighed, walked over to her, and knelt beside her, facing the wall instead of her.

I realised that arguing with her would not solve anything, and neither would confronting her even more deluded grandmother.



*Just swallow this bullshit and get home. Once home, prepare to leave earlier than planned, and go back to Kampala. Quickly get done with their crap and return to some much-needed sanity and civility.*

I held her arm in mine, and spoke gently to her, “Okay. Maybe I’ll understand, maybe I won’t.” I didn’t know if I was saying things the right way, but I didn’t want to see her like that anymore.

“This initiation, the divining, the shrines, and all this stuff. Trudy, why didn’t you tell me about it before?” I definitely needed answers.

She turned to look at me, and spoke, sounding rather disappointed towards me; “Seriously? When did we meet?”

“Yesterday!” I said, seeing only weirdness in her question.

“And you expected me to share everything under the sky in just the few hours we sat next to each other on the bus?”

I felt stupid then. I knew what she implied, and it seemed, I’d already coerced her to actually share with me “everything under the sky in just the few hours.” I let go of her hand, and instead looked out the door at the compound of earth outside; glazed in heat, and then the suffering plantations beyond. *It’s too damn hot outside...*

No one talked to the other for a while. In that moment of silence, I recalled the highlights of the night before; how I’d insisted on meeting her, how she’d pleaded for me to adjourn, but how I’d kept insisting for it to happen. How she’d finally succumbed to my pressure and agreed to host me in the village everyone else seemed to fear, and which I was rightfully warned about. I didn’t listen to any of it; all I’d wanted at the time was her, or what I thought she’d bring to me – happiness, pleasure and freedom from stresses. I believed I could escape with her – to where? I was regretting all of it. Meanwhile, my head was busy... “Behold, in under twenty-four hours, you managed to know not just her, but everything under the sky as well. Heck, you even found out about things that should best be left under the earth!”

“Please forgive me,” she finally said, “as I have already forgiven you, my dear.”

“I doubt these wrongs can be forgiven Trudy...”

“There’s a reason for everything,” she said, almost silently.  
I was the one feeling like shedding a tear then, but I wouldn’t let that happen in front of her. Was it just emotions working me, or was there something in my eyes?

“Can we go outside now?” I pleaded with her.  
“Actually,” she replied, “I had come to tell you that you’re to meet grandmother, alone, in a shrine I’m supposed to take you to.”  
*It’s too late to fight*, a voice spoke inside of me.  
“And what of you? I don’t think I can stand being with your grandmother alone, without you around.”

She smiled, and then assured me, while placing a hand on my shoulder, and caressing my neck, “No, she’s not a bad person as you might want to think, or as she might have made you believe.”  
“Are you sure you won’t be there?”  
“The initiation ceremony is not something I’ve ever witnessed in my life. Besides Ninka, the lady who was with us in the night, there’s none of the young apprentices that’s ever been actually initiated the way you are going to be.”  
“So why me then? Why this day, and not like some other preferable day; like after I’ve had time to think about all this, probably talk to my family about it or even get used to this stuff first?”  
“Time. She says there’s no time left to waste.”  
“So, what if we hadn’t met yesterday? What if, perhaps, we’d met, but I’d immediately returned home with the *bodaboda*? Would she still claim any of this?”  
“It’s not mere fate Ignatius. I’ve come to learn that our life is not a kind of profession, but neither can we say it’s mere fate. For us, it is a calling. Perhaps be patient, just for a while, and see.”  
“And as with any ‘calling’?” I replied, “You can either answer it or not, right?”

She fell silent, but just nodded in agreement.  
I patted her hand, and then stood up, wanting to really leave the little hut. She stood up behind me and signaled that it was fine to step outside.  
*Relief at last!*

“So,” she spoke, softly, “are you going to reply the call or just walk off?”

That was a hard one to answer, but first I needed to breathe and feel free. I bent as I walked out the tiny door. My body was aching in some places, and my vision didn't seem like it would adjust to the outside ever. But I felt much better once outside than within the little hut I'd been trapped inside of.

There was about nine or possibly more huts in the homestead; some much bigger than what I'd seen in the night. There was a kraal, a goat and fowl shelter as well. It was a bit untypical to see such homesteads still surviving in the modern world I was accustomed to. Somehow, I felt some admiration and respect for the homeowner, who I trusted was the old witch. The sun was high in the sky, and the air felt hot as well. I wasn't wearing any shoes, and my feet against the hot earth felt like they might develop blisters if I stayed standing in one place for too long. Trudy walked up to me, holding her mask, and asked me once more, "Have you made up your mind now? This is not something you can be forced into, it's something you must willingly decide to undertake..."

I looked at her mask, seeing that the part where the mouth was meant to be, was merely painted, but had no opening otherwise. The eyes were there, likewise painted onto the mask, but where the pupils should have been, were instead vertical slit holes, and which made the eyes seem more feline than not. I hadn't noticed that her body was painted in ash all along – the arms and feet in particular.

"Why the ash? Are you mourning something or someone?" I asked, amused.

"It should be the whole body," she replied, "but that will be later."

"Is that how I should be clothed as well?" I laughed, thinking of myself being covered all-over, in ash-white.

"It's a requirement, for all who would attend the initiation."

"Sounds like there's going to be many white people at a black ceremony!" We both giggled, and she started moving...

"Let's hurry though, I was not supposed to have told you all these things anyway. She said the ceremony must begin before the sun sets."

"It doesn't look like the sun is setting any time soon..." I looked up at the sky, and saw that it was all clear and blue. There wasn't even a bird flying about...

"But remember, before the ceremony, there's your part with her, and I'm not sure how long that will take."

I wanted to leave the sun... it was getting hotter than I'd been used to, and so asked that we move on.

# Chapter XVI

His initiation day had arrived, and with the sun clearly presiding over everything, blazing like never before, high in the skies, there might not have been a more perfect day perhaps. The venue of the ceremony was a special shrine; shaped like a termite hill and even more, built like one; it had all its exterior covered in soil – black soil, made darker by special dyes mixed with the soil, to give it a really eerie, but powerful outer finish. Very unlike any other huts commonly seen anywhere in the region, it had poles protruding from the exterior, and these were painted white, contrasting with the black external walls in a very elegant way.

It had no windows as such, but instead, some of the protruding poles were actually hollowed out in the centre, and these opened into the interior of the shrine. Their purpose? To offer ventilation, while not letting-in much light into the interior of the shrine. Wooden and partially curved, they made the shrine look like an artifact from some exotic, but undeniably creative primitive tribe.

The shrine had three chambers inside it, and all could only be reached via the single main entrance; a tiny circular door, directly facing the path to the shrine, and which opened into the outer chamber – the waiting room. Attractive or peculiar as it might seem, the shrine – all three chambers of it, was strictly out-of-bounds for anyone but the few apprentices, and the initiated that were cleared to step inside it.

The other shrines could be used for normal – consultative, divining and healing work, but this particular shrine – the black house, was only rarely visited, and mostly because the deities consulted therein, and the ceremonies that took place there, only occurred very rarely, and for really special reasons. The sudden initiation of Ignatius, who'd not chosen, but had been chosen, was to be one such case, when the special shrine would be opened, and work done inside its walls.

In the waiting room sat the team of three; all painted white with ashes, and clad in nothing else but wrappers made of dried plantain leaves and black-dyed bark-cloth; Trudy Nyamwezi Abwooli, an apprentice; Thon, an apprentice too, and lastly, Ninka Maria Atwooki, apprentice, medium

and assistant shaman to Nyamaizi. The would-be-initiate, Ignatius, was not with them, but had been led into the next chamber – “the chamber of instruction and inspection” and was in a private session with a shaman he couldn't see but could hear. The others couldn't hear a thing of what was happening inside that chamber and were not expected or allowed to do so – the little door into that chamber was closed to them, after Ignatius had been led through.

The outer room – the waiting chamber, had nothing inside it besides walls painted black, and which had drawn upon them, schematic pictures of many different types of reptiles – lizards, crocodiles, snakes of various shapes and sizes, and somewhere, reptiles that looked a bit like humans as well. The only other things on the walls were masks, placed near the top, and at either side of the door leading into the next, inner chamber.

The images on the walls depicted an ancient and important association between reptiles, wisdom and magic. But they also depicted potent faculties of the same power, normally latent inside those that never had the chance to make it into the inner-chambers of the shrine. As they sat there waiting, Trudy, the most curious of them all, inquired of Ninka, an explanation for one of the images on the wall opposite her. It was that of a horned serpent.

“Don't you find it the most prominent one here? What do the little horns stand for?” Trudy asked, pointing out the image to both Ninka and Thon. “It's Nyamiyonga, or one of her forms,” replied Ninka.

Thon asked, “And is it male or female?”

Ninka laughed into her palms, to avoid making noise where none was expected. She moved closer to them both, and then whispered the answer, “spirits have no gender, but out of respect or depending on how they choose to present themselves, you might consider some to be male, and others female, but ultimately, they have no such distinctions as we living humans.”

“So, is Nyamiyonga female or male?” inquired Trudy, intrigued by Ninka's explanation.

“To us, the women, she might seem male, because that's how we best relate to him. To Thon and Ignatius, I believe she would be feminine, though, in my experience, these differences matter little. The power and its character never changes, and spirits can assume any gender or form, if they so wish.”

“Atwooki, have you ever entered Nyamiyonga’s chamber?” It was Thon asking, and he was referring to the third, innermost chamber of the special shrine.

“I did,” she replied. “It’s about four years ago, and I was obtaining my initiation, so I could become a better medium.”

“What’s it like?” asked Trudy, who had never seen the insides of that chamber ever.

“To tell you would be to rob you of the ability to ever make it there. We are not allowed to share our experiences of what took place inside that chamber, as the things that happen there are what mould you into the individual shaman you ultimately become – assuming you manage to emerge from therein in one whole piece; some never do.”

“Maybe easier to answer; how long does it take?” asked Thon.

“Mmm,” began Ninka, “the initiation is more like how death is dealt with in our culture – for the boys, no less than four hours might be spent in the chambers, whereas for the girls, about three are enough. But, it all depends, sometimes it can go on for a couple more hours, or even days.” Trudy and Thon weren’t content with her explanation, but none of them asked anything more. It didn’t seem all rosy...

Ninka knew that one of them might also be wondering, as she herself had been, concerning why Irumba, the boy who had just shown up on the scene, suddenly could qualify to get initiated, where the others had taken years of training, and yet hadn’t been given assurance of qualifying still. She didn’t feel envious, as she’d been already initiated herself, but she knew beyond doubt, the other two must not have found it very clear or fair. She was about to bring up the topic, but started with something else entirely...

“Do you fear this place Thon?” asked Ninka, while tracing something on the ground with her big toe.

“I only fear what I’ve not yet understood,” he answered.

Thon turned to Trudy, and passed the question to her instead; “And you Abwooli? Do you?”

Trudy shook her head, and then spoke after a pause, “However, I fear for Irumba, because I know he has no experience whatsoever! I wonder how he’s managed to stay put until this moment.”

“Nyamaizi told me about him,” said Ninka, “and that his case is very rare, as Nyamiyonga herself, ordered that he must get initiated before his return home.”

“But,” Thon added, after the other two went silent for a while, “when one is selected, can't they still fail to pass the examination?”

Only Ninka had reliable opinion about that, but didn't seem quite sure how to exactly put it. She too had doubts about Irumba's abilities and preparedness.

“As these are not matters comparable to school or sports, it might be that despite his lack of visible skills, there already lurks within him the potential to pass the examination – it's not impossible. I'm not sure if he will make it, but if Nyamiyonga sanctioned the ceremony, then he must indeed be special, even without prior experience.”

Trudy was thinking about Ninka's words, and was mulling over thoughts of her sudden lover, also to become father of her child – if it were allowed to be so, walking a path he had seemed so much averse to. *I've trained hard for this, and yet grandma doesn't trust am ready for it yet... Maybe his initiation is mine as well?* The feeling that she wasn't worth being initiated yet, and especially given how the grandmother had remarked about her “wasted potential”, bit at her from within.

“Life's a real mystery,” said Trudy to the other two, shaking her head. They didn't reply, but only absorbed what she'd said, showing no visible rejection or acknowledgement of her observation. She added, “I just met him yesterday, and just like that, he's now ahead of me already.” Emotion tainted her words, and her pain could be felt, but the others simply chose not to comment about it. Ninka, the more experienced of the three, and the one more sympathetic, knew how it should have felt for Trudy to face that outcome. She chose to give her some reassurance...

“The Cwezi work in mysterious ways; Enkya ya Enkya, even more mysterious my dear. Don't lose hope.”

They remained silent, as they were expected to be, knowing that anytime soon, they would either be summoned into the inner chamber to partake of the next phase of the ritual, or that they would be asked to accompany the mysterious guest back to his sleeping chambers, if the examination



taking place in the inner chamber were failed. None knew exactly what to expect, they sat and waited.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Welcome wanderer,” a voice he could not discern greeted him, just after he had taken two steps into the chamber, and as the door was being closed behind him.

“Thank you for inviting me,” he replied, though his voice reeked of fear and uncertainty.

“You should have no fear, and while here, let neither darkness, nor light cause you to fear – it’s all about you.”

That last voice was distinctly different from the first, and he wasn’t sure from whom it could have arisen; it sounded so vivid, although it seemed to emerge right from below his feet! It brought with it, chills that ran through his feet, and up his spine, and he dragged a foot backwards, just to be sure he was standing on solid ground.

“You are our guest, but also might be our enemy – we don’t know yet. But, regardless of who you are, we welcome you, and wish that you relax and feel at home here with us.”

He looked to his right, scanned about in the air, to see if there might be someone seated there that he could not see, but there was not much he could see. The voices speaking to him seemed to emerge out of the air, but also, from no specific, localised place in particular! He was sure he was not overly intoxicated, because he could still think, clearly so, but the experience thus far, seemed to usurp every explanatory theory his mind proposed.

“Please step forward, and you shall find a soft and comfortable spot we’ve prepared for you. It will be better that you lay down and relax. You might sleep if you prefer, but otherwise, just relax, and let’s talk a bit about you. We wish to know who you are, and also, for you to understand why we called you here.”

“Or maybe,” another one added, “you might have quite a story to tell, when you return to your Nondi Zorean, Isoke Daniel and the great Isoke Byabasaija, who used to be a very good friend of ours too.”

Mention of his father’s name, those of his brother and step-mother, totally caught him by surprise! *How did they know all this?* He wondered, *How much more do they already know about me?* He assumed his place upon the specially prepared platform. He couldn’t see what it was, only knocked into it while taking little baby steps forward, and then feeling about with his hands in the dark – felt what seemed like a wooden, bed-like form, with some very soft padding material overlaying its top. The entire platform wasn’t elevated any more than thirty centimeters from the ground. He lowered himself onto it, carefully and hesitantly, as a patient might climb onto an examination table in the theater. Unlike hospital though, he was not sure if the procedures to follow were to be easily trusted. But what could he do about it? He felt grounded; somewhat unable to escape nor deviate from their plan.

He let his head align with and lay closer to the direction he had entered through, and the feet were only partially stretched the other way. He was laying on his back, face upwards, looking at nothing but the ceiling of blackness. It did not feel anything like the shrine he had spent the night in, and also was not like the sacristy, though, all shared that eerie dark atmosphere in many ways than not. This one had some unique, intriguing features, many of which one might feel or hear, but which weren't readily seen nor easily explained. He waited for something to happen, as he was sure, there was something about to happen, but he was not sure what, nor when.

Everything inside the room was dark, and there was only a little glow on the walls, where the ventilation hooks were. Lining the walls on either side of where he lay, in an arc-like sequence, they were the only visible things inside the chamber he’d been summoned into. In time though, his eyes would begin to re-adjust, and more of the special shrine would become a bit visible.

“Irumba Araali?”

“Yes,” he acknowledged the name that had been given him all his life.

“Congratulations on having finished your first degree in school.”

*Trudy must have been telling them all this*, he thought, but then replied to the invisible ones, “Thanks.”

“Businge Loyce,” one of the voices began, and this is a name he had never spoken to Trudy about, and one which he had never wanted to tell anyone else about.

“You know her, right?”

“Yyess, I know her. But...” he was really amazed, and quite perplexed... They did not let him complete his remark, one voice interjected with a further question,

“Did you love her or just wished to use her body?”

There was a pause, and heavy breathing. Ignatius was wondering why all of a sudden he regretted having accepted to walk into that shrine.

*Does Trudy know about Loyce as well?*

His thoughts were not opaque, and so he was given the answer straightaway;

“No, she doesn't know a thing. But tell us. Have trust in us, and tell us everything we ask, and try to be sincere. We promise you, it all remains here.”

“But if you can read my mind,” complained Ignatius, “then why ask me anything?” He was certain, there was likely nothing else he might hide from these invisible eyes and ears all around him.

There was laughter; light, and dry, as of a sadistic mistress not wanting to let a good joke pass by.

He did not get an answer, or rather, it was not directly put – a voice right above his head assured him, “It's clear, you would do much for Nyamwezi than Loyce, but that's because the old woman made your foolishness clear to you. Otherwise, you were ready to kill her, and dispose of her child as well, just like that.”

Ignatius felt like he was laying on hot coals, and his next utterance exposed not only fear, but guilt and hatred of himself..

“I swear, I wouldn't have intended it like that. I do acknowledge my mistakes and do ask for your forgiveness. The fact is, I am ready to support her and the child, in any way I can. I swear I won't do anything wrong to her. Please...”

“We didn't actually think of it as a mistake. You had feelings that have been much suppressed and which the likes of Loyce have abused. You desired to meet someone much better, someone that might lead you not

just into happiness, but a more meaningful life as well. When you met the girl on the bus yesterday, little did you know she would lead you here – we don't blame you, as she too, would never have known of this being the consequence.”

There was a pause, his mind was filled with memories of all that had happened while they sat next to each other on the bus. It was just the day before, but it seemed like the events had filled an entire lifetime! *How did all this happen so quick?*

The narrator of his story went on, unearthing things he was astonished to learn of, concerning his life, in ways he'd never thought of before...

“You have been told before, of how your passion for women – beautiful, intelligent women, is also your weakness. But the one who spoke these things to you, ‘Eman’, right? Wasn't just mingling words– you could have been destroyed by Zorean, your beloved mother, but if you act right, Nyamwezi might be the true solution to all your problems.”

“Or she might just bring you more...”

Ignatius tossed about from where he lay, feeling uneasy taking in all that was being said, while he lay there like an infant in its cot. He regretted having met Trudy, but then felt there was no way he might have escaped the fangs of Zorean otherwise. He had a question to ask his seemingly omniscient inquisitors – something concerning Zorean's true motives, but just when he was starting to open his lips, the better part of him shut them again. *They probably know it already...*

“Irumba, would you rather live or die, right now?”

That question was asked by an entirely new voice, but also one that clearly sounded feminine, and which was all too familiar with him! It was the sound of his long-gone mother! He was really amazed, and the thought burned in his mind uncontrollably, *that's like my real mother!* But he knew better than to trust anything, since already, he had failed to discern the actual source of any of the voices he'd been hearing, and he was not sure just how many of them there were, or what other sorcerous capabilities he had yet to experience from them.

He would have answered “life” straight away, but thinking of his mother, the unconditional love and care she’d once given him, and the fact that she’d vanished all to prematurely, caused him to choose the other.

“Death,” he replied, thinking that getting even one chance to re-unite with his true mother, might end all his woes.

The new voice added, “But death is to be earned, even more than life itself, unfortunately. What have you achieved my dear, to warrant that eternal rest should be granted to you?”

All he could think of was school, the job he was assured of returning to, and a love he wasn’t sure he was ever going to be allowed to keep.

Thinking more about it, it was clear he’d not yet achieved anything substantial in life, not even a college degree yet. *Graduation is around the corner though, maybe I can claim that already.*

“Nothing. I’ve not really achieved anything yet,” Ignatius admitted, bitter, but realistic.

“And you don’t think there’s a reason for you to still be alive?” another one of those earlier voices asked, seeming to emerge from where his feet pointed.

“I don’t want to die,” said Ignatius, “but I also don’t know how much control I have over the rest of my life either.”

“That’s well said my child,” the motherly voice replied, but then it morphed into another voice, not one he wasn’t unfamiliar with either – suddenly, it was the voice of his former Mathematics professor, the one who taught him linear algebra;

“There are things that we can’t really solve by merely modelling and running thought experiments, my dear. But then also, because you love such ways of navigating life, maybe you don’t mind going through a little test, just to see if your mind might be worthy of beholding greater light, with which you might even see in the darkest of nights.”

*What’s my maths teacher doing here? Who don’t these folks know oh my God!*

In the dark, he shook his head at what was both an amusing and daunting experience!

“Will you take the test Ignatius?” the scholastic voice inquired, reminding him of the austere lecture rooms in JICA and the Mathematics Department at Makerere, where his most advanced tools of analytical

thinking had been the most sharpened thus far. *A test. Mathematics perhaps?*

“Yes doctor,” he replied, though internally he knew already, it wasn’t anything like his university professor speaking to him inside of that cavernous examination room.

“Well,” another voice said, “let’s begin then.” And that was followed by much grunting and clearing of throats, whose owners remained a mystery though.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Before you begin this test, know that many others like you, some even greater than you, have had to be put to the test, before the treasures of these mysteries were ever bequeathed upon them.”

He was alert and listening very attentively.

“It’s a long tradition, and it would normally require that you spend time studying in a special way; being instructed, but also directly experiencing and discovering certain truths that can only be best understood by an inquiring, observant and free mind.”

It was only one voice speaking, all the others merely grunting in acknowledgement every now and then. Ignatius, careful enough to distinguish, and tell them apart, had managed to count about nine of them – a bit unsettling. But whether it was nine different people or spirits, or whether it was just one, he was not able to conclusively tell. He was wondering...*could it all be Trudy’s grandmother? But I’ve not even heard her speak at all since I entered here! I thought it was she that I was supposed to meet...*

“You have a special ability, but one which you have never been taught to explore or cultivate. Unfortunately, as with your tongue when you were but a child, only through practice and constant use, can you expect to leverage and grow the treasure you possess. You could die without ever becoming your true self, but here, right in this place, you also have at your disposal, the only opportunity to really unravel the secrets of the

world in which you've found yourself immersed. Do you wish to find out what these secrets are, and what you might do to utilize them?"

"Yes I do."

"Then, knowing that you don't yet possess the means to know the highest or lowest truths, you would need the guidance of someone who's been with you since your birth, right?"

"I don't understand. My mother is dead, and I'm not too close to my father," Ignatius replied, feeling saddened at the suggestion before him.

"No, perhaps you are wrong. Neither your mother, nor your father or siblings, and not even your best friends, could ever be as close to you as that which already lies inside of you."

*Ah, is it my conscience then?*

So they seemed to suggest...

"Close your eyes, and listen to the voices inside your head. You are very familiar with them, and they will either guide you to success, or if you can't really listen to them, you will only experience failure. Do you understand all of this? Has everything been clearly said thus far?"

"Yes. Yes, I've understood everything."

"Okay, close your eyes, and repeat the following words after me," said the leading examiner.

*My feet have carried me everywhere I've ever gone,  
But you, who neither sleep, no hunger, have been my guides  
Everywhere I've been, and it is you that I call upon,  
So you might guide me onwards, as I walk upon this narrow bridge,  
That leads nowhere else, but to a crossroad.*

After saying those words, with his eyes closed and attention drawn inwards, Ignatius wondered just how many of them, inside his mind, he'd had to guide him all his life. The suggestion that there were guides in his mind, besides mere instinct and reason, was something he seemed to

recall from a psychoanalytic entry in the encyclopedia, but one which he didn't have sufficient recollection of. *Reason tires, and many times, instinct isn't there when you would most need it, so who else is there...*

The examination began, and each question was posed to him by one of the many external voices he'd been interacting with already... As with all the exchanges, the questions were in Runyakitara, sometimes in a dialect Ignatius wasn't very fond of, or which just seemed too traditional or even archaic!

“Who measures time?”

He listened, was going to speak, but was warned – internally, not to rush answering anything. The dialogue was between him and his inner guides...

*Oha nterabwire?  
Empanga za Nyamiyonga.*

He was given an answer, but why it had anything to do with a mythical underworld deity, he wasn't told. *But it's my mind after all*, he thought. “It's all in your mind,” he recalled the remark. He didn't open his eyes, but just said what answer he'd been given from within...

“Nyamiyonga's rooster,” Ignatius answered.

There was silence, and he wondered if he'd not been stupid in admitting to just echo back what his mind had suggested, without even thinking about the question itself. *It must be a riddle. The answer could have been a clock or even the stars! Have I failed?  
Wait, and listen...*

“That's right.”

Another one then asked;

“Which rope arrests water, so it can't flow?”

He echoed the question to his so-called “inner guides”, unsure they could hear by themselves;



*Muguha ki oguboha amaizi?*

Unlike the one before, there were two conflicting answers offered – one suggested “*tikisoboka*”, the other “*akaro*”. He chose the latter, and answered in the same form as with the previous question:

“Nyamiyonga’s millet.”

“Impressive. Your ability to listen is really impressive.”

Another spirit-voice, another riddle to answer...

“What causes you to turn, and look behind?”

Listening once more, a couple of competing answers were offered him;  
*fear of death, ties with past lives, a tendency to succeed, or death itself.*  
*‘Fear’, that must be it!*

“Fear. The fear of death.”

“Almost right. It’s the fear of none other than Nyamiyonga,” the inquiring voice confirmed.

More riddles came, and each was answered...

“Who is never bound by duties or responsibilities?”

“The brothers and sisters of Nyamiyonga.”

“Who are never touched or limited by misery, ever rejoicing?”

“Nyamiyonga’s children.”

“Who is the door that shuts out poverty and ignorance forever?”

“Nyamiyonga!”

“Well then, you have demonstrated skill and knowledge that is not easily accessible to most mortals, and you have proved that you are

capable of entering communion with those of Nyamiyonga's great empire.”

“But I just echoed what I had in my mind. Have I been right all the time?”

Ignatius felt uneasy trusting that he could have been right, when all he did was listen for answers, and not reason or think for himself as he was accustomed to.

“It’s not the answers that actually matter the most, it’s the fact that you were able to follow our advice, and listen to the oracles within. Many would fail, not because they didn’t possess the answers to these ancient riddles, or that their brains are insufficient, but because they would have kept their ears upon the world they can see and touch only, or fail to tell the invisible apart.”

*So, who are you that spoke these things to me?* He internally inquired of the voices that had spoken to him so vividly during the examination. He waited, but none replied, not anymore! It was as though they’d been planted there just to help him cheat in the exam? *What was that?* No answer.

“It is because of this, that the Great Nyamiyonga would like to directly speak to you. She has much more wonderful wisdom and knowledge to share with you. Are you willing to hear Nyamiyonga's own word?”

“Yes I am.”

“Then go on and tell her, ‘Please speak to me Nyamiyonga, the Great One.’”

“Please speak to me Nyamiyonga, the Great One.”

Silence followed. It probably lasted about thirty minutes, and sleep was pursuing him. The factors working towards it were multiple; where he lay was surprisingly comfortable, the gloominess in the shrine wasn’t going away, and there was the herb, still working on him. He was about to repeat the request, when something like wind, together with a bit of

earthquake hijacked the room. He almost jumped off the platform, and he did scream in clear fright, but the reassuring voice, stern and authoritative, caused him to stay steadfast where he was. The real Nyamiyonga, had arrived... but whether it was directly inside his mind, or outside of it, didn't seem to matter anymore. His eyes and ears were peeled like plantains about to be cooked. Everything was loud and clear...

*I'm Nyamiyonga*

*The Soot remaining, after all the spirits and gods have been burnt.*

*I am the darkest of them all*

*The true essence of them all*

*But also the most fair judge of all.*

*I don't blind you, I let you see in the dark*

*With eyes that never tire, and which see while you sleep.*

*I am the one unknown to mortal men*

*The one unknown to those who only walk under the Sun*

*The one unknown to those who have only lived once*

*The one unknown to those who have never faced Death*

*The one unknown to those who never wake up in the night.*

*I'm the Master of the Underworld*

*The Overseer of Okuzimu,*

*Your master of death and the dark-*

*I can let you partake of the path, before it's due*

*And thus help you attain higher evolution quicker.*

*I control and command the spirits of the dead*

*Waiting at my gates, are those to be judged;*

*The wise, to be separated from the fools.*

*I give shelter to all your fallen heroes and kings*

*My legacy is known to the dead and the resurrected alike.*

*I warm the dead, and serve banquets to all who visit my palace*

*And no one that is not buried in my empire ever rests peacefully.*

*I was the first to witness death as a god,*

*Slain, because I attracted and absorbed*

*All the beauty and radiance of the Light*

*I was scattered across the waters of the ancient worlds,*

*And it is from my body of darkness, that the light was extracted,  
So your world would be created.*

*You are my own children, and in death or in darkness,  
Those bonds are ignited.  
United, as night and death erase all differences,  
It is I, who make you one.*

*I was one with the source of all that exists,  
Before the light was separated from me.  
The first to triumph over death;  
The true master and source of immortality.  
You may ever know me as the God of Death,  
But also, I am,  
God of the Eternally Living.*

*The Master of the Inner Earth  
The Power that gives birth to life;  
As every tree and plant grows only,  
By first being buried inside of my empire,  
And only after then, does it obtain new life.*

*Thanks to the undead and warm essence flowing through my lands,  
Everything buried alive, seems to die, but eventually germinates,  
Nourished by that dark, and pure love  
From my beautiful daughter, Nyamata.*

*No great tree, no great plant, can emerge and prosper  
Unless it anchors its roots deep inside of my house;  
From where it drinks of my water, and eats of my food,  
Both of which, never see the sun, nor behold the moon.*

*Unlike short-lived men, animals and shallow plants  
These, the great ones that feed from my courts,  
Stand strong against winds, time and the seasons;  
Unmoved by the sun, moon or the elements.  
I make you stand for eternity.*

*Be all that you can be, not just what you can see-  
That's your lesson in the dark.*

*Anchor deep into the Earth,  
And you shall be ready to grow further beyond, and above it.*

*Seeking strength, resilience, and stunning beauty  
I offer to you all.*

*Behold, I'm the one,  
Who, taking Nyarwa's bones, dropped from the heavens  
And putting flesh back on them,  
Give them to your kings and people, as cattle and game to hunt and eat!*

*Welcome then wandering man, to my empire.*

*If you wish to partake of this greatness  
And eat of the power that nourishes all within, and above the Earth,  
If you wish to transmute the darkness within into light,  
Then eat of my food, and drink of my water.*

*But, let me warn you against hubris  
And don't you think the tree grows without being buried first.  
If you must own this treasure, you must commit to eternal loyalty my  
friend.*

*In this family, as with the traditions of your ancient ones,  
All I ask, is that we make an eternal pact,  
And as your essence flows in blood,  
A blood pact it shall then be.*

*I shall give unto you a new life, a new body, a new spirit and a new mind.  
You shall become one with me;  
Imbued with beauty, power and wisdom  
That flow to the chosen via the night, via death or the shadow worlds.*

*You shall be known to the dead, and the dead shall be known to you.*

*You shall not die again, as once dead in me  
You shall obtain a life that lasts forever.  
If you must die on earth, you shall not be buried again  
But shall only trace your way back to where you always dwelt.*

*Come then,  
Share in the mysteries and might  
That once gave birth to and nourished all the great empires of men;  
That continues to enkindle the minds of those who dream,  
That feeds wisdom to those who see with eyes closed,  
That speaks solace to hearts that harbor no fear,  
That your great ancestors and sages –  
Those Cwezi, old and new,  
Leveraged, to work great miracles and mystifying magics.*

*Come wandering man  
And become one with me  
The Great Nyamiyonga.*

Ignatius had entered a trance state, but was not familiar with it. All was going well, until when Nyamiyonga finished her summon. Ignatius tried saying something, but it seemed to be coming from afar... It wasn't his conscious mind in control anymore, but he was in control nevertheless. He finally made the affirmation, guided from within...

*Yes, Great Nyamiyonga.*

*I'm indeed humbled by your great and mysterious power.  
I am greatly honored to be invited into your empire, and to be further  
given the chance to become one of your own.  
I willingly submit unto you, choosing you over the sun outside or the moon  
at night.*

*I am willing to enter your house, and eat and drink of your food.  
I do wish to grow like those great and wise trees,  
To have the protection and embrace of your empire, just as do the beasts  
within the Earth, and those walking in the life beyond.*

*But, unlike the others,  
I wish to experience you while living, without falling asleep.  
Like the great trees, may I eat of the darkness below,  
While feeding on the sun from above as well.  
Thus will I truly exhibit the wisdom and beauty you speak of.*

*After this life is done, Great Nyamiyonga*

*May not my cows, wives or children follow me,  
But may I arrive in the house I have prepared with your help,  
And there make for them a banquet they shall always want to eat.*

Thus Ignatius made his request, and Nyamiyonga, present and delighted by the success of her work, gave him the affirmation he needed the most...

*It is done.  
You, a mere wanderer,  
Have been granted the liberty and freedom to become one of us,  
And to you shall I give all that you have asked,  
And all that I have spoken of,  
If but you shall accept to then complete the great work,  
As then, and only then, shall you not be a mere wanderer to me  
But instead become as my friend, my brother, child and lover as well.*

He stirred in his trance, a warmth and pleasantness eating at him in ways tricky to express. He had but one thing to do, submit...

*Yes, Great, Dark and Timeless One  
With you do I walk,  
Who was never created by Enkya ya Enkya,  
But who existed unscathed, before all the worlds and light were created,  
with Him.  
With you, who is the Great Darkness, Mystery and Power,  
Do I Desire and are willing to make the Pact.*

How those words formed upon his lips, was not a thing to take lightly. The trance deepened even further, and he fell into a deep and peaceful sleep, oblivious to whatever else was going on about him.

Meanwhile, Nyamaizi closed the first part of the ritual, thanking all the spirits and powers that had presided over the working. She then exited the chamber, to brief her three waiting assistants, on how they must conduct themselves, and which roles they were to play, when the second part of the ritual came around.

She assured them, the first part had been an amazingly smooth and rare kind of success. “We really have gotten a great wizard in him,” she said, all smiling and evidently proud of the work she had just accomplished. “However, there’s more to be done before he can fully undertake the purpose for which he was led here. My child, you have brought great pride to yourself and our lineage, and Nyamiyonga promises to reward you himself.”

Trudy was pleased to learn that her little role in the otherwise complex affair, had nevertheless earned her some credit. Thinking about it, she couldn’t wait to set her eyes on Ignatius, who she had body-painted herself ahead of the rituals; with ash, mixed with millet and some ghee, as per the instructions of her grandmother, but to which, unknown to them all, she had added her own secret formula. This, she would not disclose to anyone, as it was part of her secret plan, to ensure he walks through it all, finally returning to her. “He’s mine,” she muttered to herself, and then smiled.

\* \* \* \* \*

The chamber door was opened, and from the other side, the darker side, emerged Nyamaizi, a puzzling calmness on her face, as she held out two *entimbo* drums – a big one, and its smaller cousin.

“We need these well-tuned,” she said, handing them over to Thon who’d risen to take hold of them already.

“Put them out in the sun for a while, check that they are fine, and then bring them back inside before we get started.”

“Alright.”

He left with the two drums, as Trudy and Ninka stayed seated, awaiting their own instructions if any.

“How did it go?” asked Ninka, surprised that Nyamaizi looked so serene after what she believed to be a tense part of the ritual.

“I thought he would fail the tests, since it was apparent that he had no prior training to rely on, but, his link is much more powerful than I’d suspected. He performed so well, that for a while, I hesitated to make



judgement. But, that's not the end of it; there are more tasks he must walk through, before we can be wholly sure it is done."

Trudy had been listening without facing any of them, but after hearing her grandmother speak of Irumba's performance, she turned towards her and then asked of her, "Grandma, what happens in the first test?" Her grandmother pointed to one of the symbols on the wall – it was the image of a snake trying to bite its own tail. "You stalk yourself, if you fail that, then you can't be initiated, otherwise, you are worthy to progress to the next level."

While she was still thinking about what that meant, Nyamaizi turned to Ninka, concerned about how she felt after the long ordeals of the night before.

"Did you manage to sleep well?" asked Nyamaizi.

"I slept, but failed to dream. It's like part of me wasn't present still."

"It might take a while, but I believe there was more you gained in the process as well. How do you feel generally?"

"A little exhausted in the body, and I've constantly felt a mild chill all over me; even after sitting for prolonged sessions out in the scorching sun. Could it be a fever from the exhaustion?" Ninka was looking at Nyamaizi as a child might look at its mother, begging for a reassuring answer.

On the wall next to her, sat one of the masks guarding the entry into the inner chamber where Ignatius was being held. The two masks looked alike; black on first impression, but actually dark-green on closer inspection – a result of continuous reapplication of concentrated herbal mixtures over the many years they were in use. They were a prominent attraction to anyone entering the shrine. Nyamaizi, turning her attention to one of them, adjusted it so it could sit against the wall without being tilted. Then, continuing to look at the mask, addressed Ninka's concerns...

"The MaxiDozi," said Nyamaizi, "are like cold-blooded vampires, even though they walk with us during day."

Ninka either understood what that meant, or got confused unto silence; she just sat there staring at her teacher, whose attention was still being held by the mask upon the wall.

“Did she get possessed as well?” asked Trudy, breaking the ice that had started to form. ‘Possessed’ was probably the wrong word to use, or so it seemed, given how Ninka and Thon quickly, and questioningly turned to face the one who’d brought up the matter. Nyamaizi didn’t join them, her attention shifted to the other mask instead, and then she replied in a sarcastic tone; “You and your friend got ‘possessed’, but Atwooki was merely ‘visited’.”

That didn’t seem to settle the issue, or the lack of reaction on their part, prompted the old woman to go deeper. She turned to face all three of them, and once holding their full attention, proceeded to lecture them about the difference between possession and ‘hosting’.

“When someone visits your house, you become their host, and they are your guest. You are only possessed, if the visitor won’t leave – especially upon your command or request, or if they start to disturb; like hiding your own property from you, or sneaking upon your children in the night. That is when you are possessed – you do not have any more control or it’s diminished, but likewise, cannot hope to regain it without putting up a fight. Otherwise, you are merely hosting.” Like students grateful for a lesson well given, all three nodded in acknowledgement, although, Ninka, the one who’d apparently been “visited”, seemed unconvinced. Nyamaizi didn’t bother to talk about the issue any further, “You will learn more with experience. At the moment, let’s get on with the work, there’s no time to waste...”

“Abwooli, we are going to need your goat for the final work, is it okay?” she asked, her gaze focusing on the granddaughter.

“The wounded one?”

“It’s better we use it, instead of sacrificing one of the others. And besides, it’s already been used in the night, so we might as well finish the work with it.”

“Do I have any option?” asked Trudy, sad that her Mubende goat, with its twisted horns and distinctly beautiful beard, was to meet its final fate so suddenly. It was special to her, and outside the shrine, its bleating could be heard every once in a while.

“You are lucky, my dear. Isaza promised to compensate, and I trust his word. If he can’t buy us one, I bet that sooner than later, you’ll find some stray goat joining our herd somehow... it has happened before.”

Ninka smiled at the suggestion of other people's goats 'straying' into theirs, and thus being claimed as rightfully theirs. It never was "wrong" for them – a stray animal coming into one's home is typically an omen of some sort. To other families, such might even evoke fear, but for Nyamaizi and her ilk, "all danger can be neutralized", and so they would ritually "cleanse" the stray animal, and after a period of redomestication, claim it as their own – especially if no one showed up to claim it. Perhaps, so it would be.

"Alright then," said Trudy, sure that she would get her goat back some other way after all.

"Then, go bring it, we are soon starting the next ceremony."

As Trudy stood up to go fetch her horned friend, Ninka looked out the door, and spoke with a hint of sadness, "I feel pity for him, as he was just regaining strength and starting to play about..."

"Every goat and chicken, has its day as well," laughed Nyamaizi, walking back into the inner chamber to start preparing for the next ritual.

Outside Nyamiyonga's shrine, the tall man, Thon, was having fun 'stress-testing' the two drums; it was his hardened fingers and palms versus the stretched and warm buffalo hide.

"Hey Lakwena's son! You're definitely going to invite the wrong company, beating the drums in that manner at this hour of day." It was Trudy, struggling to pull the goat towards the shrine.

Thon saw Trudy struggling with her defiant goat, and laughed at her scornfully, as he continued beating the drums wildly.

"That goat is in need of a good 'death riddim', so it can die joyously."

Trudy jeered at him, while the goat continued to fight against being led into the shrine.

"This one's too sharp," admitted Trudy, finally managing to tug it into the chambers of the Underworld Lord.

As she entered the shrine, she met Ninka, who was emerging from the examination chamber with speed; "Nyamaizi has said he should bring the drums inside," she assured Trudy.

"Then go on and tell him," replied Trudy, looking at Ninka wide-eyed.

Ninka just grinned, "Ok. Hurry and get inside... Your man is not safe."

She winked as she said those words, and then walked past her to go summon the elated drummer outside. Trudy, laughing at the threat,

poked her from behind, and when she turned to face her, gave her the warning; "You better not come back inside." Ninka just chuckled and then ran outside.

Trudy cautiously approached the door of the examination chamber, and then knocked three times upon the heavy wood, so she could be granted permission to enter.

\* \* \* \* \*

The second ritual was the blood-pact, and the most important rule to be observed was silence; besides the drums and breathing, no one is allowed to talk until when the ritual is done. But, just because there was to be no talking, didn't mean that the rite was all somber and uneventful. No. While the drums did the talking, it was expected of all participants, with the exception of the presiding shaman and the would-be-initiate, to engage in vigorous ritual dancing. All communication was to be non-verbal; they already had special gestures and a sign-language used in such circumstances, and for the more experienced, perhaps even telepathy could be employed. It's part of the tradition during these rites.

All had convened, and so the ritual began. The drumming was the first thing that broke the silence; for a couple of minutes, lurking in the dark, feet stumping heavily on the ground to the rhythm of Thon's shamanic drumming, percussion was all that filled the room. Then, Nyamaizi, who was leading the ceremony, difficult to identify in the gloominess, went on to banish the darkness; there was a special earthen stove that was always kept inside the chamber, and she then proceeded to light it. The stove had some pieces of charcoal inside it already. She added a few bones to that, and then sprinkled grave dust over it all. Unlike the night before, she could not utter a word while performing the work; all she did was chant in her mind, as the arms kept playing above the stove in sweeping motions. *Will it work? Wondered Thon, gazing at her as the drumming advanced.* Soon, the contents of the stove were glowing-red with heat, to the amusement of those witnessing her admirable magic!

To this glowing stove, she added some incense. Soon, there was not just a glow in the room, but thick shadows playing about in the air, as Ninka and Trudy got busier with the evocation dance – a variant of the *runyeye*.

Both ladies wore rings with beads around their waists, and Ninka, who played the role of the male in the dance, also wore rattles on her legs. Ignatius, the would-be-initiate, was wide awake, although he'd not been allowed to sit upright, nor partake in the dance. Once there was some visibility in the room, he turned about to face the zealous dancers, and was clearly being entertained. Unknown to him though, the drumming and dancing was not meant for his enjoyment; rather, it was a standard method of inducing trance, and soon, this would become clearer to him.

The space was filled with vibrations and much energy, as each pouncing of the drum set off powerful waves into the air, which bounced on and off the walls of the shrine, enveloping them in a sphere of invisible, but palpable motion. Feet were moving to the music, and hands were gyrating in the air. Augmenting the drumming and feet-pounding was the sound of gourd rattles being vigorously shaken by Trudy and Ninka. These rattles just added a whole different character to the performance.

It was quite a scene for Irumba to behold. He smiled as Trudy danced before him, in a rather luring style. We wanted to laugh, but Nyamaizi had already briefed him on the protocol – “all seriousness and no jokes during the rituals.” He quietly suppressed his momentary joy. Noticing the seriousness with which everything was being done, he acknowledged that the dancing was part of the business. *Much better than church, huh? And creepier too!* The thought crossed his mind, and he just smiled.

The ground shook, as did everything loosely held to it. The shrine was on fire! The goat, more agitated and worried than ever before, cried even louder, trying to free itself from where it had been fastened. Away from them all, motionless and expressionless, Nyamaizi gazed into the steadily rising smoke, her trance intensifying ahead of them all.

After a while, she opened her eyes, and started to move about the shrine, encircling every one of them a couple of times, while raising and lowering her staff in the process. The air was filled with something ethereal. Eventually, taking position near the entry into the third chamber – whose door was closed shut, she signaled for everyone to sit, and further, hinted to Thon, that the drumming should continue nevertheless.

Thon, faithfully continuing to drum without interruption, adjusted his posture and position, so that he was stationed right in front of the door into the outer chamber. It was all planned; his role wasn't just about driving the rhythm of the ceremony, but also, preventing anyone inside from leaving or blocking any unexpected visitors from entering. Trudy sat facing the left-side of Irumba's bed, while Ninka sat to his right, directly opposite her. The leading shaman, Nyamaizi, sat a little distance away from the foot of the bed – right in front of the door into the other chamber.

Finally, Nyamaizi signalled for Irumba to sit upright. Trudy conveyed the message to him with a gesture, and he acknowledged by easing off the “bed” so that he sat with his back to Thon, his legs stretched out on the platform, facing Nyamaizi. The shaman then stood up, and slowly walked over to the stove. In her hands, not very distinct to the eyes of the others, she held something that was dirty-white, but which under the shadows looked grayish. The bottom was bowl-shaped, its sides were rugged, and somewhere towards the top, upon closer inspection, you could see a profile of rugged teeth! *A skull!* The venerable witch held the inverted skull slightly above the fire she had made, all the while, moving it about in alternating circular and zig-zag motions – all without uttering a word. They all looked at her, no comment or reaction issuing from any. Except for Ninka, it was all novel to the others.

A few minutes later, she walked back to where she had been seated, picked a knife from a pouch leaning against the stone, and then walked over to where Ninka was. She silently passed the knife to her, and all eyes turned towards them. Ninka knew what to do – both from memory, but also from a recap she had been given by Nyamaizi, shortly before the rituals had begun.

Ninka accepted the knife, and then used it to beat the goat! Yes, while the goat, which had been cleverly tied to a rock, complained and fought futilely, she struck at its body using the broad side of the blade. It was part of the ritual; she beat between its horns, under the mouth, along the neck, on either side of the tummy, on all four legs, the tail and then three times along the spine. The entire ordeal was meant to awaken in the goat something other than the goat. This simple gesture was accompanied by a chant, which both Ninka and Nyamaizi were silently repeating in their minds...

*Mbunibemtu, eiziro enanyazi oma*  
*Mbunibemtu, eiziro enanyazi oma*  
*Mbunibemtu, eiziro enanyazi oma*  
*Mbunibemtu, eiziro enanyazi oma*  
*Mbunibemtu, eiziro enanyazi...*

After performing this bit, Ninka signalled for her colleague to draw the skull closer. Nyamaizi complied. The skull was then held below, and near the throat of the goat, while another hand tightly held the horns. Then Ninka dealt a fatal blow to the goat's head, from below, quickly pulling out the blade so that blood gushed into the waiting skull-chalice below. She threw down the knife, and then quickly helped secure the goat in place, using both hands. The poor creature choked, struggled, and threatened to break the ropes holding all its legs, but the fights only helped quicken its death, while intensifying the flow of blood from the wound created. "Too feral," gasped Ignatius as he witnessed in shock, the brutal side of Ninka and her fellow. The sight of a goat's blood being collected into a human skull, and the way in which Ninka had slain the thing, all was a new experience to the two – Trudy and her embattled lover.

Thon missed the bloody ordeal, because he'd gotten so immersed in the drumming, only part of him was present at the shrine! His eyes were closed, his head was gyrating about the shoulders, and the rhythm had started to vary uncontrollably. When Trudy turned to look at him, she noticed how absent he was, and she envied him somewhat; *wish I was the one doing the drumming, would be much better than watching any of this!*

Much of the blood was collected, but not all of it. When what could be held in the skull had been obtained, Nyamaizi pulled it away, and then gestured for Ninka to make the goat rest – she patted it slowly, while easing it to one side of its stomach. "Rest in peace my dear," Trudy quietly prayed, as the goat finally stopped its movements, "go join Nyamiyonga's herds."

Nyamaizi was already onto the next phase; the skull was held high in the air, before and above her head, eyes focused upon it. She was performing

a consecration. After a while, she lowered it, and then taking careful, small steps, approached where Irumba was. From the look on his face, it was impossible to doubt that the young man was so much unsettled by her approach, and especially what was being brought towards him. *Please...* he pleaded internally, to no avail.

Not a word said, but Trudy was instructed to go fetch a knife next to the stove. She picked it, and brought it to her grandmother, who was holding the skull with both hands, above Irumba's shaking laps. The sight was disturbing indeed; blood was dripping through some of the fractures on the skull, onto his naked laps, and between his thighs. The smell of fresh goat's blood – especially a he-goat, together with that of sweat and the incense hanging in the air, did more than magnify the creepiness of it all.

When she presented the knife, Ninka interpreted that she had not understood the instruction, and so walked over to them, and took the knife from Trudy. The girl first hesitated to pass it on to her, but Nyamaizi nodded, and so Trudy understood that she had been relinquished of that tricky task. Ninka paced over to the stove with it, and then passed it through the incense and over the heat a couple of times - to cleanse, and then consecrate it. She walked back to where the two women stood, and then much to Trudy's surprise, handed the knife back to her!

When she was given the knife, Trudy's hands trembled, as she couldn't recall what her next role was. In fact, she almost uttered a "No", thinking that what had happened to the goat, might be what she's expected to perform on her stoned lover. She looked inquisitively at her grandmother, seeking assurance that she was wrong. The old woman smiled, and then quickly became serious once more. No other communication, no explanations, just tension! Trudy was shaken, but more gripped was her companion, the fear threatening to burst out of him.

There were beads of sweat on his forehead, despite his entire body having been smeared with a thick cloak of ash. Trudy wasn't going to do it, or that's what Ninka thought, and so she moved in, and looking into the eyes of Nyamaizi as though to consult her, took the knife from Trudy's hands. Again, she'd been reluctant to let it go, but the angered expression on her grandmother's face prompted her to comply. Ninka,



smiling when she was finally given the dagger, nudged at her colleague to watch what she was going to demonstrate.

The apprentice and medium made it clear; the intent wasn't for her to slaughter her friend's sweetheart. Instead, she took hold of his left hand, and gesturing with the blunted side of the blade, showed Trudy, that all she was required to do, was for her to make a small incision on his thumb, and then let the blood drip and then mix with what was already inside the skull. *Creepy, but not fatal.* After demonstrating this – which visibly didn't reassure Ignatius, Ninka handed the knife back to Trudy, and waited for her to take action.

Nyamaizi brought the skull closer to Ignatius, in the process, intentionally or not, tipping the skull some more, so that more of the goaty-blood spilled on him. Trudy drew closer as well, and she held the thumb of the hand that Ignatius extended out to her – surprisingly, boldly so. She closed her eyes, half expecting Ignatius to do the same, except he only stared more widely at what was about to happen.

As the ground shook with the drumming, the incense bathing them, and the air feeling electrified, Trudy sank the very sharp tip of the knife into his thumb, and in just two movements, managed to cut enough into it, so that it immediately started to bleed sparingly. The pain raced up to Irumba's head quicker than the actual event itself – when he threatened to pull his hand away, Nyamaizi gestured at Ninka to hold him in place. She held him, but soon, she was helping him – she squeezed his veins after a while, helping slow-down the bleeding, as Nyamaizi then withdrew the skull, and walked with it back to where she'd been seated earlier on. She placed the skull upon the rock, after which she returned to them with a bunch of herbs meant to help arrest the bleeding. Irumba was still bleeding, the crimson stuff dripping freely onto his own body as he watched in pain. Trudy, who had avoided looking into his eyes, beheld the bloody mess on his crotch and thighs, and then cried silently, "I can't believe I'm the one that's done this!"

Ignatius was about to utter a complaint or let out a cry, seeing as the bleeding was not being stopped, but Ninka gestured to him that it was all being taken care of. Nyamaizi had been sorting and mixing the herbs, after which she passed them on to her assistant. Making small balls with each portion of herbs, Ninka applied them to his wound successively.

The old woman brought to her even more herbs, and then a hot rod too. Ninka applied the last batch to the wound, simultaneously holding them onto the cutting with the hot rod, so that there was a sizzling sound, as the hot metal touched the succulent herbs. It was tough, and Trudy, who'd almost shared in Irumba's pain, at one moment tried to hold his free hand, so as to console him, but Nyamaizi wouldn't have any of it – she tugged it away, and gave her a tough and terrible look. Ninka, who was playing the nurse, finally used a tiny piece of sisal to hold some herbs into place, made a knot around the thumb, and then finished the operation.

Nyamaizi picked the abominable cup, and holding it above the coals, continued with her earlier, inner chanting. Once done, she returned to where Ignatius was, and then signalled for him to open the mouth wide. The next act was clear. He obeyed without restraint, and proceeded to hold one side of the skull, as the other was held by Nyamaizi. He closed his eyes as the crimson stuff oozed out of the bony cup, into his mouth, some of it dripping onto the sides of his lips, and onto the stomach and thighs below. The gulps were shallow but intolerable – you could tell from the expression on his face. Nyamaizi wouldn't let him push away the ominous cup, until he'd taken a total of five sips from it.

Not emptied, but he'd had a fair amount of it – and this included swallowing his own blood. After his ordeal, he waited to see if the others might be offered the same gruesome drink as he, but after him, the skull was taken to a small pot, and was lowered inside of it. Next, the pot was sealed shut with a piece of hide, and was then further tightened with a sisal rope.

Thon, who'd missed most of the action, did open his eyes just in time to witness Ignatius drinking of the bloody stuff. The sight would remain with him for long, and for him, it was the most amazing part of the ritual. He continued playing the drums, knowing that one day, it would be his turn to taste of the “cup of life and death.”

The sealed small pot, now containing the skull, was lifted off the ground, and was taken into the third chamber, by Nyamaizi herself. The others watched, trying to figure out what awaited on the other side of the door they could not look beyond. They would not find out.

When she returned a while later, promptly closing the door behind her, and even checking to make sure it was properly sealed, her attention returned to her crew. She gestured for Thon to cease the drumming and open the door. Was it done? She pointed to the door, indicating that they could depart, but to Ignatius, she signalled that it wasn't done yet. She walked over to him, and whispered into his ear, "Just hold on a while." For what? She didn't explain. Thon and Ninka took hold of the sacrificial goat, and balancing it between themselves, slowly carried it outside the chamber as they left.

Before leaving though, Trudy, who'd been watching him unceasingly, and who was filled with compassion towards him, ensured she says a word before stepping out, "You have been very brave, my love. I'm so proud of you." She squeezed his shoulder, and then quit the room. As she joined the others in the outer room, a tear formed in her eye, but she was quick to wipe it off – Thon saw her though, and he placed a hand over his chest in response, projecting a sympathetic look towards her.

The door was drawn shut, and Nyamaizi stood there with them, all smiles!

"It is done," she exclaimed, grabbing Ninka's hand and shaking it, before summoning Trudy to give her a big hug as well. Thon was sitting in the same exact place he had sat earlier on, looking at his female companions, possibly sharing in their joy. Nyamaizi walked over to him, and patted him on the shoulder, saying, "You have never played the drums as well as you did today! I really enjoyed it, though I couldn't join them in the dance. Thanks for it. You will definitely make a powerful conjurer."

"Thank you for inviting me inside," replied Thon, smiling end-to-end.

Trudy grabbed Thon's hand and shook him furiously, smiling too; she had her own comments to give concerning his performance inside the chamber; "Thanks for that music man! It was the best ritual dance I've ever participated in."

"Really?"

"I'm not lying. I swear! And I believe, Maria here, enjoyed it as much as I did, right?"

Maria's feet were all dusty, and her beads had gotten loose from all the vigorous jumping she'd been doing. "Yes," she admitted, nodding her

head in agreement, “he plays well, but that’s expected of him. You’re one hell of a drummer boy!”

Thon laughed loudly, and shook his head to ward off their patronizing remarks.

Nyamaizi was watching them, and she smiled quietly, contemplating what her growing family of *embandwa* would be in the not-so-distant future.

“So,” began Trudy, “this marks the end of it all? Is his initiation done?”

“Almost, but not quite,” said Nyamaizi.

“There’s the ‘chamber of death,’” added Ninka, yawning and stretching her arms on both sides.

“Yes,” acknowledged the old witch, “he will now retire to the chamber of eternal sleep.”

“Death? You mean death, Grandma?” asked Trudy, not sure she was understanding them right.

Both Ninka and her grandmother laughed, causing her to get frustrated.

“Death brings a new beginning, always,” remarked Nyamaizi. She was about to speak, but gestured for them to keep silent, as she strained her head, to listen to something none of the others could hear. She then lowered her voice and continued to lecture them:

“The true initiation happens when a person dies, not while live. This kind of death, doesn’t necessarily mean physical death, even though that’s what’s commonly used to symbolize it. The more important death is the one that takes place in the mind and spirit of the person. One must die to their old self, so they can awaken from that phase, as a new person, a new spirit, a new mind.”

Trudy nodded, as did Thon, who was actually the more naïve of them all. Nyamaizi looked at them one at a time, and then added:

“For those blessed to walk such paths as you are, you should expect to die and resurrect many times during a single lifetime – it’s normal and even necessary. By the time you physically die, you will have transcended the lives of so many living. You will have insights into, and glimpses of things that ordinary, uninitiated people, only either dream of, or even never imagine as being possible. By merely being present in this shrine, each one of you has already undergone such a death, at least once in this

lifetime. But for our new friend back in that room, there's a much more important rebirth he must undergo, before he can truly claim his place amongst us. That's the purpose of the chamber of death, and so, when he wakes up tomorrow, he will have been born anew. And the amazing thing is, none of us can predict or tell what he'll be like when that happens. Initiation is like a gift – to him, but also for us.”

“I only spent an hour in the chamber,” whispered Ninka, recalling her own experience a couple of years before.

“That's because your path required just that and no more. But sometimes, some people will warrant to be in the chamber for days, or even weeks! It depends on their calling, and the nature of transformation they require before returning to the world. We all have little control over what happens inside the chamber – some might not return, don't forget that.”

“So, is he going to come out first? He definitely will need to eat something, right?” asked Trudy, naturally, the more worried of them all. “I'll tell him to be patient for the next couple of hours. Most, if not all those hours, are likely to be spent in a state of deep sleep. He can leave tomorrow morning if he so wishes, or whenever he makes the first contact. But for now, you can go on and cook for the rest of us. He's not expected to eat until when he emerges from the chamber, but maybe we can make an exception for him?”

“Alright then. May Enkya ya Enkya protect him.”

Nyamaizi held and squeezed her granddaughter's hand, nodding in acknowledgement after she said that short prayer.

“You can leave me here for a while. The rest of us, let's return to our other chores, your work here is done. For now.”

# Chapter XVII

“Alone” in the shrine, I sat there, thinking about the ritual I had just been led through, and what its implications might be. However, try as I could, no train of thought led me to any desirable end. I soon abandoned all speculation, and decided that experience would teach me best...

*You are not the first, and definitely not the last, so, get over it, and get done with it.* However, the only thing I couldn't get over, was the feeling that had I just been a little more patient the day before, perhaps, my fate would have been entirely different! *But then, that was not your destiny!*

The little door into the chamber opened behind me, suspending my thoughts and turning my attention to them. It was the tall and dark drummer, followed by my initiator, the old Nyamaizi. She was the first to talk, and she said to me, “We have brought you something to soothe your stomach – keep you going during the next phase.”

I wasn't in the mood to eat anything actually, but I didn't want to be rude nor take chances; “Thank you. I was starting to feel hungry.”

Her companion handed to me a gourd, which I half expected to contain something alcoholic or perhaps unpleasant.

“It's milk. Fresh milk, but there's nothing to eat with it,” said the man as I took hold of it and sniffed at the opening, to determine what exactly I was about to drink.

“You are lucky we could get you that, otherwise, you aren't supposed to be eating food at this moment,” added the witch.

I took the first sip, and tossed the stuff about in my mouth, trying to get a feel of it. It was milk true, and it was raw, although way much better than the bizarre crimson stuff I'd had to endure moments before. *Options? None.* I drunk deeply and quickly, to get done with it sooner.

“And here, drink this before you finish all the milk,” said the woman, stretching out her hand, to hand yet another gourd to me! This one had been trimmed to half the height, so it looked more like a bowl than a vase.

“What's that?” I asked, wondering why all of a sudden I had to drink lots of “weirdness” – by its smell alone, it was already suspect!

“It's *brain*, but you probably wouldn't know or believe me.”

I wouldn't believe it, or didn't think she was being serious about it. She was smiling, but the tall man behind her just looked on, expressionless and a bit alarming.

"You're not serious, are you?" I wanted to think otherwise.

"Take it anyway, it's just a special drink you are going to need as well, more for your spiritual state than nourishment."

*Alright weird folks, I'll take whatever...*

I put aside the milk, of which only a little was left – perhaps two more gulps or so, and then grabbed the bowl, which felt a bit warmer than the milk had been. Though visibility was low, the stuff looked like a soup of sorts; watery, gelatinous like raw egg-white, but then smelling nothing like egg. Visibly repulsive; I knew I wasn't going to be able to taste it while looking into it, and so I closed my eyes, and drew the bowl closer.

"It's not much, and you'll be done with it before you even realise it."

I took a deep breath, my heartbeat almost paused for a while, as I put the bowl to my lips, and drunk from it non-stop. I made sure to avoid tasting it – though I couldn't prevent noticing the saltiness of it. "Brain" or bad porridge stew, I didn't want to find out what it exactly was. I handed over the bowl soon as I was done, and wiped my lips with both my palms, before gulping down the rest of the milk and feeling my stomach complain a little.

The man took the gourd and bowl away, disappeared around the door, only to return later, accompanied by Trudy and Ninka. The whole team reassembled, and they stood around me in a circle of sorts. Trudy's grandma was the one standing directly before me, and she was still smiling.

"Now step aside, and let's prepare the path for you," said the old woman, pointing me towards the rock where Trudy had been sitting earlier on. I was glad to stand and stretch, and so I jumped off the woolen bench, choosing to stand instead of sitting where she had indicated. *The path? To where?* I looked on...

The man, who I heard being called 'Thon', reached towards the base of where I had been stationed all the time, and at the direction of the old woman, undid something, and then another. It sounded like the undoing

of locks of some sort. She then pointed to the side opposite where he was standing, and walking around in obedience, proceeded to execute the same procedure there.

“Now push from this side, while lifting,” she commanded, “The two of you, stop watching and help him! Let’s get this side up as well.” So, while Thon lifted one side, the other two, Ninka and Trudy, likewise lifted the “bed” off the ground, from the opposite side. For me, it was surprising to realise I had been seated on a trap-door of sorts all the while! I noticed the hinges of the thing on one side, and then was curious concerning what was revealed after the “door” had been entirely opened. There were two large wheels made of metal, and these were held in-place by a thick metallic bar spanning the whole length of a pit! Yes, I was astonished when I beheld what had lain under me all the time!

*What the heck is that?!*

No help from within, and so I spoke out, not caring to disguise my fears... “Excuse me Ma, but what is that? What’s inside there?”

“This? It’s the path. Through it, you will arrive at whatever you are meant to achieve in life and beyond.”

“What’s inside there? A road?” I asked, making it clear I didn’t mind being totally naïve.

“Come,” she said, gesturing for Thon to make way so I could look inside the pit.

Before daring to peek into the thing, I first studied all the others; besides Nyamaizi, the other three were looking at me, not the pit, and the sight of them – bodies painted ash-white, faces with indecipherable expressions, didn’t give me any assurance that the so-called “path” was what it was being claimed to be. The thought ringing again and again inside my head almost made me scream – *it’s a trap! It’s a fucking trap, and you’re about to be eaten alive if you don’t escape now!* Until that moment, I had managed to contain my fears, but that was changing so fast... I was even more afraid of them than what lay down that pit – whose bottom I couldn’t even see!

“You mean I’m supposed to step down into that?”

“I didn’t say you have to step in.” It was the old woman speaking. She drew closer to me, stood to my right, and then pointed at something I



had not seen at all – almost imperceptible, and not too far from the edge of the pit, was something that looked like a “bed”?

“What is it?” I asked, not sure what I was seeing.

“Thon, help me turn that,” she pointed at a pedal – much like a bicycle’s, only lacking the padding. Thon started turning the handle, only to be told he was doing it the wrong way; “No, you are lowering it. Turn the other way...”

*What, a pulley...*

“Now you two can turn the other side as well,” she pointed Ninka and Trudy to another similar pedal, on the other side of the pit. They pushed and pulled – Ninka pushed from one side, Trudy pulled from the other side, and on the other end of the hole, Thon was doing both, alone. With each revolution, the thing rose higher and higher...

I started to see the top of it – not a bed, but goddamn it, a coffin!

“Eh!” I exclaimed in shock, “It’s a coffin?” I couldn’t believe it. I didn’t even want to. I was starting to get paralyzed as well. No one answered me, they just kept to their act. As its body finally surfaced outside of the depths, furthest it could rise. Nyamaizi confirmed what was definitely obvious – “Yes it is.” And then she looked me in the eyes, totally serious, I was afraid what she was going to say.

“You fear death, right?”

I nodded, confident that would suffice.

“You also suffer from a fear of leaving behind people and things you love, especially if death were to come right now, right?”

*You can't be more correct grandma, and I fear what you are about to suggest!*

“We all feared death, each one of these might still do as well. But, it’s the path we all must walk – every living thing does at some point.” That bit was pretty obvious, and not disturbing. I acknowledged with a softish “yes”. She was grave-serious though, and standing there, next to the pit I was sure was some sort of sophisticated grave, I could not avoid peeing on myself no matter how hard I tried. My body must have picked up her next message before she even uttered it...

“You have to die, so you can later begin to live.”

*Shit you are not suggesting to bury me alive or worse, kill me now?* I felt the warmth of my own urine flow down my thighs, and I was more afraid than ashamed of what was happening. I wanted to flee!

I started to mumble something, but she cut me short, “No, you don’t have to die physically, and I promise you, not even your skin will witness any pain while any of this happens. It shouldn’t. This is more a symbolic death than a real one, and if we’d wanted to kill you like you are thinking right now, we’d not have wasted time playing cat-mouse games like this. Death is serious, but it doesn’t have to be bloody or painful.”

“So so...” I fumbled, looking for the words to say, after I felt the ground beneath my feet getting wet. Inside, I was struggling to stay calm, and trying to regain control of my own body.

“I’m not going to die right now,” I said.

“No. Be firm young man, it’s a big privilege you have here, and one each of them would cherish to possess. Just be calm, and firm. Also, be a man, even unto death.”

I was shaking with fear, but tried so hard to disguise it.

The old woman walked over to one of the boulders in the room, and pushing it aside, picked up something, after which she walked back to where I was. She was holding a tiny stone; “Here, hold onto this one as you get in, and you will be more than ready to go.”

*I’m going to die here. I’m going to die, after being promised all earth and more...*

I accepted the little piece of rock, tossing it about in my hands, as I cast a deep stare at Trudy, hoping she could utter something to me. Nothing. She was all silent, but her eyes seemed to say something nevertheless... She was crying.

“I don’t want to go on please...” I pleaded, stepping away from the edge of that pit, and handing over the stone to the old woman that’d given it to me. She wouldn’t take it back. I was starting to feel nauseated once more. I quickly scanned the room, determined to identify where the door was, so I could flee my hell-bent captors, before anything more devastating could be executed. But my expressions gave me away almost immediately, and Thon, who was much bigger and stronger than me, already had started towards me, just as I was turning around to head for the concealed door.

“Let’s do it, and be done,” shouted Nyamaizi, as Thon’s hands perched on me from behind, and with ugly force, threw me onto the ground, nearly breaking my nose and the hand I used to prevent myself from crashing my head onto the ground.

“No!” I screamed and cried, “Please forgive me and don’t kill me! Trudy, please help me, please!”

But she only sobbed, as her grandmother jeered, and asked the Dinka man to not let go of me at all. I kicked, I tried to lift my arms and push him off my back, but he was too strong for me. I felt totally hopeless, but wasn’t ready to die.

“Ninka, bring the ropes, and hurry!” commanded the witch.

I continued pleading, without any signs the plan would be changed...

“Pleaaasee! Have mercy on me, please! Why treat me like this, Trudy please! Forgive me my love! Someone please help me...”

All my pleas fell on hard rock. I got crushed.

Ninka brought the ropes as she had been told, and without easing off of me, Thon helped her fasten me; the feet, thighs, and finally my hands. As they did this, I wept so much, my face was bathed in a mixture of soil, mucus from the nose and salty tears. I knew Trudy would not have a thing to do with me anymore. “All this time, you stupid bitch just wanted to lead me into a trap? I hate you Trudy!” I thought, with such heavy regret! I felt more unfortunate and accursed than I had ever been before.

Quickly, everything was done quickly. I heard the lid of the coffin being opened, and before I knew it, the three of them – including Trudy, heaved me off the ground, and cast me inside the casket, alive!

“I will never forgive you for this!” I shouted, as they forced my head to stay low, so the lid could be sealed above me.

“I swear upon all your gods, you filthy people! I will never forgive you! I swear...” I sobbed harder, and breathing was getting harder too. I was not only constrained, but my new prison evoked in me claustrophobic feelings of a sort I’d never felt before!

“Ignatius please! This isn’t meant to kill you! Be calm, be strong my dear...”

“No, fuck you Trudy. I didn’t believe a girl could ever be so evil like you! I hate you! I swear I hate having met you at all! I hate all of you, and if I die, I swear, I’ll come back for you!”

The old woman laughed, as Ninka muttered something to her.

“I don’t care if you eat me alive, I already knew you were cannibals! Even you Trudy? Fuck, I hate you...”

I heard the pedals start to move, and felt the whole coffin sway about as well. It was no joke anymore. *They are burying me alive!*

I moaned, groaned, shouted, kicked, and tried bumping into the sides of the coffin, hopelessly thinking I might stop it moving, but none of that could help. I couldn't see a thing, as the coffin didn't even have a visage to look through. Steadily, they continued to lower me deeper and deeper. I wondered how far down the pit I was, or to what depths I was going to die and rot from, but didn't have the faintest clue. It just felt as though I was being lowered into a bottomless grave. I hated life, and wished I had surrendered to Eman or Zorean the night before! Unfortunately, they were not there to quicken my dying, and I couldn't help myself either.

At long last, deeper than any grave I'd ever seen or known, I heard a soft thud, and then the rocky motion stopped. "At the bottom you've arrived." I could not believe it yet, but it was actually happening! It was dark, smelling of fermentation or molds, and though I could not knock into anything else besides the wooden walls of the coffin, I was sure something else was in the coffin with me. *Death is not far, it never is.* Abandoned to death's cold grip, I heard them finally close the lid over the pit as well. But, before my grave was sealed, the sorcerous old witch had something more to say...

"Ignatius Irumba? That's your name, right?" I could not answer her, or felt it was even stupid trying to, given where I was. She wasn't offended though, just went on; "Despite all the cursing and childish cries, not long after this, you shall truly know the reason you were born. You will only die, if you fail to realise that your work here isn't done, or if you choose to not finish the work. Otherwise, I hope you become more grateful and optimistic concerning your life. And don't forget this; whether you die or live, remember that 'death is just another part of life'."

"Fuck you, old woman!" I shouted, not even sure she could hear me.

"One last thing dear child, please suspend your disbelief, even just for a moment. Accept to get immersed in a new world; a place where things you might have gotten accustomed to, no longer apply."

There was a pause, probably to let me soak those words in, or perhaps she'd picked up my cursing, and then she went on:

“Embrace your divine nature, and realize that reason on its own, isn't enough – it never is, even for you that's so well-educated. As you might have already noticed, there's more to life than is readily obvious. There's a veil over your eyes, but no one can remove it, except you do it yourself.”

Those words were the last I heard of them, and then I was sealed in, totally cut off from them. Immediately, the grave's solid silence embraced me, unforgivably so. *Alone and dying...* I still couldn't believe that my life was coming to an end, just like that!

I had refused to take hold of her stone, but she'd been stubborn, and had thrown it inside the coffin with me. So, as I turned about, I felt this cold and hard pebble poking at my lower ribs, and I tried much to heave it aside, but with my body tied the way it was, it was rather tricky. It was annoying, more than anything, to realise that in addition to my real anguish, I had to deal with that discomfort unto death! I even started wishing the bus had toppled over, or if we'd instead crashed into the River Kafu! *Better to die quick and suddenly, than having to deal with a slow, painful and disgraceful death such as this!*

I was feeling very exhausted, and my fears had given way to a morbid desperation for quicker death. I considered thoughts of how many more other people had already faced the same fate as I, or how many more would have to, and those thoughts made me loathe Trudy and her family the more. *Just how many deaths are required to keep these filthy shrines operating?* I started wishing the dead could resurrect and avenge. I'd never taken the matter of the afterlife serious, and had never considered wishing myself to exist as a ghost, but with the pain and anger I was feeling, I prayed that if I died, heaven not take me, so I could return and torture them properly!  
“I swear I will return.”

For a while, I continued sobbing and swearing. Then, a different kind of concern arose; “Am I going to hell? I doubt I could go to heaven, but I don't wish to burn in hell!” *It was a new kind of terror, and it seemed to make sense.* As these thoughts haunted me, the mind raced through time, to a moment in my life when I was younger and more religious.

'Sacrilege!' that's what the catechist during my Sunday school days used to proclaim, as he lectured us on what sin was, and why some sins were worse to die with than others. I took it too serious back then, but lost it along the way. But, locked in a coffin alive, assured that death was indeed coming, I could not avoid trying to recall what the difference between "venial" and "capital" sins were. However, not a memory of it seemed accessible in that moment. There was panic in my heart; I felt I wanted to confess, but to who or for what, I wasn't sure. I just was too afraid to die... and the threat of a Catholic hell with monstrous unforgiving demons commanded by an equally unforgiving God, shook me into bitter tears. Suddenly, I found myself face-to-face with ideas I'd been fighting-off most of my life.

"You have died in sin, and will go to hell. You have not been a believer, and never did pray, for almost ten years now. No wonder, God's not been there to help you, and won't be showing up any time soon." The thought hounded me; I sobbed, but had no sound left in me.

Amidst all this bitterness and hopelessness, something else seemed to be happening to me – inside of that raging mind, it seemed as though I was being split into bits. There was a battle raging inside of me, and I didn't know if it was the effect of so much fright or the grave affecting my psychology, but it intensified steadily, and I didn't know what to think except that death had finally arrived.

\* \* \* \* \*

*No! There's no such thing as hell, and if you don't believe it when you die, you shouldn't find it anywhere after death.*

*Oh really? Don't listen to that! You better acknowledge that you could suffer indefinite pain, and so much sorrow for the rest of your existence.*

But the body rots, the brain doesn't work. How will I feel pain after death?

*Don't ask for it.*

*No, answer the question! How can he feel pain when the body is gone?*

*That's dumb! It's the members of your mind. Your body might escape pain – as it always did, but the mind wouldn't. Dismembered, it can still experience pain, just like in a dream.*

I don't get it.

*It's just a hoax! Don't accept any of that bullshit.*

*But do accept death. This is a special one...*

*Only if he has no guilt, which he doesn't.*

*What do you have guilt for anyways? Still enslaved by false absolutes? Let go...  
And there's more dying left for you anyways!*

Please!

*You're about to experience death though, and it's real. Think about that.*

*Oh sorry...*

*You've been there before. But this is different; it's The Path.*

*And you are lucky, we definitely need this one as well.*

*Some never have the assurance they would make it back, not even at the hands of the anointed!*

Shit! What's happening to me...?

*The dying and those sharing in their death are typically clueless. But you're seekers, and so warrant our help.*

*We'll be on the other side...*

What's happening!

*He's dying already...*

*Just brace yourself, and stay together.*

Oh God no...

*There's going to be an experience like you've never seen before, just don't lurk in the dark for too long, or you'll never make it.*

*"Zin-Uru," don't forget that. And definitely, beware of the leeches...*

Damn! God, what the fuck! Please forgive me...

*It's like walking down a tactile kaleidoscope shaped like a rollercoaster...*

*Alright then. Let them go!*

*See you on the other side. And stick together no matter what.*

Stop it please!

*Hee hee ha ha ha ha ha!*

*By the way, just in case you don't find us on the other side, or if you hit a dead-end and can never progress or return, just relax, and accept it. There are many others like you.*

*You'll just rinse and repeat. Another couple of years perhaps...*

*Is that possible?*

*It's a mystery my dears.*

*Okay, we have to part.*

*Alright then, there they go...!*

\* \* \* \* \*

The body had already started to approximate clinical death, thanks to the potent toxins that he had been administered furtively. It could not contain them anymore, and neither could the casket in which he'd been



trapped. The coffin's base, as well as the solid rock-bed upon which it sat, seemed to sublimate into nothingness! The essential bonds had been weakened but weren't broken yet – not even Nyamiyonga could pull that one off without the sanction of Enkya ya Enkya.

The four of them; Umtol and Wonem - the higher and shadow principles, and their lesser counterparts, Uminah and Uminu – the logical and creative souls, were free to embark on the pilgrimage. It was not natural, rather it was special. Departing thus, from the body that had served as the instrument and anchor for them to do work in their respective realms, Ignatius became essentially dead, his spirit and mind having parted ways with his physical shell.

Umtol and Wonem wouldn't use the descent – it wasn't necessary for them anymore. Being advanced, they could use more sublime paths, but the ultimate destination for all four was the same. For Uminah and Uminu, the route was different however, and theirs was a tremendous fall through a region of Nyamiyonga's dark empire known as "Irembo Kuzimu". A realm in which innumerable souls either waited or had gotten trapped, but via which they had to travel, to reach the next phase of their existence.

The path was dark, the fall was lightning fast, but seemed to have no end. It wasn't their first across incarnations, but because they brought with them a different essence each time, it never could feel or be the same. They also were not the only ones to ever do it, as both venerable and gross souls had to take the journey at least once during their cycles. If a soul advanced well enough, it would then have to do just one more of these journeys, and then never have to fall again. For those less fortunate, the fall had to be relived again and again, one incarnation after the other.

As they continued to fall, avoiding being distant from each other, Uminah and Uminu started to experience the fringes of *Okuzimu* proper; the darkness started to be palpable, and as they entered those alternate realms, their distinct essences started to show. Uminah glowed a soft but steady blue, while the other glowed a rich violet. Like shooting stars falling through a pitch-black sky, they fell with such speed, a trail was being left behind them, and it caught the attention of many within the realm.

Before long, they were starting to decelerate – not because they didn't have enough energy to make it any further, but because, like many other lights falling into the empire from deaths occurring elsewhere, the light with which they entered the dark realm, attracted many. Most of those gravitating towards them sought to dwell in their light even for a moment; the light, a divine afterglow, was unto them, like precious nourishment.

The leeches swarmed about them like moths to a lamp, and they couldn't really escape it entirely – it was just too many of them to fend off. However, it wasn't just the embrace of *Okuzimu's* dwellers that had impact on them; merely returning to that realm instantly awoke memories that had been inaccessible in their incarnate state.

For both of them, it wasn't like years before, but just seconds, when they'd been summoned into *Okuzimu*, having dwelt on even lower realms than that. For Uminu, her previous life was among vegetative souls or plant spirits, and Uminah had been a feline soul! Both had been summoned at the same time, even though they'd entered Nyamiyonga's empire from different origins and moments. One of the peculiar things that happened to the lesser souls inside *Irembo*, was that they underwent further transformations, and some would eventually emerge as capable human souls – that is what had happened to Uminu and Uminah during their previous stay.

Either at the end, or even during their metamorphosis, Nyamiyonga's agents could identify a soul and reassign it to some emerging corporeal form – on the physical plane that is. Some would end up inside of plants, others would animate the beasts of the air, land or water, and those fit enough, would be allocated human shells. But it was not all predictable, as sometimes, it was possible for a human-ready soul to be reanimated inside a tree! Also, unknown to humans, not all souls were of the same kind! Inside of Nyamiyonga's empire, soul-forms could evolve into many varied things, some even impossible to reconcile with any known forms of life. It's how many so-called “monsters of the dark” came to life.

“We need to hurry!” projected Uminah to his partner, as they slowed down even further, swallowed on all sides by the cocoon of life-hungry beings of many natures. Many defied classification, but among them

were ghouls, gremlins, djinns, imps, unredeemed and many immature souls, among others.

Overtime, most of these leeches had evolved mechanisms for coercing or entrapping any incoming souls, especially those with attractive energy reservoirs – it was a cheaper way to effect evolution or quicken it without doing much work. Uminah and Uminu had been warned, and the quirks of the realm weren't entirely unknown to them anyways.

“The form!” replied Uminu, as she struggled to keep in sync with Uminah amidst all the pandemonium gathering about them.

“Yes! Focus, and let's do it!” he replied.

They were not falling anymore, but were swirling about in the vastness of darkness, which was occasionally punctured by falling lights, just as they'd arrived themselves, and which lights were quickly swallowed by darkness, as swarms of beings enveloped and sought to feed off that energy too. The two locked into each other, and begun to swirl furiously in sync, as a means to disorient their predators. At the center of this swirling, a sphere of light started to form, initially as tiny as an orange, but one very bright. It was a costly operation, as it caused them to radiate even more energy.

They were in sync, and had gotten adequately entangled to coordinate the portal creation:

**Uminah:** *Zin-Uru!*

**Uminu:** *Zinnn-Uuuru!*

The power effectively caused an impeccable rupture to start forming inside of the sphere of light. The portal was open, but only for them who'd issued the command, even though it caused so much light to sip through into the dark realm, much to the thrill of those leeching on them. There was a lot of manic rejoicing, but they had to ensure that doesn't distract them.

*“Quick!”*

*“Sure... let's go!”*

The sphere started to dwindle, and with it, their forms got sucked up into the next realm – Kitara.

As the last bits of their being emerged on the other side, the portal, which could not let in anyone that had not been a part of the opening signature, closed behind them. They left a huge surge of energy in the dark kingdom however, and those that had been close, feasted immensely, despite having lost their grip on the two fleeting souls.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first thing that struck them, was the stunning appearance of the realm in which they had emerged; soon as they were free of Irembo Kuzimu, not only did their own forms change, but the surreal nature of the brilliantly illuminated universe all around them, totally blew things out of proportion for them. Unlike the previous world of darkness, and the mundane one before that, Kitara was a domain of Enkya ya Enkya – where he was known as “Ruhanga Kitara Musana”, that they had never experienced directly before.

Back on Earth, the more optimistic ones would call it heaven, and some might have been right – any delights imaginable could and did dwell there, but it was not all there was. In this realm of divine light, all was but a “state of mind” – or rather, “state of spirit.” All constructs – beings and places alike, beside the universal mind in which they all dwelt, were projections of some sort.

So, for example, some beings might project an idea of a temple built out of fire, and it would be! Furthermore, one could dwell inside of such a fiery temple, and not experience anything like burning or pain! On the other hand, it was possible to encounter such strange things as ladders that rose into the skies, only to terminate into nothing! Invisible structures weren't entirely unpopular either. But because all inhabitants of Kitara were purely spirit – as was the entire realm itself, one could choose to coerce even the creations of others, to project as they willed. This was generally possible, though, how much you could influence things, relied on the strength of your willpower relative to what was being affected.

Everything, from the appearances of those with whom you'd commune, to how you'd commune with them, wholly relied on the exercise of will, without which, one could easily find themselves existing inside of an immense, indifferent and homogenous vacuum – not hell, but nothing at all like heaven either. Every being – angels, demons, souls, elementals, deities, name it, that could find their way into that realm called “Kitara”, were essentially practising magic – whether or not they'd call it that, didn't matter. Manipulating reality, or essentially causing changes in the awareness of any being one interfaced with, including themselves, was the default mode, and that's what made Kitara the sort of heaven or hell it was – a paradise for each and every one, relative to their whims or needs.

But also to effect significant power in that realm, especially over others, called for greater will power and that readily translated to the level of evolution a being had attained. Also, one's orientation towards the supreme architect of all – the highest source of all that impersonal power regardless of the forms it could take, Enkya ya Enkya, greatly determined what one could accomplish while inside of Kitara. There was an inevitable order imposed on each and every one, relative to their position on the hierarchy of will power, and that's what helped maintain order, where chaos would otherwise have reigned unrestrained.

Despite all this, for lowly-beings such as Uminah and Uminu, visiting Kitara at their level of evolution was more than anything they had ever asked for.

“Wow!”

“You've seen it?”

“Oh yeah, I've definitely seen it!”

“It's beautiful!”

“I would say ‘majestic!’”

“It's changing forms, seen that?”

“Peculiar!”

They were standing upon a cloud, which Uminu had conceptualized after noticing the absurdity of where it was that they'd emerged – originally, they'd found themselves hanging in mid-air, upon nothing in particular! Uminah readily accepted the suggestion and stood upon the floating cloud. He went a little step further, and realizing that he too could “just

make things happen”, decided to adjust Uminu’s cloud to his fancy; it wouldn’t be a plain smoky-white, but would have undertones of gold, and he made a few lilies to sprout through the cloud and immediately bloom as well!

“This place is really strange!” cried Uminah, “How are things kept in order, without some global zeitgebers?”

“There’s no zeitgebers, because we don’t need them. But then again, I doubt everything is entirely under our control... see that!”

A small comet whizzed past them, its tail, a trail of emerald, and whose head was a cube whose corners had been meticulously trimmed to give it a very exquisite character. What it was exactly, or what purpose and destination it shot for, the two visitors could not tell.

“It just appeared out of nowhere!” exclaimed Uminah, who, relative to Uminu, appeared as a sentient and animated scepter, standing erect upon the cloud she’d created!

“Should we chase after it?” she asked, pointing towards the fleeting comet, which was growing in size, contrary to what normal perspective would imply.

Uminah was more excited about the disparity before them, and instead answered her with a further question, “Are you noticing that? I mean the size!”

“Yes, it’s strange as well,” replied Uminu.

“We are giving it too much attention, perhaps we shouldn’t,” concluded Uminah, intuiting that attention was a real force in the new world.

Seeing the wonders scattered in various places all about them, Uminu could not help but admit, “This place is amazing!”

But her partner thought otherwise, “It’s the thoughts of its inhabitants that are more amazing. Look at that mountain over there!”

She turned to see it, and as she did so, caused them to start zooming in towards it, just like that...

“We are moving!” she said, more exhilarated by the manner in which desire readily translated into actuality.

“Be careful,” said Uminah, as he caused their airy vessel to decelerate, “or we might crash into forbidden territory pretty soon.”

Uminu, feeling as liberated as a child in the most magical story, laughed so freely, and while doing this, caused her friend’s flowers to bulge and

radiate with hints of red, while the cloud upon which they were floating, glowed a pleasant yellow. Even Uminah couldn't avoid feeling elated by it all.

"Yes, better you do that, as we figure out where exactly we are to meet Umtol and Wonem," remarked Uminah, as he studied the expanse before them.

The exquisite aspect of everything caused Umtol to say to Uminah; "Heaven is where you are, when you are happy." Perhaps, it was to anyone listening, the most palpable expression of what couldn't otherwise be said of their experience.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a boat sailing towards them, adorned on all sides with the decapitated heads of various animals. Uminah was the first to see it, and immediately drew his friend's attention towards it.

"That's unlike anything else here!" complained Uminu, studying the details of its grotesque and elaborate design.

"I doubt there's anything like a standard in Kitara. You have the option to change its appearance though, to whatever you fancy."

Uminu tried to do as he'd suggested; she desired that the boat change course, and also, in place of the grotesque things lining its hull, have fruits and flowers instead. The task proved impossible, or rather, difficult for her to pull off, and that was their first real surprise.

"I'm failing to do it! Can you?" she said, surprised that what had worked so effortlessly on other things, didn't seem to be able to even cause a slight cosmetic change to the approaching sight.

"It might be different from all the others. I too have failed to transform it. We are possibly not strong enough to."

"It's coming straight at us!"

"Just ignore the appearance, let's see who is behind the projection," said Uminah. He took it upon himself to ensure they don't get into danger; he caused their cloud to split into two, and then repel each other, so that the course of the fast-approaching vessel no longer intercepted with, but extended between and beyond them.

"Have you been here before?" asked Uminu, impressed by Uminah's apparent grasp of the rules governing the realm.

“Never, but I have already noticed that not all things around here are to be trusted or messed with. There must be some underlying order somewhere...”

The vessel, rowed by a being with a bulbous head having no eyes, and whose entire body was pale green, finally got sandwiched between them, and then it stopped. At the front, sculpted right onto the bow, was a gargoyle-like creature, except, where its monstrous teeth parted, was being emitted a purplish-black vapor, and the eyes of the thing glowed a hot purple, so that it seemed to be alive, and that the canoe was its body!

Similarly, as it drew closer, both Uminu and Uminah saw that the decapitated heads, of which there was one for a pig, a mule, a bull, two of goats and others, of both common and some rather obscure animals, were not actually dead! These seemed to ooze fresh blood where the heads had been excised from the rest of their owners, and these heads were then attached to the black hull via hooks. Further, despite having been separated from their bodies, these heads continued to breathe, eyes were somewhat moving and some, like the cow's, were even chewing! It was all wrong!

“You are to come with me right now,” said the odd and lone boater, whose outrageous vessel still astonished the two souls.

“We are waiting for some friends,” said Uminah, as his cloud morphed into a rocky, floating island instead.

“You aren't actually meant to be here, you are drawing too much attention towards the operation, just standing here, drooling over works that don't yet concern you,” the one with a featureless head warned. Uminu didn't like any of it, and wasn't ready to side with the ominous sailor; “We were led here by Wonem and Umtol, and so can't leave without their knowledge.”

The thing stood up, causing the canoe to yaw a little, and then caused a fog to form all about them – including the two obstinate souls. It totally engulfed them, so they couldn't perceive each other easily anymore. Uminah tried to escape it but didn't have the liberty or ability to do so, despite gathering as much will power as he could in that moment.

“That alone should prove to you that you aren't yet meant to dwell on this plane, as you would be too weak to stay on course or do anything to



completion. I've been asked to deliver you to your masters though, so either hop onto my canoe, or I'll be compelled to drag you along."

Uminu was afraid of the thing, and so she asked, before deciding whether she wanted to willingly board or just be forcefully tagged along: "Who are you?"

She couldn't see its face anymore, though she could see part of the boat's outline. Also, she couldn't escape from where she stood in the fog – not any further, though she could draw closer to the boat.

"Call me Navayi," the thing replied. Upon mention of that name, "Navayi", a frog croaked several times, and they wondered whether it was him or something he held with him in the boat.

"Did he sever a frog's head as well?" Uminah wondered.

"I'm a collector, especially of stray souls such as you. Wonem is a close friend of mine, and so I offered to locate you, and then take you to where they can safely meet you."

"Fine! Do you mind if I just sit in a smaller boat right behind you?" asked Uminu.

"That's very fine. It makes little difference, as I'm the one controlling the winds anyways."

Uminah knew what he meant, and so just chose to stay where he was, knowing he would still be taken along with them.

Uminu would have her way still; she formed such a beautiful boat, it made Navayi's seem like a throw-away from some distant and primitive past.

"That's very impressive! Are you the creative one? You are too prolific for a young soul!"

Navayi was impressed with her, and so was Uminah her companion. Not satisfied with her conception though, she caused a rainbow-like ring of light to encircle her small boat, and after cheering herself for the little accomplishment, affirmed to him; "Yes, I'm the creative one, and he's my yardstick," as she pointed to the more orthodox Uminah, who was more cautious with his powers and freedom.

"You are very beautiful as well," added Navayi, taking note of the persona she had assumed – a lean, but ethereal girl of dark complexion. The boat in which she sat, possessed colors that matched the headdress she had wrapped around her head. She also wore beads on her arms, and had

grown locks, which extended all the way down into the foggy waters below.

“She’s called Uminu,” said Uminah, who admitted his partner was way too liberal with the magical ether. He laughed, and to show he could be creative as well, went ahead to rival some of her flair; a morning glory sprouted instantly from the waters below him, and climbed around his otherwise bland scepter form.

“Hmm, now both of you are getting the hang of it, let’s go then. I trust you’ll enjoy witnessing the amazing beauty, and so many wonderful things that are spread throughout Kitara. This is where the gods and their subjects are free to explore all possible forms of expression and creation. Welcome to the realm of magic, and I’ll be your willing guide.”

The fog subsided a little, Navayi claiming that though he wished for them to readily see the things they’d encounter, he didn’t want to draw much attention towards them – “You don’t yet belong here,” he reminded them.

“Where are we going to meet them?” inquired Uminah as they started to advance forward.

“You wouldn’t know the place even if I told you. But, for now, brace yourself for the first amazing kingdom we’ll ride through. It’s called ‘Mhezi’ by the inhabitants, most of whom were Cwezi, just like you.”

# Chapter XVIII

He would have taken them faster, but Uminah begged him to go a little slower, so they can have a chance to experience the scenery, and also have him explain a couple things that they might want to learn about the realm.

“I get it,” Navayi said, nodding, “you are tourists indeed, and I know just which route will be ideal for you!”

“Yep, we are touring, for now...” affirmed Uminu, as she steadied herself in her own little vessel, Navayi changing course, by about one hundred and thirteen minutes, after which he then plunged them forward at a slower speed.

Soon, they were distant from the floating temples that had first captured their attention, and were greeted by a marvelous sight as they steered into new territory.

“Oh God! Look at those!” exclaimed Uminah as he caught glimpse of curved structures easing into view. Uminu had been looking elsewhere – in the depths above them, studying what seemed like oval ships or moving oval islands, but when Uminah shouted in awe, her focus followed his gaze, till she saw them too...

“Wow! They look amazing...”

“What are they, Navayi?” inquired Uminah, even shifting closer to the edge of their befogged fortress to take a closer, clearer look at them.

“Those?” asked Navayi, pointing at the gigantic mushrooms with his oar, “they are special ritual sites.”

“Rituals? As in magic rituals?” asked Uminu, stooping forward so as to also see clearer, one arm holding onto the thwart of her boat for stability.

“Look further below, in the spaces around the stalks, and you will see what I mean,” added Navayi, not bothering to look there himself.

“Oh yes! The colors! Oh dear...” she exclaimed, dazzled by the sheer beauty of the said ritual spaces.

The tall structures were shaped like gigantic mushrooms; as tall as a typical five story structure back on Earth. Their equally immense caps, probably about fifteen to twenty meters in radius, were a brilliant tomato red, and had white spots on them, which weren't anything like typical

fungoid scales, but which looked like polka dots instead. They were actually openings on the caps; columns of water, or something like it, could be seen jutting upwards into the air by about three meters from the orifices. These aerial fountains were placed in a concentric circular array all around the cap, and with the biggest one right in the center. Beyond aesthetics though, it wasn't clear what purpose they served. Furthermore, the water didn't seem to flow anywhere in particular (didn't even fall to the ground below), nor did it seem like it was being sourced from anywhere around – there was no sign of a lake anywhere in sight. But, they looked really nice, and the roaring of the fountains, mixed with drumming by some of the folks below, greatly augmented the scene.

The gills of these mushrooms were white, but had sodium light glowing in between them, so that the entire space below the caps and that in the vicinity was glowing likewise. The stalks were white, but with rings of gold adorning them at various heights along the stalks – about three per stalk.

Also, seated or standing in various spots about the shroom structures, mostly in groups of six or more, were many, tall negroid beings, dressed in long, darkish robes.

“Who are they?” asked Uminu, turning to face their guide.

“There's no official name for them, but we generally refer to that sect as the 'Seers of the Nile.'”

Both tourists nodded in acknowledgement, and Uminah saw something else that needed to be explained.

“Those orbs of glass...”

“Yes! The ones with the green clouds in them?” asked Uminu, looking at the large scrying orbs about which the seers were gathered in groups, some drumming and others raising their hands occasionally towards the spherical things towering above. Others deeply gazed into them, turning to talk with their neighbors every once in a while.

“They are instruments for peering into most of the universe,” answered Navayi. He went on, “They allow them to see things not just in the now, but across time and space; you can think of them as our observers.”

“What do they use the information for?” asked Uminah, curiously.

“You probably have never practised the art,” said Navayi, “but since the ancient times, especially in the Egyptian empires, these divine seers worked to help their counterparts on the physical realms, obtain accurate

and reliable readings of many things. They still do, but the art is mostly lost to the majority of surviving humans.”

Uminu was enthralled, and spoke with much fervor, “That’s great! How I wish I could get a chance to look into one of them!”

“Maybe not those particular ones, as you’d need to be initiated into both their craft and lineage, which would be quite difficult for souls of your kind,” said the guide.

“But one can still learn the proxy skills, right?”

“Yes Uminah, even on Earth, I believe some adepts do know and use very similar techniques.”

The majestic mushrooms were left further and further behind, and in their place emerged a mostly blank horizon and miniscule attractions in the far distance. From their perspective, the world looked like a collection of many tiny, floating islands. Navayi did explain that transportation between these was mostly instantaneous, except that once in a while, someone would decide not to zarp across distances, instead choosing to travel in a more “physical” manner – like they were doing. “But nevertheless, all travel here is a form of ethereal flight; a form of strange levitation or teleportation, as there’s no real matter to traverse.”

“Look to the far-right,” shouted Navayi. He pointed out to them an immense structure that was mostly pale, and easy to miss if one wasn’t looking carefully.

“That’s bigger than anything we’ve seen before!” exclaimed Uminah, as Navayi piloted them off-course again, so they could behold the landscape properly. They increased altitude as they drew even closer; “You need to see it from high above, to appreciate the majesty of it,” he told them.

“Damn! Who built that?” asked Uminu, feeling she’d seen more amazing things than she’d ever tried to imagine.

“First, study the patterns and let me know what you think...” said Navayi to her.

She looked far and wide; the vast mountain range neatly leveled-out for miles, and with huge arcane patterns etched into the plateaus like some gigantic tattoos upon the rocky structure. Uminah was more engrossed in studying them than she, and he was the first to ask, “Are they natural?” “Natural? What do you mean?” responded Navayi, looking out at the ridges and depressions himself.

They were all over the plains; visibly deep, and of about three meters in width, all along the exposed ducts. They spread out in many different and intricate patterns, but most of which looked like fractals, especially when considered together in totality. The sides of the trenches were all colored silver, and against the ambient light, shone admirably, some reflecting more light than others, depending on your orientation towards them. They were not actually empty, but had water flowing through all of them.

“They can't be irrigation canals,” commented Uminah, “There doesn't seem to be anything to irrigate on the land.”

“No, they aren't,” confirmed Navayi, refusing to divulge the answers to them yet.

“Are they crop-circles then?” asked Uminu, seeing no alternative explanation for such large-scale, intricate designs in the ground.

Navayi laughed, and then told them what the mysterious canals were.

“They are canals in which you can swim, though not ones meant for recreation. Together, they form an elaborate maze that must be explored and mastered by a class of elemental spirits called the ‘Nunyu’, and who have visited the Earth in past times, where they were known as the ‘Nommo’, to the Dagon tribes of Africa that they nurtured.”

“So, it's like some complex for sports then?” inquired Uminah, not content yet.

“Not really,” replied the guide, “It's a mandatory task in their initiatory rites, and one which if not passed, disqualifies the candidate from assuming any roles, and which might even cause them to be demoted to a lower realm for further preparations prior to ascent into their caste.”

“So, are they like fish or mermaids? These ‘Nunyu,’” asked Uminu, amused by the role the vast maze served, “and can I get to swim there as well?”

“Hohoho! You could, but many have entered that maze, never to be heard of again. Not that they drown or are siphoned off, no. The thing is, once inside the maze, you can't really escape unless you are either delivered by a watchful and compassionate elemental knowing its way around the maze, or if you are indeed skilled, so you can navigate your way out of it. It's a puzzle remember, and one not meant to be easily solved.”

“I love it,” exclaimed Uminah, not explaining why.

“Ultimately,” said Navayi, “If one masters the ability to navigate this maze, then essentially, they can navigate their way around the cosmos from memory. You could think of it as a memory honing and testing tool, something like what the wise on Earth would call a ‘memory palace’, except this is one you swim through, not walk around.”

“I see.”

“I wonder who actually designed it,” pondered Uminu, silently.

“Leviatan, God of the Nunyu,” said Navayi, not sure either of them recognized the name. Indeed, they were naïve, and didn’t know about him.

“That must be a very skilled architect and mathematician,” remarked Uminah.

“He’s an Arch, and one of the more sublime beings of the multi-universe, also king of the creative elementals and their various realms.”

“Who are ‘Archs?’” inquired Uminu.

“He was present in the primordial waters, from which much of the physical cosmos was molded.”

Neither understood his answer, but they didn’t pursue it any further.

The mountains and their spell-binding labyrinths were finally left behind, but exploration of Kitara and its majestic artifacts continued.

\* \* \* \* \*

They were not far from their final destination, and had passed many other amazing creations, some of which Navayi would stop and explain to them. It was also starting to get dark – as though night were approaching, but that didn’t stop the journey and the scenery from being any more fascinating.

“See! Dragons!” shouted Uminah with joy.

Uminu saw them too, but believed they weren’t dragons. They asked Navayi to explain what the flying reptilian things were. Also, they were worried, as the fleet of these things was approaching them head-on.

“It’s a swarm of Yuremtes,” Navayi told them.

“They look like chameleons, but they also have wings!” Uminah called their attention to appendages with which the beasts were flapping and gliding like birds.

“It’s not the beasts which I’m talking of, but the ones riding them,” explained their guide.

“The ‘Yuremtes’ are the riders?” asked Uminu, pointing to one of the flying things, which had a pair of riders – lovers perhaps, given the way they held each other.

“Sure. The animals are called ‘Yituru-turu’, and they don’t actually exist anywhere in the physical realm, though they indeed look much like pterosaurs of ancient Earth.”

The Yituru-turu had exactly two riders on each one of them, and there was a whole swarm of them, flying out in profile, and all towards the same direction – opposite where Navayi and his own commuters were headed.

Navayi slowed down so as to avoid possible collision with the swarm. For his two passengers though, it was more than overwhelming, and they were afraid, so they told Navayi.

“Oh gosh! Look at the size of these things!” exclaimed Uminah, as one flew very close to them. But, it wasn’t just the gigantic size of the Yituru-turu compared to them that wowed them. Besides the scale of the entourage, the sound issuing from them was likewise outre; the Yitutu-turu roared and growled as they flew onwards, while some of the Yuremtes – the male ones in particular, hummed unceasingly and incomprehensibly. Their female counterparts, donning wild hairstyles, whistled melodious tunes, so that putting it all together, one could consider the composition a gonzo band in need of lyrics.

“They are some choir of sorts?” asked Uminu, swaying to their powerful music.

“They are twin-lovers actually – each pair of them, and they make some of the most melodious music in the realm,” explained Navayi, as he waved to a couple that flew past them to the left.

Another couple, riding a bright-green Yituru-turu, threw two large fruits at Uminu, who jumped just in time to catch both – one slid from her grip and fell into the boat though.

“Oh, what are these?” she asked, turning to show one to Navayi and Uminah.

“You should not eat that right now,” advised Navayi, earnestly projecting his palm at her.



“What’s in it?” asked Uminah, as Uminu handed the other one to him. He just held it in the air, with an invisible limb, and didn’t stop inspecting its texture and colors.

“The Yuremtes are going to the 690<sup>th</sup> observance of a famous love festival called ‘The Pagorumu Circle’, which explores and celebrates all of the sensual expressions of the divine, and which is as sultry as it is purging.”

“Is it an orgy then?” inquired Uminu, loving the idea of a sultry festival.

“You might call it that, but all the pleasure is expressed between immaterial beings, and all is done to the glory of the Supreme Architect,” said Navayi, steering them away from the swarm finally, and proceeding to lower their altitude some more.

Uminah was still engrossed in making sense of the unfamiliar fruit – orange in color, with irregular, but faint stripes of white upon its skin.

“But you haven’t answered my other question. And then, where do these fruits come from Navayi?”

“Unlike food for mere mortals, the kinds of nourishment here are very different – I trust you expect that. Certain kinds of spiritual nourishment that have found their expression in such forms as the one you are now holding. The so-called ‘Forbidden Trees’, such as the ‘Tree of Knowledge’ and ‘The Tree of Arcane Delights’ are but examples. However, the fruit you have been given, is a kind grown in a garden by a very industrious archdaemon called ‘Ominire’.”

“That’s a cool name for a daemon!” exclaimed Uminu, hugging her fruit fervently.

“And in that case,” said Uminah, pushing the fruit further away, but not surrendering it, “this ought to be tasted with caution.”

“It’s delightful, and I’ve tasted them before,” said Navayi, not wanting to ruin their anticipation, “just don’t taste it before work, or you’ll lurk in stupefying bliss for longer than you might wish at the moment. Also, I don’t want to have to explain to Umtol, how I let that slip past my attention.”

All three of them laughed, knowing that Umtol was indeed very strict, and that he always insisted on rectitude of them.

“Later then,” admitted Uminu, putting the bulbous fruit down.

\* \* \* \* \*

Uminu, looking out into the distance, and observing pulsating brilliance in the clouds they were headed towards, noted, "Looks like we are headed for a very bad storm!"

Navayi pointed towards their left, just as they were starting to make another change of course.

"That's where we are stopping, but what you see in the distance aren't storms actually. You will soon see..."

"Are those pyramids?" asked Uminah, interrupting their guide before he could even finish.

Uminu saw them too, and cried with joy, "Oh my! They are so cute!"

"Welcome to the lands of the Cwezi, my dears," exclaimed Navayi, as he accelerated their progress, the excitement finally eating at him as well.

"They are floating on water!" observed Uminah.

"They are actually deeper than they look, and are anchored to a vast city below," said Navayi, correcting him.

"An underground city?" asked Uminah, very excited.

"Much of the floating island is a city, but besides the pyramids protruding out of the waters, most of the residents and activity takes place below."

"Wow, such perfection! What are those lights? See the ones rising up into the air?"

The pyramids – and admirably lots of them, sat like buoys upon the water, with no peers. Apart from these, there was no visible land, and yet everywhere else was just water! It was the most stunning sight anywhere. Furthermore, the water, which spread out in all directions, culminated in discontinuities marked by waterfalls everywhere. You could think of it like what the ancients believed the Earth to be like – flat, and with a vast sea terminating in endless waterfalls all around the edge of the world! That's how this spectacular metropolis was built; just floating about in space. The water flowing over the edges, didn't merely flow down indefinitely, but somehow, and mysteriously so, vapourised about a mile or so below the edge, so that the entire thing seemed akin to a floating sea, seated atop a gigantic cloud!

The said city, a vast network of ulterior halls, laboratories, temples, ritual sites, libraries, homes and much more, wasn't possible to detect by merely studying the surface of the region – all you could see from the surface were the pyramids and the water. Each pyramid – some of which were based on triangles, others on quadrangles and still others on other regular polygons, had its base deep in the water, attached to one or more entry tunnels into the submerged city.

At the other end of each of these pyramids – their vertices, were columns of brilliant, pulsating light like columns of fire or persistent lightning bolts, rising high above the pyramid regardless of its height, and into the empty skies above. All these fiery columns terminated at the same height moreover, and each described a coil at the very top, which coil was made of the same luminescent energy as that in the the column below. The entire formation of columns and their uniform coils, illuminated the waters and the entire atmosphere, and caused Uminu to refer to the lands as “The Real Kitara”, to which Navayi responded, “That’s amazing intuition! Indeed, it’s from this particular empire, that the whole of heaven obtains its name.”

Along the visible base of each pyramid were drawn, in distinct font, and in brilliant light against a black background, various hieroglyphs, most of which were spelt using sigil-like letters. It was a very telling sight.

“So unlike the Egyptian pyramids,” said Uminah, trying to compare these architectural marvels before them, to those built by the ancient African elite.

“Uminah, would you have even thought that the Cwezi could build such phenomenal things? I mean, this looks too advanced.” It was Uminu sharing her mind.

Navayi offered them a more realistic explanation;

“By the way, don't forget, this isn't the physical plane. That being said, indeed, these are a much more advanced kind than their ancient predecessors. It's what happens with evolution, and the results are what you are now looking at.”

As they approached one of the pyramids – the biggest one, or so it seemed, he pointed to a large and prominent glyph on its exterior. The glyph was a single huge Anhk.

“You now know where we are, right?”

“Perhaps.”

“Yes, it’s hard to doubt anymore.”

They finally came to a stop before the immense pyramid, whose exterior was painted in black-gold, and whose forming blocks were interlocked by light or a flow of some other luminescent energy.

Just as they were preparing to disembark, Uminah morphed into his humanoid self. Uminu, taking note of this sudden change in his looks, smiled and showed him the thumbs up. His assumed persona was a very close replica of Ignatius Irumba, though he wore the form with embellishments that Ignatius would never have had access to, and he looked very smart.

A door formed on the face of the pyramid before them, as though it were a hologram. Uminah stepped out first, followed by Uminu, and then their guide, Navayi. They all climbed onto a draw-bridge hovering over the water, and which had automatically protracted towards them, just as they’d approached the pyramid. Navayi, taking small, hesitant strides, stopped for a while, and then just looked on as the two jubilant souls walked into the pyramid ahead of him. He opened his arms wide, and nodding as he looked at them without their awareness, exclaimed:

“You are the New Cwezi! Welcome.”

A laser probed all three of them, as they walked in. It was mandatory protocol – cross-checking the spirit-signature of each entrant against a universal database called “The Akasha”. Not all pyramids were allowed access to just about anyone, and some places in the metropolis were strictly off-bounds to beings below certain levels of advancement. Luckily, all three had already been cleared, and so they walked on without any confrontation or hustle.

In the brilliance of the pyramid’s exquisite interior, Uminu and Uminah really looked striking – yes, even Uminu had further altered her looks. She’d weaved a headdress of cream and black, with delicate bits of red laced in. She wore a plain necklace of silver, and the same dress she’d worn on the boat. She wore wooden heels whose straps were made of creeping plant twine, and which had fresh, black leaves that matched her headdress!

“Hmm, my dear, you look fresh and organic!” joked Uminah, to which Uminu just responded with a wink, and then smiled with pride as she continued to walk on.

“I don’t even know where we are headed, but I just love this place!” so she remarked, noticing that they’d abandoned their guide already!

“Oh Navayi! Sorry, we are just too excited about this place!” she shouted to their guide, who was approaching them slowly, as though he enjoyed seeing them enthralled.

“It’s very okay with me. I love the energy you have.”

Uminah, being a bit more conservative and reserved, had chosen an outfit that might have been easy to miss, but which was nevertheless right for the meeting; a plain and dapper half-kanzu of white, with three laconic lines in black, sewed over the chest. Under that, he wore black pants made of opulent cotton, and then wore simple black sandals. Simple but neat. The most telling, and obviously exotic touch to his look, was the choice of his hair color; blue, with a hint of red near the edges. “That’s on point!” Uminu had commented in reaction to his chosen look.

They came to the end of the empty anteroom, and a single wall with a single door stood before them. The two stood in front of a sign that required of them to wait: “Wait. Inspection in progress,” the blinking sign read, in bold red letters that seemed to hover over the wall – it wasn’t a screen. A stern voice repeated the same message to them, from seemingly nowhere.

“Please step forward, one at a time.” Commanded a robotoid voice that seemed to emerge from nowhere except the door. Uminah was the first to step forward, and he wondered if yet another scan was to be done.

“Are you Uminah Monohih, the anima of human subject Iganitus Irumba?” asked the detached voice, to Uminah.

“Yes, it’s me.”

“Welcome Uminah. Please go on and enter...”

The door automatically opened before him, revealing a big and busy room on the other side, which, like the anteroom, had immaculate white walls, but which was bustling with activity unlike it. He stepped through, and behind him, the door closed itself once more.

Uminu was the next one to approach the door. Navayi had caught up with her, but told her to go first.

“Are you Uminu Ficc, the animus of human subject Ignatius Irumba?”

“Sure, it’s me ma’am,” she replied, faking an attitude that made Navayi grin behind her.

“Welcome Uminu. Please go on and enter...”

The door did open, and she stepped through to join Uminah who was reluctant to venture further without them.

Navayi approached the door, and the invisible sentinel turned to him, sounding more virile than it had been while talking to the other two.

“Navayi MBC, guide of these aspiring astralnauts?”

“On orders of the angels, Umtol and Wonem.”

“Assigned to Them?”

“Yes.”

“Sure, they are expecting you and them already. Enjoy your stay my dear.”

“Thanks. Could you please let them know we are here?”

“No need to, they are already waiting for you in the lobby area.”

“Good.”

The door opened, and he joined his two waiting tourists.

The lobby, which is the immense room into which they’d just walked, had various exits and entrances beside the one they had just used. Unlike the other people in the lobby, the new entrants clearly stood out as different, or rather, alien. There was a resident standing not far from where they’d entered, and when Uminu walked into the lobby, this man waved and smiled at her, likewise causing others to turn their attention to them. Uminu, being the bold and expressive lady she is, bowed a little, and then waved back at him. “I’m glad to be here,” she told herself.

Uminah asked of Navayi to explain why there were no signs of occupancy on the outside, yet there was so much activity going on in the room they were standing inside of.

“There are many ways to enter this pyramid, as with other parts of the city. But, for visitors, there’s just this one route we can use to get in initially, and this was it.”

“So, are these all natives here?”

“Yes, most of them are. But, there are other routes in and out of there, most of which are underground like I already told you. And so, folks here are mostly either waiting for someone, something or are on their way to some place. This is like the metro station.”

The two tourists nodded as they studied the activities going on in their vicinity, while waiting to see any signs of their hosts.

They did not actually have to wait for long. Soon, Umtol and Wonem emerged from an elevator, and started walking towards them. Despite there being lots of folks and activity going on, identifying who and where the visitors were, was quite simple for them. The two visitors and their guide visibly stood-out when compared to the meticulously dressed, but near-homogenous natives, most of whom were either dark chocolate or fair skinned, and who wore pastel colors that didn't contrast much with the immaculate white atmosphere of the room. Navayi, their guide, who was only partially Cwezi – was a hybrid with a race called the Bavilli, and who in the corporeal world had close ties with races around the “Great Kongo”.

Umtol stood high, possessed white horns, a winged humanoid form, and was draped in white, even though his body was a pale, but clean gray. Wonem, the daimon walking with him, looked exquisitely erotic; so much, that she had the ability to startle the mostly stoic Cwezi natives. Like many other angels, she'd picked her persona after that of an Arch, and hers was Lilith.

Dressed in a margaritaceous latex top-dress that had a slightly exaggerated cleavage, it was hard to miss her too. She wore a metallic belt adorned with rich rubies and emeralds, and which complemented the long-neck collars of her dress – which were metallic as well. The dress was definitely brief, and she was keen on emphasizing her shapely form – it added to the rest of her allure quite effectively. She wore boots made of bone, and these were skillfully designed at the base so they seemed like they'd been splattered with blood. She was undoubtedly deviant, but to those who knew her, it was just another day, and another projection of a dark temptress.

“She's beautiful,” Uminah remarked to Uminu, who was waving at their hosts, believing they weren't seeing them yet.

“Wonem?” asked Navayi, also equally astonished.

“Yes, her.”

Uminu turned to check Navayi, forgetting he'd been there with them all the while. She noticed something she might have missed all along?

*Navayi had eyes all along! Or has he been merely hiding them?*

But Umtol read her reaction from the distance, and helped answer before Navayi even could, “He was in meditation all along, and it's why they call him ‘The Priestly Navigator’.”

Navayi realised they were talking about him, and he grinned in a queer way, after which he assured the concerned Uminu, “Good enough, despite having eyes closed, I was able to deliver you safely, right?”

Uminu grinned back at him, not believing that it was even possible.

However, she'd come to accept that their guide was something else entirely; she admitted, and turned back to their newly arrived colleagues.

Soon as they reached them, Uminu ran straight for Wonem, and hugged her with so much zeal.

“We've been missing you soo much!” she told her.

“I doubt it. The journey is much more exciting than hanging out here with us.”

“Yep, it was so much fun, so many strange and weird things.”

Uminah and Umtol shook hands, and Navayi approached Umtol and gave him a light hug.

“Navayi is a remarkable guide,” affirmed Uminah as he took his turn to hug Wonem.

“I'm glad you liked it,” said Navayi, blushing a bit.

“So, my role's done here, right?” asked Navayi, turning to both Umtol and Wonem.

“Thanks very much, we can take charge of these two now. We'll be going to the monastery,” said Umtol, pointing out the way for the two visitors. They were to use the same elevator from whence the two angels had come. “That'll be the best place to proceed from,” he added.

Navayi didn't follow them, he stayed standing with Umtol and Wonem, as the other two walked towards the elevator.

“You took longer than we expected?” said Umtol to him.

“They were a delightful bunch to take around. They wanted to see more, but I figured there wasn't much time.”



“They are new to this place indeed. But thanks for helping once again. So how much do we owe you?”

“Oh, not really! I just love doing it, every time I have a chance to.”

“No. We owe you and must settle this.”

He reached into a pocket on his robe, and pulled out a small vial. Soon as Navayi saw it, he extended his hands frantically, looking very expectant. Umtol opened the vial, tipped it over, and a few drops fell onto Navayi's palm, after which he cupped it, and quickly brought it to his stomach.

“Much appreciated!” he said to Umtol.

“No problem. We'll be meeting yet again...”

“Will I have to wait for them? Are they going out soon?”

“No. We'll see to their return some other way,” replied Umtol, waving goodbye to the priestly navigator after giving him yet another hug.

Navayi waved to the crew of four, and then walked off to another one of the elevators where he got engaged in a noisy conversation with someone that'd been standing there and possibly waiting for him all along. As they laughed hilariously and exchanged funny gestures, Umtol and his team entered the elevator and started the journey to their next destination.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Welcome, my dears!” cried Wonem, hugging with passion, both Uminah and Uminu at the same time. The door of the elevator closed before them, and they weren't the only ones aboard. There were two other beings in there, natives.

Wonem noticed that Uminu's attention was focused on skin exposed by one of the other passengers in the elevator with them – the native that is. Later, after they'd disembarked from the elevator, she laughed and told her, “Forget their skins! It's not real.”

“Really? It didn't look so real indeed, but then, nothing here is actually “real”.” All, but Umtol laughed at that remark.

“Well, some things around here are more real than others. I trust Navayi showed you this on your journey.”

“Talking of real, we failed to manipulate him or his creations,” said Uminah.

“Sometimes, you just have to sit back and let a better artist do the painting,” replied Umtol as he returned to them after inspecting one of the available transportation pods waiting on the tracks.

“That one,” he said, “is the one that’ll take us.”

He started for it, and the others followed behind him. Upon reaching the pod, he pressed a button, and then spoke to the pod, “The Monastery, track 9, cubicle 13.”

There was a short pause, and then the pod’s on-board system responded; “Address confirmed. Please get on-board.”

They stepped into the pod, and all sat down – there were exactly six seats, facing each other. Uminah sat directly opposite Wonem, and she winked at him, as he took his seat. Umtol and Uminu sat next to each other, on Wonem’s side, facing vacant seats instead. The door closed, the lights went off, and for the next few seconds, the pod wheezed through a maglev-like network of passageways, finally coming to a halt, right outside the entry into the said “cubicle”.

The oval door opened for them, leading into a very opulent, but austere interior, in which the only visible art anywhere, was a single, huge sigil – a pentagon, embossed onto the ceiling, right over the centre of the room. After all had walked out of the pod, its doors closed, and once all were inside the room, even that of the room closed, automatically.

“Welcome to the monastery of Chaos,” announced Wonem, as she stepped into the room ahead of all the others.

There was no one else in the room, and there didn’t seem to be doors leading elsewhere, and neither were there windows on the walls. For some reason, it seemed like the choicest cell of an eclectic ascetic, but it probably wasn’t.

There was no furniture within sight, nothing really welcoming, but as they stood there waiting, Umtol walked over to one side of the room, and spoke to the wall, after which, the diffuse light in the cubicle, turned from an ambient white, to a magical octarine hue. And then, a platform of divine proportions – its dimensions on all sides employed the golden ratio, rose from beneath the floor, to a similarly hallowed height of exactly .972 meters above the floor. Accompanying the altar-like platform, smaller, but likewise protruding from the floor, were cubical seats; four of them, one for each of the four cardinal directions about it.

“Is it an altar?” whispered Uminu to Uminah, who was standing next to him, also watching as the room got transformed.  
“I don’t know, but its geometry does hint at nothing else but that.”  
They kept silent again and waited to see what was going to happen next.

Umtol walked over to one of the small seats, and proceeded to sit down, facing the large and vacant altar-like thing before them. Following his example, Wonem assumed the closest seat to her as well, and then the other two did likewise, all four of them, facing the thing. Uminah sat opposite Wonem, while Uminu sat on the other side of the platform, facing Umtol. *Essential Balance*.

The special cubicle in which they were, was located inside an area right below the pyramid called ‘The Monastery’. The cubicle itself, was 9 meters long, 14.56 meters wide and its floor was located exactly 72 meters below the illuminated tip of the pyramid. Its walls were plain white, though under the octarine light, took on a different aspect. The floor was checkered and tiled with black and white – not unlike a temple of mysteries. There were a number of other cubicles like it in the area, but “Cubicle 13 at the Monastery”, was especially reserved for certain initiatory and invocational work. Typically, any external beings seeking to work inside those chambers would have to pay for the space, if at all they would even be allowed, but being who they were, Umtol and Wonem had secured it for the event, at no price moreover.

Because of their expertise in crafting sacred spaces and their mastery of sacred geometry, many from across the multi-verse, ventured to Kitara, to work some special rituals from there. The Monastery was a special destination in that regard, and for a while, Umtol lectured Uminu and Uminah about the special importance of the place, the ritual they were about to perform, as well as the significance of it all – including the impact it would have on Ignatius Irumba, of whom they were the essence.

After his lecture, all, including Wonem, acknowledged the relevance of the rite, and expressed their willingness to proceed.

“Let the Work begin...”

# Chapter XIX

“I offer myself to you,” started Umtol, as he held Uminu’s hands in his, facing her, and both of them kneeling on one side of the altar. The other two, Wonem and Uminah, likewise knelt before each other, palms interlocked, on the other side of the sacred altar. Wonem, unsurprisingly, looked more lustful than anyone else in the room!

“I offer myself to you,” replied Uminu, her eyes wide open, looking straight into those of the angel. They proceeded in synchrony, Wonem speaking when Umtol spoke, and Uminah responding at the same time as Uminu – each, to their partner.

“I don’t wish to deplete you, but instead, to procreate with you.” The other responded, “I too, don’t wish to take from you, but instead, to add to you.”

“I am your fire,” said Umtol to Uminu.

“I am your air,” she replied.

“I am your earth,” said Wonem to Uminah.

“I am your water,” he replied.

They all looked each other in the eyes; one hand went behind the other’s neck, the other to their chest. Already, the energy in the room was starting to surge, and things were happening... Wonem, as did Umtol, declared with deep sincerity to their partner; “I love you, as I love who I Am.”

“I love you too, as I love who I Am”, they replied.

“Be my sacrament,” they all proclaimed.

“Let us make a child in our image; after our likeness; and let them become for us, an instrument to evolve further.”

Uminu replied, “So mote it be.” The others did likewise, and the act begun.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before the ritual could proceed, the rules were made clear: the work had to be done in the nude. Indeed, starting with Umtol, followed by Wonem and then their two sprouting accomplices, all stripped naked, robes, headgear and shoes all vanishing in the process. For the ladies though, Wonem and Uminah, parting with their body jewellery seemed unacceptable – none removed it, despite the rest of their body being in the buff.

Then, facing each other – in pairs that is, they performed the declaration thus; the first person would place the palm of their right hand upon the crown of the other person's head, and while looking them into the eyes, would declare:

“I desire to dwell with the God in you.”

The other person would then stretch out their right hand as well, place it upon the naked chest of the other, so it rests over their heart, and then would respond with certitude:

“I am God that speaks, and I welcome you to dwell with me.”

When this was done, the roles would change, and the other would then repeat the declaration, their hand atop their partner, and the same declaration and response would be performed. This, both pairs performed in sync.

After the declaration, the ladies got onto the altar, laying with their backs upon its solid and bare top; knees arched and facing up, legs spread before their partner, and all their focus on nothing else but the single brilliant glyph on the ceiling above them.

Umtol reached under the altar and retrieved a vial of sacred oil. On the other side of the altar, Uminah did the same. The entire ritual was well known to all – Umtol had shared the formula with them all, and so each knew what the next phase was, “raising the serpent.”

*“Yuku senog. Yuku senog. Yuku senog. Yuku senog. Yuku...”*

Wonem and Uminu remained mostly silent, while Umtol and his colleague Uminah, busied themselves with the invocation, while simultaneously engaging the bodies of their partners below. Hovering over them, they invoked, occasionally stopping to bend and kiss an energy spot on the body of the one below them, after which the chanting would proceed, while the focus turned to yet another energy spot. Amidst all this, their hands got busier, as the special oil from each one's vial got smeared all over the body of their partner, each pass of the hand accompanied by mostly muffled moans from those experiencing this. Steadily, the touches got more rousing, as did the reciprocated movements of those upon the altar. All was progressing well, and according to plan.

The intent of this part of the ritual was to build rapport, increase the energy available for manipulation, and prepare for the more creative work soon to follow. Indeed, and sooner, the serpents rose, and music started to fill the air.

Wonem sighed, and Uminu cried, both were well relieved. The light in the room seemed to flicker or pulsate – the atmosphere was all electrified, and a tiny spark anywhere in the room might have set them all on fire. Umtol knelt between his mate's legs, her body playing to his every suggestion like a shadow to its body. Slowly, in the most sensual manner, she led him into the palace. Not far from them, Wonem didn't even wait for her young conductor to give the signal, she merely obtruded towards him, and virtually swallowed him into her yearning chambers.

Slow but piquant, each movement done as to the tick of some tardy clock, the spirits united, and shared in that mysterious communion, with love, pleasure and a yearning so profound, time slowed down as well. There was no breathing – they didn't have to, but something akin was taking place; in spirit, they used every other moment, to draw into themselves more and more of that creative flame, drawing unrestrainedly from the cloud of power surging in the room. There was no need to speak, just the need to experience without corruption, the presence of the divine in each other.

Some time during the operation, and still based on the formula, positions had to be changed; the ones below, stayed below, but their feet and knees

lowered, and were then tucked between their mate's – who then had their knees on either side of their mate's thighs. The grip tightened, the heads bowed, and the seeds would soon fuse. When the consummation reached its peak, the fusion of opposites having taken place, everything seemed to freeze to a solid halt – for a while, as the divine spark in each fused with the other's, and as their visualizations became nearly animate, their intent assumed a life of its own.

Two spirit beings, or rather egregores, were thus made manifest, in an operation that required not just love and bliss, but steady and razor-sharp focus, in order to execute it with perfection. For humans in flesh, the operation could have been easily corrupted by diversions and the impurities of operating in matter, but not for the incorporeal four. But, not just for this operation had they convened, the ritual was still progressing.

Umtol held Uminu's face in his two hands, kissed her lightly on the forehead and then looked deep into her eyes, after which he proclaimed:

“My love, we, have made it, and it is beautiful.”

After saying this, he turned his gaze into the air above them, and saw what had become of their work. Wonem and her partner likewise kissed, and they too gazed at the palpable beauty flowing above them.

\* \* \* \* \*

The orbs of light stayed suspended in the air above the altar, as all four participants retreated to their seats, looking on as the miracle unfolded before their eyes. Between Umtol and his mate Uminu, a cherub was forming. Between Wonem and her mate Uminah, a djinn was forming. All admired the results of their work, which, unlike human conception, advanced at a much more terrific rate. Already, the limbs and key features of both children were visible, and their essence was quickly crystalizing into distinct forms. Umtol smiled, looking across the altar at Uminah, who was so starstruck, he didn't realize Wonem was talking to the other two about him, using gestures. He'd never seen anything like it, and furthermore, witnessing it, right after that peak action, nearly rendered him stoned.

Umtol broke his gaze as he stood, after which he declared to all three: "It is time then. Let us make the sacrifice."

All nodded in agreement, and then stood up to join him as well. Umtol walked over to Uminu, and Uminah walked to where Wonem stood. Standing at right angles to each other, they then performed "The Crossing"; Umtol stretched out his right arm, and his partner extended her left over his, so that they touched, and crossed each other at right angles. Also, the palm of one below had to face up, while that of the arm above faced down. Echoing their actions, Wonem and Uminah, on the other side of the altar, did likewise.

Then, all, speaking in unison, chanted the mantra:

*I am ready to sacrifice that which I have obtained via my own sweat and love.*

*I am ready to stake all at the crossroads, for you.*

*May the night marry the day, and may destruction marry creation.*

*Upon this cross, I sacrifice my all to you, so you might take what's gross, and transmute it into the gold I desire.*

And with those words said, slowly at first, and then furiously fast, the crucifixes formed with their arms became incandescent, as though their arms had been set on fire by an invisible match to a fuel within. Besides the arms, the rest of their still-naked bodies stayed the same, and all merely looked on, no sign of pain being expressed by any – there was none to feel.

After a while, Umtol signaled for the arms to be separated. When they did this – both pairs that is, the light in their arms started to fade as soon as the arms had come apart. But as their arms "cooled", something even more amazing replaced the gesture now withdrawn; hanging in the air unaided, right where each pair had been expressing the crucifix, was steadily formed a real crucifix, only it was made of nothing but hot, brilliant light.

Umtol grabbed their cross, and placed it upon the altar, right below where their cherub baby hovered. Wonem grabbed theirs as well and placed it under the floating djinn. Then, following after them, while their partners held onto the crucifixes, Uminu and Uminah, using both hands,



pulled down the little creatures, as though through a viscous fluid, and then pinned them onto the fiery crucifixes waiting below. Uminu shed a tear as this happened, seeing as theirs looked so beautiful and innocent. Though it had not been stated, she knew without doubt, these weren't like kids meant to be kept or grown; rather, with all their beauty and innocence, they were nothing but propitiatory objects – things born to be sacrificed. *A mere means to an end.*

Then, stepping away from the altar, all four assumed their former seats. It was part of the ritual – as the creations got consummated by the powers made manifest, their parents looked on, meditating about the entire operation, and what it meant for each one of them. Meanwhile, the two spirit children lay down, facing an infinite progression of alternating pentalphas above the altar. They wriggled and screamed dreadfully, but nothing could ease them from their fate. Even without nails or chains to hold them down, they couldn't escape once they'd been bound to the fervent sigils below them.

Soon, the altar was awash with flames – the entire space below the star glyphs having become ablaze like a furnace. While flames jutted into the air, the forms of the two egregores got transfigured, so much, so that they soon became indistinct and just fused with the flames rising up to the stars. While all this happened, the entire room got filled with a brilliant sun-like light, which could have blinded the eyes of mortals, had there been any. It seemed as though the space above the altar had been suddenly flung open, and as though a sun had been invoked to consume the spirits being sacrificed below.

Maybe it was... the four ritualists, each touched by the light and its power differently, shouted and hailed as they saw fit. The core of their chants was similar though –

*Epatiziydo Piguru! Piguru!*  
*Epatiziydo Piguru! Piguru!*  
*Epatiziydo Piguru...*

None were seated anymore, and it was clear, the energy permeated them all. Uminu was even levitating! Wonem cried and laughed, while Umtol slowly spun round and round, his arms rising and falling as he continued to chant. The flames on the altar eventually ceased, nothing of the

sacrifice or the crucifixes left behind – but the brilliance above the altar didn't stop, and neither did the chanting.

As their asynchronous and ecstatic chanting continued, there emerged in the room, two, extra, but totally harmonious voices, none of which were theirs. The two new voices, singing melodiously and merrily, slowly signalled to the four, that theirs could subside. Uminah was the first to hear them, and soon as the song hit him, he went silent, and fell to his knees exhausted but delighted. The others soon followed suit, their gesture indicating that they were acknowledging the result of their work – the two voices represented the two sacrifices that had just been made, and the song being sung, indicated that the sacrifice had been accepted, and that transmutation was happening. To get that acknowledgement was all they'd been hoping for, and all four got filled with joy at the sound of clear victory.

As the song, originating from a realm that they couldn't directly interface with, diffused into the room, they closed their eyes, listening, and submitting to the transforming power that was being ushered in by those voices, and which was already doing work inside each one of them. It was not just the song they had experience of; apart from the ethereal melodies, there was a beautiful scent, likewise diffusing into the room, and with their eyes closed, its beauty could be seen and its touch felt.

The sentiments of all four could easily be told, when Wonem, leading them all, proclaimed with great emotion and vigor:

*I have created both life and death.  
I have sired a child, and made of it a god.  
Thus, as you have risen into unity with the  
Infinite, Absolute, Mysterious and Unknowable,  
So I, one with you, are one with It.  
I AM U.  
Nomu, Nomu, Nomu!*

After this, as the experience progressed, Umtol climbed onto the altar, and the others followed after him. All four held hands, forming a closed ring of sorts. Their eyes were raised to the starry things above – which weren't as bright as before, but which were nevertheless ablaze. The light

flowed into their opened eyes, sinking deep into their being. Then all spoke at once, each in a language unlike that of the others:

*Grant that we may dedicate and devote our existence, in service to you, the divine mystery in us. And that we may be faithful to each other, as we are one body.*

*We are evolving, more endowed with thine own wisdom and power, so the divine mystery, previously dormant in us, may unfold and be useful to us as a body, for the manifestation of the glory and honor of Thy Holy and Mysterious Name.*

This prayer caused all of them to be lifted off the surface of the altar, and into the air above it. They didn't let go of each other's hands though. This went on for a long while, the transformation continuing to manifest inside of each one of them. The angel became more capable of illuminating the dark; the daemon more capable of obscuring false light; the anima, capable of creating with light, and the animus, capable of sublime discernment, under the new light. Together, the being of Ignatius had thus been transmuted, through both darkness and light.

The rite concluded, when all – not just the four spirits, but everything in the room, became silent and calm once more. The light above them had finally departed, and all singing and sound gone dead. Likewise, there was no smoke, and neither was there any hints of ethereal or burning scents. The party of four was gently lowered back onto the altar, and with this omen, it was clear, their operation had finally come to an end. Their hands parted, and when they surveyed the room, nothing but the altar and their abandoned seats could hint at what had been taking place!

“Congratulations!” Umtol said, walking over to Wonem to hug her; Uminah and Uminu hugged as well.

“This was amazing, but difficult!” said Uminah, as he turned to hug and congratulate Umtol as well.

“I can still feel it...” said Wonem, raising her hands into the air while closing her eyes – still enjoying the experience!

Uminu looked up at the innocent glyph, and with a smile on her face, murmured, "So, that's what the mystery is made of..."  
"Yes," Umtol replied, "it is the whole of it, inside those five sides and vertices."

Umtol alighted from the altar, and then headed straight for the wall – to the same spot as earlier on; he uttered a command to the wall, and the lights changed back to their original state. Once the other three stepped down from the altar, it too receded into the floor, and the four cubical seats followed suit.

"So!" started Uminu, as her body magically assumed its clothes once more – not unlike what everyone else was doing, "where do we go from here?"

Umtol looked at Wonem, as though she would have a better answer than him.

"Before we return to Earth?" asked Uminah, unsure there was anything left to be done besides returning home.

"I know just where we should go," said Wonem, her sensual persona fully restored.

"There you go!" shouted Umtol, turning to Uminu with a she-knows-better look on his face.

"Alright then," said Uminu, "we should leave this place. I just can't wait to return..."

"We'll be there before you even notice. But first, let's go to 'that place?'"

"Called 'Owom,'" concluded Wonem, as she waved to the door before them, so they could exit the ritual chamber at last.

Upon mention of that name, Umtol complained while shaking his head from end-to-end; "Don't tell me we are riding a Yituru-turu!"

"Oh, you mean we are going to 'The Pagorumu Circle?'" asked Uminu, very excited, recalling the strange lizards that the Yuremte had been riding to the said festival.

"That seems like it," replied Wonem, "but since Umtol is lazy, we shall just be there in no time, uneventfully so."

"I just don't see the necessity for all the pomp," he replied.

"Alright, alright. Let's go then..." said Wonem, as the door of the pod closed, and the lights went off.

They were leaving Cubicle 13 behind, and everyone seemed to be excited about their next destination; no one sat, they just remained standing, holding onto the overhead handle bars, as the levitating pod cruised through the tunnels at terrific speeds. They were returned to the lobby where their first meeting had occurred, and from there, exited the Cwezi empire, not by boat this time, but inside of a projection sphere that Wonem made for them once outside of the pyramid.

Their arrival at the festival wasn't "broadcasted"; they arrived silently, and uneventfully as Wonem had warned. Upon arrival though, they found their way to the festival grounds, which were bustling with lifeforms of all kind. They went on to mix and indulge in the myriad activities on exhibit.

The festival, one of its kind in the whole of Kitara, attracted spiritual beings of all kinds and temperaments. It was like the spiritual equivalent of a Mardi Gras. However, the four jubilant spirits did not stay long, before embarking on their journey back home... They projected through *Okuzimu* with ease, and Nyamiyonga was brought several gifts from the festival, the remainder of which they took with them back to Earth, where someone would eventually receive them.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke up, unsure it was not sleep paralysis that was preventing me from moving a limb. I waited for a while, unsure what I was going through, nor where I was. Slowly by slowly, my mind started to clear up. There was something pinching me from below my back. I tried again to raise my chest and sit, but still felt weak. Instead, I heaved a bit towards the right, so as to prevent the thing below my back from hurting me any further. And then, as I tried to turn, likewise attempting to raise my arm, it hit me that I was trapped!

In fact, that realisation quickly awoke me properly, and I immediately began to recall what had led me into that dark and constraining casket. I was still fastened, but to my amusement, when I started to think about it, while tossing about in the little space available, I felt one of the knots snap, and that was the first good omen I got.

Soon, I was busy undoing and breaking them all, having realized that my captors had bound me using nothing else but banana fibres! I wondered; *How come I couldn't initially escape from these bonds?* Soon, the answer came to me; they'd been initially soaked in water, so that, making ropes with them made it hard to break them. But now that they were dry, even a little effort could undo most of them. *Finally free!*

However, breaking free of the ropes wasn't the real problem; I recalled that I had been buried alive! *Oh damn! Just why didn't I die? I didn't die!*

I was still trapped in the grave though, and when I pushed open the lid of the coffin, to see or hear if there might be anyone waiting to save me, I was greeted by an ominous darkness, utter silence, and the disagreeable odour of the grave. I pried about in the dark, but all I could feel was lots of bones, hides and other things I could not identify. It felt like waking up inside of a ruined morgue. *Not pleasant at all!*

"Hello! Hello there! Anyone? Please help me out of here!" I shouted and pleaded for nearly five minutes, before concluding it was either night and all were asleep, or I was too buried to be heard.

*And what if they really meant to kill you?*

*Or stash you until the time for a meal arrived?*

*Hell no! This is family. Just go on, kick someone out of bed...*

*Mmm, interesting.*

I was having fun listening to all the ideas cropping up in my head. It felt like waking up from a dream, and then having those immaterial conversations pour over into waking life. I could counteract them, but couldn't escape nor halt them entirely. Rather, they seemed to be talking independently of me! And then, for some reason or other, I eventually felt I could trust and love them – and unknown to me at that moment, I was going to stay that way, forever!

*How do I do that?*

*You can just 'fly' there. But, note that moving in the mind won't necessarily move your body. All the same, go on and fly out of here. You need to get out.*

*Can I do that?*

*Why not? Just close the eyes, imagine where you wish to be – outside the grave, right? Then enter one of those huts, and kick someone out of sleep!*

*Nice idea, not sure I can do it though.*

*Damn, you need to realize...*

“Yes!” I exclaimed, as I realised that actually closing my eyes and imagining to float out of that sombre trap was not impossible after all. When I tried it the first time, I mostly saw the dark, and didn't seem to be able to emerge from it – not unlike the deep grave in which I dwelt. But, with advice from within, I did it differently the second time – increasing my speed of ascent, and coupling that with the determination to see the outside. It was exciting and so unlike what I knew of day-dreaming or imagination. It wasn't as though I was just imagining these things, I felt that I was actually rising in the air, even though I remained fully aware of my physical body, which was still trapped in the grave! I felt so happy, and didn't know what to make of it all.

*What's happened to me?*

*Slowly, and over time.*

*What?*

*You'll come to grips with your new found self.*

*It's amazing!*

*Sure. But don't get too excited too quickly. Go ask Trudy to seek some help. It's time to start living!*

*Was I dead? Am I alive or dead?*

*Does it matter? No one would believe you anyway, but you have risen back from the dead...*

*No, I don't believe it either.*

*You don't have to. Not now, and probably it won't matter anyway...*

I was hovering above the shrine, looking down at the compound with all its huts neatly arranged in semi-circles to form some sort of enclosed compound. I had not been to Trudy's hut before, but just felt I knew which one it was, and I was right. She shared the hut with her grandmother, but had her own room, accessible via the tiny sitting room adjoining both bedrooms.

She was sleeping on top of the bed, curled up, and the pillow thrown to one side of the bed instead. She wore the same nightdress she had won the night before, and the sight of it brought back more memories of what exactly had been taking place during the last 72 hours. I hovered over her bed, unsure she'd really hear me if I tried to speak. *Will she feel me if I try touching her?* It seemed I was only capable of moving through things, but not moving, grasping or touching them in anyway.

*"Hey! Hello!"*

Nothing. She was not disturbed at all.

*It's not working. What do I do? How do I do it?*

*You are speaking to yourself? No! Imagine you were actually present – physically, then speak out loud, just as you would.*

*"Trudy? Trudy my dear... wake up please!"*

*No, I doubt this works.*

*Get closer, and imagine you are inside her head, inside her mind. Then try again and see.*



I could hear her breathing, and I even tried stroking her hair, but I couldn't pull it off. I entered her head, and had a megaphone with me – rude; I just wanted to try and see!

*“HELLOOOOO TRUDY!!! WAKE UP WAKE UP WAKE UP!!!”*

*Oh damn! It works!*

*Hehehe you'll adapt to this.*

She kicked and hastily turned, almost falling off the bed given she was sleeping right near the edge.

“Grandma?” she asked in a low voice, thinking her grandmother had woken up earlier than normal.

*“Hey! You won't believe it, but it's me...”*

She turned her head, unsure where the voice was originating from. She stood and walked towards the door. She listened against the door, and there were just the sounds of the night outside, nothing more.

“Who are you?” she asked, realising it must not be Nyamaizi encroaching on her sleep.

“It's me, Ignatius...”

A hand went to her lips, as she couldn't believe it.

“Is that really you Ignatius?” she asked, sounding very skeptical.

“Oh yes. You guys buried me, but for some reason, I'm not dying.”

“Oh my God! I should tell the others immediately! How long have you been like this?”

“I just woke up. Maybe half an hour ago?” I wasn't sure of the time myself.

“How did you know where I am?”

“Heeheeheehe...”

“Seriously! I still can't believe you. Are you out of the chamber as well?”

“The ropes broke, I opened the lid, only to find myself hostage to whomever else you guys have buried in there. I just couldn't stay longer, so I came to seek help. Can you guys pull me out now, or is this damn ritual still going on? Or was I meant to be dead for real!!”

“No! It's nothing like that.” She paused, looking for the right words perhaps. “Listen, you probably understand now, or soon will. But there

was nothing like intention to kill you. Actually, the first person to make contact with you, is supposed to alert the others. We need to get you out, now!”

She opened the door, and ran to the other side, literally breaking into her grandmother's room. I followed from above, enjoying the moment.

“You almost knocked into me!” shouted her grandmother, who unsurprisingly, was not asleep yet.

“It's Irumba! He's awake!” she said, unable to keep her excitement low.

The grandmother didn't share in her ebullience though; “Being awake is not important, is he walking?”

“What the heck is she talking about? Walking,” I wondered.

“He's here right now, Grandma! He's been talking to me!”

“I can't hear him speak. Are you here Irumba?” she asked, looking around in the air, and then returning her attention to a basket she was sewing under the light of her kerosene lamp.

“You can do better than talk actually.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“She wouldn't regard speech to be that important. Make her jump!”

“Hehehe, how?”

“Watch what we are going to do...”

“He might need to stay down there for another day or two if I'm not mistaken.”

“Grandma, really? That's not fair!”

The old woman paused in her work, and looked up at her puzzled granddaughter.

“I've told you before, don't let your feelings get to your head, or interfere with the work. Maybe you have been dreaming too much... it's getting late actually, and so we ought to sleep.”

“But...”

“No. Until he's really ready, we can't get him out.”

She stood up, and placed the basket she'd been working on under a table next to the window. Trudy stayed there standing, vexed and wanting to do something. I could see that she was busy thinking.

“Ignatius?” she called out to me, desperately.

I didn't answer, we were onto something.

The grandmother laughed silently, as she prepared to jump into her bed.

“Ignatius? Please speak to us!” she pleaded once more.

“Good night Abwooli. Please turn that light off as you leave...” and then the old woman slipped under the covers, holding a quartz dream stone in her left hand.

*Let them sleep.*

I did as such, and waited. Trudy blew out the light, and then sneaked back into her room, shutting the door with frustration, alone in the dark. She didn't sleep, but stayed sitting on the edge of her bed, possibly still thinking about whether she'd successfully fooled herself, or whether it was something real. We had an answer for them both, and it was rather warm...

About ten minutes after getting under the covers, I went into her grandmother's room, and upon the suggestion of my friends, did something she wouldn't have expected at all; the lamp went back on, just like that. That didn't wake her up, but she wasn't the only one to give an answer to. I returned to Trudy's room, and she was still tossing thoughts about. We turned her light on as well, and for her case, the queer event instantly sent the message home. There were seven other huts, some of them shrines, and one in which Thon was fast asleep. Every lamp, every candle, each fire-place in the homestead, was soon lit!

“Oh shit! That's the sign!” exclaimed Trudy, as she jumped off the bed, and ran into the sitting room, sure as hell, she was going to find something similar there. And she'd probably heard us, perhaps.

“Grandma! Wake up and see! He's given us a sign!”

The grandmother woke up jeering and cursing, but when she saw Trudy standing there with that bewildered look, and the whole hut washed in light, she thought the girl might be going nuts... *Is she trying to burn the house down?*

“Why light the lamp so high? That naked flame could burn things!”

“But it wasn't me Grandma! It's happened like this, even in my room, and the sitting room as well!”

A cow moored, and the disquiet from the outside caused them to pause for a while.

“That's a fire in the kitchen!” screamed Nyamaizi, jumping out of her bed, and running barefoot past Trudy, towards the exit door.

Trudy followed from behind, after turning low the lamp in both the old lady's room, as well as that in the sitting room.

When they ran outside, they were greeted by the light emerging from the kitchen, a ritual fireplace in the center of the compound and the sound of Thon running out of his hut, claiming he'd turned in bed, only to find his candle alight! It was such a delight watching the chaos we'd caused.

The old woman immediately ordered them to make it to Nyamiyonga's shrine, "Now!" she said, leading the way into the shrine that wasn't supposed to be opened until perhaps the next day.

I was feeling excited, but also had used much energy, I felt tired. I returned to my grave, and waited in the shadows, as the lid of the pit was drawn open, and a voice called out to me.

"Ignatius? Is it you?"

It was Trudy asking.

"Please get me out of here. This place is disgusting, and if you delay, something will be burning terribly out there soon!"

She laughed, and asked Thon to help as the three of them turned the wheels.

At last.

*Yeah, we've made it!*

\* \* \* \* \*

That night, after I had been declared 'resurrected and truly initiated', Nyamaizi ordered Thon to go wake Ninka, her entire family, their neighbours, and whoever else could make it to the event. It was approaching eleven O'clock in the night, but soon, the compound was bathed in light as though day had come all too early.

A large fire was setup in the middle of the compound, and for the men, seats were arranged in circles around pots in which *kwete* was being

warmed for all to enjoy. I was taken to the goat's kraal, and was tasked to identify a goat that would 'satisfy my spirits'. There were about thirty goats in there, and with the light of the lamp shining upon them, most of them looked sinister – the eyes! I pointed to one medium-sized goat, "I think that'll be the one."

I was amused when Thon claimed it was the 'barren one'; it looked healthy and fertile to me, and my recently acquired *inner friends* didn't think it a bad choice either.

I slaughtered the goat myself – something we argued about for over a minute before Nyamaizi came to me with another old man, and they assured me it was required of me to do so, and that it was a critical part of the ceremony. It was the first time I'd ever slaughtered anything bigger than fowl! The only other help I got was from Thon, who'd offered to help tie the goat to a post so it wouldn't disturb me during the slaughter. I watched as the blood flowed from where I'd cut, and into a large clay bowl below.

"So," I asked Thon when we were alone, "will this blood be served raw like last time?"

He laughed so hard, he even pounced me in the back.

"Hell no! This is going to be cooked just about now, and will be served with food later."

I would soon establish, that a second goat was likewise slaughtered. *This is such a big deal then!* I was somewhat overwhelmed at how quick these folks could arrange for and execute such an elaborate ceremony! *Moreover, in the night...*

What had seemed like the remotest village had suddenly turned into the liveliest place to be!

"Okay. I was just concerned, you know. I'm kind of new to all this stuff..."

"No worries. You are now way ahead of many of us."

"Really?"

He laughed and before we could chat more, someone called him away. I went on, slaughtering the damn thing on my own! Thon did return later, and he found me nearly ruining the meat – I wasn't good with the skinning, and so he helped me do it properly.

Once the slaughtering was done, I was relieved of my duties, only to be summoned a little while later, as I was the one supposed to lead the meat-roasting activity. I was handed a very generous skewer with five gigantic chunks of meat. The rest of the meat was divided more finely, so each person present could have something to roast with me. The roasting itself took place at a large fire that had been skillfully setup inside of a dugout hole – so we could roast with indirect heat mostly.

There were drums of many kinds to accompany the event; long ones, small ones, and two fat ones. It wasn't just the drums though, someone had brought a tube fiddle with them – it was a Lugbara man, and he was very skilled at playing the soothing instrument, everyone lauded him, and we all enjoyed the fiddle-drum ensemble. The ladies clapped and sang till late, as everyone feasted on the meat and *kwete*. There were mostly adults, and teenagers, but I saw at least two kids loiter about as well – despite the late hour at which the event had been commissioned. The local folks were a very merry lot. In fact, I even saw some woman, a pregnant one at that, seated among a bunch of old men, conversing very loudly, while enjoying the hot alcoholic *kwete* with them!

At the peak of the event, I was summoned into a large circle, bounded on all sides by everyone that had come to the abrupt event – I'd asked of Trudy, why they had to do the ceremony at night, and not wait for the sun the next day, but all she told me was, "It's the tradition. Once you emerge from the grave, there can't be any more waiting."

Standing in that circle, surrounded by mostly strange people – I could only recognise about five of them – Trudy had introduced me to a friend of hers just before the circle thing, all the others were total strangers to me. I felt shy, thinking someone might ask me to dance or give a speech?

*This isn't school, and neither is it grad,* I was reassured.

A drum was brought into the center of the circle, and I was given a small club with which I was to hit on the said drum, three times after each of the following activities were performed:

First, some old woman, who introduced herself as "Lazio", held a necklace made of beads, which she brought and wrapped around my

neck, twisting it round and round, until when it fit me without sagging too much. After this, she declared that I had become a true '*Mbandwa*'.

Next, Ninka walked over to me, and asking for my left arm, dressed a large, metallic amulet around it. It had inscriptions and primitive-like drawings of snakes upon it. She said to me, "That will keep you protected, especially against bad charms." It felt heavy on my hand, but I wouldn't remove it.

Another man, dressed in true shaman attire, complete with feathers and bones, walked over to me, and he held in his hands a small gourd. He asked me what my name was, and after that, he declared to all present, that I was to find my Cwezi patron and that he was to give me his own name.

"Should we make him a brother among us?" he asked all present, to which all replied, "Yes indeed!" The women were clapping and ululating loudly. The drummers, in addition to the tube-fiddle player, had been joined by someone blowing a horn. It was late at night, but the barbaric village was all too awake.

"Alright then! But first, he should know who the patrons are, and what each is capable of."

"Yes, tell us grandpa!" all present shouted, very excited.

"Kagoro?" he asked loudly. "Yes!" the people responded.

He went on to recount the powers of that Cwezi divinity, and what his 'demands' were.

"He gives knowledge of the black arts, the more troublesome ones. You shall be able to kill without having to meet your enemies, as all you need is something of theirs, or their real names. You shall be able to turn other people' black magic back to them, even where the target wasn't you. You shall be able to awaken the dead at night, and task them to till or tend the animals or some other task you fancy. You shall never forget a thing, especially what has been spoken, and the names of those you have met."

People shouted and clapped, some murmuring amongst themselves. The shaman then went on:

“However, Kagoro demands that you must eat of another, whether they be dead or alive, at least once a year. That’s how you manage to keep other people’s black magic at bay, as the dead can’t be bewitched once alive. But never touch of thy brother or sister’s skin, rather, you might surrender your gifts.”

The man on the long drum beat it so furiously, after that declaration, I wondered if he was for or against that bizarre requirement.

“You must never cry at a burial, even if it were your wife or mother that had passed on. You must keep a skull in your home at all times, and if you can’t get that, ensure to keep that of a cow that didn’t die of illness. If it be a cow’s skull, don’t remove the horns please.”

A woman jumped into the circle momentarily, carrying a cow’s skull upon her head, as the others cheered on, and shouts and screaming were added. The shaman wasn’t done with *Kagoro* meanwhile...

“Never to taste both of a woman’s lips at the same time, or you should put her into comma. You must remember the names of all who have fallen by your hands, so you might bind and keep them subdued at all times.”

The last one really caused me to fear choosing Kagoro for a patron:

“You will die a terrible death, and when its time comes, not even magic will be able to stop it. Someone else will have to inherit your patron at that point.”

The shaman then poured out of some bag, bones and stones, onto the ground, after which he moved on to the next patron.

“Kyomya?” he asked loudly. “Yes!” the people responded. He went on to recount the powers of that Cwezi divinity, and what his demands were.

“He will teach you how to control rain at will. How to stop or make it rain. You shall be able to cause suffering upon entire villages with draught or be able to bless those kind to you with abundant rain. You shall be able to curse gardens as well as entire herds of cattle and goats.”



Someone shouted “No!!!” but the shaman went on:

“You shall be able to treat many, otherwise mysterious diseases, as well as be able to cause them in others. You shall be able to give children to the barren women, without sleeping with them. Those children might be either too wise, or too stupid though.”

People laughed, and the horn was blown even louder. He then told of the requirements of Kyomya:

“You must offer sacrifices of fresh cow fat, or ghee, if you can't get the fat. These offertories must be conducted atop hills, or in places he directs you to work from, and the sacrifices must be made at least once each month.”

The fire was dwindling, and Thon moved into the circle to blow and add more firewood.

“You must make sure that the rain you cause, never touches your skin or you may momentarily fall ill or even go unconscious for a while! Only move when the rain goes down, or under some cover of sorts. Never sleep with a woman that keeps her pots sooty and dry, and also you must learn to keep water in the pots of each woman that hosts you.”

The ladies whistled and laughed hysterically. I knew he'd touched on a special matter there.

“He likes that you eat meat that's been smoked, and never to eat freshly slaughtered meat.”

Someone danced about with a stick of roast meat, and another grabbed it and pulled off a piece, causing confusion and much laughter. The shaman picked out more stuff, and poured it onto the ground, so it intermixed with the other sortilege stuff he'd cast before. He then moved on to the next Cwezi...

“Mugasha?” he asked loudly. “Yes!” the people responded.

“He gives knowledge of leadership and controlling any subjects assigned to you. You shall not only be able to lead, but also confuse entire villages when allowed to even utter a single word to someone in that village.”

That caused laughter, and I laughed as well. It was a hilarious gift to possess. He went on...

“You shall be able to steal anything, from anywhere, without ever getting caught.”

Someone shouted, “Subairi!” and the others laughed loudly, causing the old shaman to pause for a while. Then order returned, and he went on.

“When you meet people grazing, you shall be able to summon their cattle to follow you, even from a great distance. And these animals will never return to their former owners, unless you abandon them.”

Then he spoke of the requirements:

“You must rear no less than two heads of cattle in your homestead at any one moment, or Mugasha will deem you unworthy of his comforts. You must drink fresh milk each morning, or risk going through a day of drudgery and ill-fortune. Eat meat at least once a week, even if it means stealing it from those with just a little.”

*Mugasha seems much like a fattening deity*, one of my voices joked. I smiled, and then listened as the last requirement was said:

“You must abstain from sex as much as you can. If you must fail to keep distance from women, resort to using the hands and feet to give them company. Keep all else for Mugasha, and you shall be rewarded much more.”

An old woman laughed, while pointing at some dude not far from where she stood. I wondered if the man suffered that last, unfortunate demand.

“Wamara?” he asked loudly. “Yes!” the people responded, a man jumped up and down, before bumping into Trudy, who slapped him promptly, much to the amusement of all present. The man was visibly drunk, but that wouldn't stop the show.

“Wamara can help you change shapes into that of any other person you know. You can detect and counter the magic of others as well. He gives great knowledge of other people’s cultures and their beliefs, and if you want to, he can teach you the magic of any tribe. He shall make people you meet become friendly and welcoming, and you would never be homeless.”

I felt like that was a nice patron to have, however, he hadn’t read the requirements yet. I listened very carefully...

“He loves polygamous men, and if you have multiple wives, you should keep their homes next to yours. When any of your wives cooks for you, she must never utter a curse or jeer while cooking, or she will soon fall ill.”

The men cheered the most...

“If any of your wives cheats, she must return and confess within a day, or the man she cheated with would soon suffer a mysterious illness that might even cause his death.”

More shouts and cheering.

“Don’t eat any human flesh that’s been dead for more than a day.”

*Now that’s a weird one.* I laughed loudly, and the shaman grinned too.

“Mulindwa?” he asked loudly. “Yes!” the people responded.

“He will help you to foretell future events with much accuracy. You shall be able to speak with most animals, without even using words or gestures.”

A goat bleated, as though in acknowledgement of the said power, and that made all of us laugh.

“You shall be able to cause people to fail to wake up from sleep, and they can’t even be awakened with water or beating, until you lift the spell. You

shall likewise be able to cause others to fail to sleep, for days, weeks or even months. The person might die from lack of sleep.”

*He controls dreams and the sleep faculties*, a voice consummated to me. The shaman then read the requirements:

“You must never eat chicken, but only use them to gather stones for use in divination, or use their feathers, eggs and feet in making charms, not meals. Never let your dogs or animals eat the entrails of chicken you have used to divine, or they will suffer terribly. He prefers that you rear and eat goats, instead of cattle. He loves goats. Also, he likes when you eat raw coffee beans, and if you must take roasted coffee, don't drink, but chew it. He will easily be close by then.”

That did not seem to cause much hullabaloo, but then he made further demands apparent:

“If you have the chance, always try to bathe outdoor while it is raining, as the rains will carry with them much information and secrets for you, from all the lands the waters arose from.”

I nodded in acknowledgement, as that seemed like such a nice idea.

“Eat your herbs raw, and rarely use smoke. He will teach you about these special herbs himself, and you must not share this knowledge with others against his will.”

Herbs.

The drumming was subsiding; possibly, folks wanted to return to the roasting and brew, but Nyamaizi called out to the drummers; to “put energy into the music!” Life returned once more, and the shaman read Ndahura's gifts loudly:

“Ndahura will bless you with much knowledge of all natural sciences and the secrets of the gods and spirits. You shall be able to cause fires spontaneously, and at will. You shall possess knowledge and the ability to walk, run or float in the air, and you shall also be able to easily do the same in your dreams. He shall make the sun your friend, and you shall

never be at loss of ideas or solutions, while the sun shines upon the Earth.”

Wow! I loved that one, so much.

“You must keep a fire burning in the home every night, without fail, even if that means keeping just one piece of burning charcoal till morning. You must occasionally drink juice from the roots of the acacia tree, at least once a week. Don't have sex while the moon is absent from the skies, and if possible, abstain from sex all-together, as this will help you keep your powers vibrant.”

A man ululated and clapped fervently, while most of the others cheered on in lower tones.

“Eat as much raw fruits and raw food as possible, and don't avoid raw blood or meat either.”

He poured out the last contents of his bag, and put his arms straight into the air, proclaiming, “May the Cwezi guide and inspire you. Now, draw your circle, and let's see which patron you pick.”

I picked a small stick, and started to draw a circle, but then someone pointed at what I was doing, and the shaman looked down at me. “No! Not like that,” he complained, making me stop just after I'd started drawing an arc in the ground.

He drew a circle in the air, with his index finger (of the right arm), and with eyes closed. He then opened his eyes, and told me, “Close the eyes, draw with your hands or index finger. Also, draw there,” and he pointed at the scattered things on the ground.

“Understood,” I replied, and then I did as he'd indicated. Everyone was silent, and only the wind, birds and crickets seemed to cheer me. I was shaking literally, so afraid I might pick the wrong patron.

“Stop!” the shaman declared, causing me to open the eyes and look at what I'd drawn. It wasn't anything like a perfect circle, more like an oval, and the closing arc had already gone past the starting point.

He indicated to Ninka to bring a light, and many more drew nearer, as he read the bones, stones, sticks and many other things scattered on the ground. When the light finally approached, he consulted the drawing I'd made, and then declared...

"Ndahura!" he shouted, very jubilant and causing everyone around to shout the name as I was lifted off the ground by two men, and was taken around the compound, with others dancing, clapping and screaming with joy. I too was happy with the outcomes of that reading.

*That was a very neat choice! Possibly the best...*

I was very happy, and when they put me down again, Trudy came running to me, and hugged me. She gave me a quick peck, after which she told me boldly, "I'm so proud of you, my dear!" She hugged me once more, and then let go of me, as the same shaman called on everyone to return to the circle. The circle was made around us – I and he, and he asked me to stand with my arms stretched on either side.

"With this Ojwangi," he declared, pouring oil of that tree onto my forehead, "I affirm that indeed, you are one of us, and that Ndahura, who has chosen you himself, will see to your growth and protection, within this family."

All applauded, and as this went on, he dipped fingers in the gourd, and applied more of the oil to my armpits, and then between my thighs and finally onto my heels and palms.

Nyamaizi then approached us, holding a short staff made of bone. As she handed the staff to me, she declared:

"With this staff, may you not only be able to command humans and animals, but also the elements and spirits. Become its friend, get familiar with it, give it a name, and never let it leave you on your adventures and in times of tribulations."

She then patted me on the head, kissed me on the forehead, and stepped back. After she did this, everyone present did the same, one at a time. They would walk over to me, pat me on the head, kiss me on the

forehead, some on the cheeks, and then walk on, clapping and jubilating merrily. I was so touched by the ritual, I wanted to cry.

After all this was complete, the shaman who'd been leading the ceremony, approached me, together with Thon and three other staunch men, and he assured me, "Now that you have all the tools, it's time to go for a walk."

"What kind of walk?" I asked, not sure what he meant. Thon leaned fore, and whispered into my ear, "We are going to run. It's more of a symbolic race, but one that you must win." I laughed silently at the idea of me participating in any serious sport, even running for that matter! However, I nodded in agreement, not wanting to detract from their excitement.

Thereafter, the drummers split up, and then lined up on opposite, and parallel sides, as did the rest of the group. We walked in between these two rows of happy souls, and trekked out far into the night, by about half a mile.

When all the music and jubilation faded in the distance behind us, the shaman asked us to stop, and then he asked me to hold my staff firmly.

"All of us in a line please," he said, as we lined up in profile, as athletes preparing for a race might do."

"Can this old man really participate in this race with us?" I wondered. "Ndahura, it is your night, and so, we hope we don't reach the prize before you do."

We laughed, and then he signaled for everyone to be ready. I still wasn't sure if he was likewise going to run – he wasn't in the profile with us. "The egg, the chicken, the egg, the chicken, the egg, the chicken, then go!"

First I did not know I would even be able to properly make it back without hurting my feet, because we were all barefoot, and the road hadn't been any even at all. It wasn't just the roughness of the road that made me cautious while trailing behind them all, but the uneasiness of running about in the dark as well!

“You are failing brother!” shouted Thon as I struggled to catch up with them. I was running as fast as my feet could carry me, but these men seemed like they were not just on steroids, they seemed to be running in the air!

*Running in the air?* A voice screamed in my head.

*Fuck! You are capable of doing better.*

And the idea came just when I needed it most. I was probably behind them by fifteen meters, and we were fast approaching the ceremony grounds.

Upon the suggestion, I assured myself I wasn't ready to fail, *Not on my initiation night!*

*Yeah right!*

*Let's show them vapour...*

Initially leaping, I quickly groked the technique, and then barely had to touch the ground! I tightly held the staff in my right hand, and avoiding collision with the energetic contenders, I bypassed them from the sides, after which I shot forward and ahead of them at terrific speed, one of them stopped, just to marvel at me! There was one of the men though, who seemed the most skilled, and he too ran without almost touching ground – but only after I had pulled that trick on them.

As I entered the compound once more, ahead of all the others, everyone shouted and cheered me so fervently. Others had plucked banana leaves and were waving them incessantly. The drummers had the drums off the ground and into the air, and Trudy was all jumping up and down, while pointing at me, as Ninka screamed for me to hurry before there was a chance for someone else to catchup – that other dude was nearly reaching me!

“That's the man!” shouted Nyamaizi as I fell beyond the finish line, which had been marked out using ash. The others soon followed, Thon being the second-runner up, and our old shaman coming in last - he arrived walking, no hints of him having run whatsoever.

He never needed to; never left *this* place actually!



“Now you can't be caught,” he declared, “not by police, not by night-dancers, and no lion will match that speed.” The others laughed, and someone asked, “What of the *Link* coaches?”

“No, buses can't beat our speeds, at least, not after they go past the Mubende mark,” exclaimed one of the young revelers jubilantly.

The festivities went on till late – actually, till dawn, but, by then, I was too tired, I had already retired to Thon's hut, where I found not just my clothes, but the phone as well. Before sleeping, I held the phone for a while, unsure if I should turn it on right then, or if I should ignore it, wait to return home and then face the daunting task of retelling the epic journey I'd undertaken a day before, and what had become of it.

*Where do I even start?* I had no clue, and undecided, abandoned the phone without turning it on, and then slept soundly and heavily, till about 11:00 am the next day. It was a Sunday, and since no one in the homestead was Christian – none could be, there was no call for anyone to go attend Mass, and so I really enjoyed that long awaited slumber.

I woke up eventually, asked for water to take a shower, before changing into my proper clothes, which were all creased, but which had been washed for me. Trudy came to my hut, and we had breakfast together. She told me her grandmother and some other woman had gotten her herbs that were helping her cope with the emerging pregnancy, and that she felt she could go to the clinic only later, “just as an extra precaution” she said.

I still had money with me! It had been neatly stashed inside my wallet, and not a note had been added or removed. I gave Trudy Shs50,000, leaving me with Shs17,000 – enough to take me back home. I called the same man who had brought me to Bitanga in the first place, and we met a little further away from Trudy's home this time.

I did not leave empty-handed though – it was not possible anyway. First, and obviously, I had sustained deep and profound changes to my inner self. It was difficult to explain or express these to others, except those who likewise had the same phenomena happening in their inner life – of which, only the initiated members of Nyamaizi's circle would understand. Then there were all the myriad lessons, bits of knowledge and wisdom that had been imparted to me by various people during

those two days alone. Last but not least, Nyamaizi, and Ninka, both brought me lots of food, some relics of the craft and I also carried with me everything given me in the ritual the night before. I borrowed a large travel bag from Trudy, and put all my tangible gifts therein.

Before jumping onto the bike, I hugged all who had escorted me, and upon their request, promised that I would return soon to see them.

“We have your wife with us,” claimed one of the women.

“No, we have his family with us,” clarified Nyamaizi, “and we hope you tell the good Isoke, that he has indeed found a path back to his roots.”

“How?” I asked.

Ninka and some other women smiled at the question, not wanting to say the answer, but which I nevertheless read from their looks – there was a “silent” story about my father, that I needed to uncover someday.

“There is much to share with him, but that should be another day. I hope he will understand,” said Nyamaizi, before adding, “Don’t forget though, you have married into our family already, but the bride-price is yet to be paid! We need more than cows...”

Trudy chocked while laughing at that reminder.

I bowed at them, waved, and climbing onto the motorbike, assured them, “Very certainly, the bride-price will come eventually, possibly doubled or tripled.”

Abooki, the *bodaboda* man, laughed and honked as we set off, while waving at them all.

I felt saddened that I was leaving them. It felt like I was leaving my real family, but I knew, the ones back home were probably more heartbroken than those I was leaving behind. *Except Zorean perhaps? Damn! There’s Zorean!*

Part of me felt ill-prepared as I embarked on returning home, and there was one particular reason for this: I felt, Zorean knew everything that had happened, already.

*Have no fear. There’s nothing we can’t overcome,  
Once initiated.*

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# SECTION 5: THE AFTERMATH: THE NEW CWEZI

If it wasn't for dying, I wouldn't be  
If it wasn't for introspection, I wouldn't be  
If it wasn't for the longing, I wouldn't be  
If it wasn't for the awakening, I wouldn't be  
If it wasn't for magic, I wouldn't be  
If it wasn't for the illumination-  
That occult, but ever present light  
I definitely wouldn't be.

The key has lain before our eyes all along  
But the key isn't the secret, finding the door is.

There are only a few things that define man's  
Complete life;  
When man first dreams  
When man finds true love  
When man questions himself  
When man loses himself  
And when man finally finds his True Self.

Magic  
Can bring man all these and more-  
It can bring the universe to man,  
Whether seen or unseen  
And that is,  
Or it ought to be  
The Ultimate Great Work  
That man is engaged in.

# Chapter XX

On the night of my disappearance, Dan, my big brother, having failed to reach me on phone, drunk himself into a frenzy, and then somehow, miraculously found his way back home. I was told, when he reached home, he made a lot of noise outside the house, causing everyone in the home to wake up. The little girls went to open the door for him, and the moment he was inside, he went straight for Dad's bedroom!

Already, he had been summoning Zorean to go outside, before the door had been opened for him – both Zorean and Dad had ignored him, but when the kids let him in, and when he reached their door, there was already trouble waiting for him. He proceeded to abuse Zorean, calling her names, and accusing her of having bewitched him, so that he had broken “every” taboo, and that he was forever cursed. Rael told me, that he kept shouting at her; “*Habwaki ondeteire amahano!*”

Dad, who was already furious at the unconscientious, disrespectful manner in which his drunk son had stormed the house and then their bedroom, inquired violently, what Dan really meant by his accusations and actions. His initial attack was directly against Dan, and they exchanged many bitter words, as the children and Zorean looked on in shock and awe. The argument advanced, and what had only been verbal, became effectual; they got into a physical fight, as the kids shouted and cried in horror at what was happening. All the while, Zorean was merely watching, possibly confounded or just gripped by guilt.

The fight got bloody, and Dan terribly hit my dad against a door post, after which it is said he ran into his room and locked himself inside. At that point, filled with anger and pain, Isoke turned to Zorean, and proceeded to beat her, while asking what was happening “under his roof”. Zorean pleaded innocent at first, but as the fight worsened, she shouted loudly, so even the kids and Dan in his room did hear, that dad was “not only accursed, as a result of his abandoned witchcraft”, but also, that he would “die impotent.” At the mention of that, it is said, dad swore he was going to kill her for her “witchcraft-laden-head.”

Already, the kids were greatly alarmed, and so, one of them, Yusuf, ran to Dan's room, and assured him dad was threatening to kill Mum. Moments later, Dan came out of his room wielding a panga, and he assured dad, "If anyone should kill her, it shall be me, and don't dare touch her, for she has my child." That was his worst move.

Dad attacked him once more, and in the battle, during which Dan lost control while trying to hack his own dad – he was seriously intoxicated, Dad grabbed the machete from him, and beat him with it, in the process, accidentally cutting into his scalp, in a manner that caused Dan to bleed furiously, and fall into a comma soon after. It was just madness in the house!

Dad, in utter disbelief of what had happened at his own hands, and still baffled by the revelations he couldn't come to terms with, abandoned his bleeding and unconscious son, the children and his wife, and ran into the dark of night, never to be heard of or seen again. Zorean was in tears, as were all the other children, for whom the sight of blood was greater than the horrors which their innocent minds had sustained during the originally verbal fight.

There was no neighbor close enough to have witnessed or attended to them, and I'm not sure Zorean would have bothered to deal with Dan, but the kids cried and insisted she go and seek help. Rael asked her to call my number, but when they tried it, it was off, and that caused them even more worry, as they knew Dan and me had left the house together. Zorean called a taxi from the town, and she was lucky that some of them work till late on weekends – at that time, none of our neighbors had a vehicle by the way!

The special taxi arrived a bit late, but they managed to rush Dan to Masindi Hospital, which is a district hospital, and which is the largest in the region. At that terrible hour of the night – 3:00am, while Trudy and I suffered our own perils at the hands of relentless daemons, Dan was admitted into a newly established casualty ward, unconscious, and nearly bleeding to death.

Back home, our siblings had been locked inside, the tension and blood still in the house with them. Meanwhile, Zorean tried finding out where I was, but all her attempts were futile. My phone was off, and the only

person who might have given them a clue, was in an involuntary deadlock, and she didn't think of making contact any other way. In the hospital, the only reliable person on duty assured them that, "He is not likely to recover from here, with that kind of lesion." When asked why, he assured them, the hospital was unfortunately short of qualified staff, "especially for such kinds of tricky cases", and worst of all, the 'real' doctor, who was supposed to have been on duty the whole night, had left prematurely for another emergency at his "private clinic in Kampala"! He had been gone, about two hours before they'd arrived!

Somehow though, they managed to arrest the bleeding, but didn't succeed in recalling Dan to consciousness, yet. The next day, the tragic news was the talk of town and all the villages nearby, but I wouldn't learn of any of it until my return on Sunday morning. I was still on the *bodaboda* riding back home, when we bumped into Chris Abooki, walking in the opposite direction. He saw me first, and called for us to stop. Chris, who had become more like a close friend of mine, first told me of "rumors of 'hell having broken loose on the village of Nyamigisa".

When I tried to ask what it was exactly, and where the rumors originated from, he mentioned "Isoke's home", and that's when I got to first suspect that something terrible might have happened to Zorean – I was not thinking of Dan or Dad, as I did not expect what I would later find out. But from my own battles in those dark realms earlier on, I felt, and strongly so, that whatever had happened, must have something to do with the witch in our house. I didn't disclose any of my theories or experiences to Chris, as I couldn't trust him with the information, and so I just shut up. I was definitely filled with horror, but also partially comforted by the fact that unlike any other time in my life before, I was now more prepared to confront just about anything life would throw at me. We left Chris behind – he didn't know of my association with the Isoke's, and rode on towards home with my surprisingly patient pilot.

Despite his sincerity and friendliness, I did not give him the privilege of getting any closer to knowing where I was going, nor who I really was. I wouldn't. Neither did I wish to let him know I was closely related to the rumors. And so, I abruptly stopped him a short distance from the small trading centre, paid, and dismissed him without further ado. Holding the small, but curious package of wizardry regalia that had been proffered to me from the dreaded village of Bitanga, I walked on slowly, ruminating

over a plan for how I would reach home without causing myself any trouble or raising alarm.

I became timid and resolved to evade scorn and the perils of being quizzed by the enraged talebearers everywhere, and so found my way back home, walking via people's gardens and several illicit paths. I even convinced myself I might have been somewhat "invisible", as passing through plantations and behind people's homes, somehow, no one seemed to be able to see or hear me, even though it was as bright and clear a day as none I'd known before.

When I reached home, it was the closed doors that greeted me; there was no one in sight, and the whole place reeked of trouble and desolation. I had no keys into the house, and so hid my curious lot behind the kraal, before trying Dan's number. As the phone rang, I kept hearing something convince me it wasn't Zorean in trouble, but rather Dan. However, not until I heard her voice answer hesitantly on the other end, did I realise the gravity of the matter.

"I... I'm so sorry Ignatius, but please rush and come to Masindi Hospital immediately. Please hurry, please..." and then she hang up on me.

So Zorean was alive, and Dan had not picked his phone. My heart raced, the sun seemed to have turned black, and I was getting disoriented.

*Zorean has finally done it!* My mind was not at ease, and numerous conflicting ideas buzzed therein. Then I wondered about Dad.

"Where's Dad? Where is my father?" I cried out loudly, suspecting that something wrong might have happened to him as well. I was puzzled, asking myself what to do next; pacing about the deserted homestead, while ignoring the cries of the thirsty and hungry animals still locked in their shelters. I then got the phone, and dialed Dad's number – it was right next to Dan's in the phonebook.

The apathetic auto-response was all I got, and I loathe the telecoms for it; "You have insufficient credit to complete this call. Please..." I proceeded to load airtime via mobile money, then retried Dad's number. The cold bot once more... "The telephone number you have called is currently switched-off. Please..." I hang up before it could finish its blubbering, and cursed everything in sight. I abandoned my fears and walked to our nearest neighbor to borrow a bike with which I could get to the hospital, alone.



\* \* \* \* \*

“Irumba! When did you arrive?” asked one man, seated under a coffee tree, smoking his aged pipe.

“Oh! My God Irumba! Where have you been all these years! How sad of you to come home at this hour!” It was Rwemera, a middle-aged man, and also a very close friend of Dad’s.

“I just returned,” I lied, not able to disclose anything more incriminating than that.

He approached me and hugged me, his eyes reddening as he did so.

“Terrible things have happened, my dear child!” he began, and I was praying he didn’t say what he was about to say, but he did.

“On Friday night, while the rest of us slept, a terrible fight broke out at Adyeri’s home. Unfortunately, none of us found out or learnt of it, until much later in the morning, when I had gone to fetch him, so we could go to the trading center as we’d planned the day before.”

He let go of my hand, and gestured for me to accept the small chair that one of his children brought for me. I declined the sitting, instead choosing to continue standing as I entertained his tale. He didn’t sit either, but went on speaking, his face filled with expressions of anguish and horror.

“Irumba, I reached the house, and was faced with locked doors everywhere. It must have been some time around ten in the morning, and it was hot everywhere, but the house was locked, and the cows and goats were all enraged. I rushed to one of the doors, and knocked hard, believing there ought be someone at least. Indeed, there was not just one person, but all the children were there, and they had been locked inside – that’s what they told me.”

He paused, and then went on to retell the grisly episode as it had been recounted to him by the kids, and what he later found out, after going to the hospital to check on Dan’s state.

After he told me these things, I excused myself, as I was filled with terror, but also anger, and then I begged for his old bicycle. He suggested I take a

*bodaboda* instead, but I refused the idea, claiming I had unresolved issues with my mobile money account, and so couldn't access cash to pay for it – an excuse that wasn't entirely credible. Luckily though, the man didn't push any further than that, and so he offered me the bike.

Off I went, riding in the scorching sun, as though it were some means of purging myself of the guilt I found hard to overcome; *it was I, that had sponsored all of Dan's trouble-causing poisons, and I that had further abandoned him to his mental perils and insecurities... Stop thinking!* I avoided looking at people's eyes, or listening to "hellos" as I rode down Ntuha Road, past the Kobil gas station, onto Market Street, and finally arriving outside the somewhat questionable hospital, not far from Masindi Bookshop. I was panting, and my back was all drenched in sweat, when I arrived. It also was the toughest bike trip I'd taken in a long time, and my legs hurt, as I walked into that lamentably maintained hospital.

I asked a nurse at the reception, where a patient called "Daniel or Isoke", might be. "Is he the one who's in a comma?" she asked. "Yes." I replied, very sure, "he must be the one."

"He was in room 3D, but go and check in the general ward instead."

"I don't know where the 'general ward' is. Where do I pass?"

There was another nurse, a male one, walking hurriedly with a tray upon which he carried cotton, scissors, sealed injections and a series of tiny bottles. I thought he might be a reliable one to consult.

"Should I follow him?" I asked her, suspecting he must be headed for a terrible case. "Yes," she acknowledged, and I hurried a few steps behind the speeding nurse.

When he walked into the ward, I thought he would walk me straight to Dan, but he hurried off to a woman that was yelling from pain – her legs seemed to be afflicted by some cancer or tumor of sorts. I avoided seeing more of her, and instead scanned the room for signs of my own patient.

"See Ignatius!" shouted a voice I was too familiar with. I saw them, the whole bunch, and there was another lady I didn't recognize as well. I walked over to them, still panting, and couldn't believe my brother was in such a state, just a day after we'd reunited!

"Where have you been!" asked Zorean, as I covered my mouth in shock, seeing the blood-stained bandages wrapped across Dan's head, almost

blind-folding him. And it wasn't just the head that was wounded, there were bandages on both his arms, and a small one on his leg as well! My only sister, the little Joan, was already crying when I approached, and she ran to hug me, hiding her face in my tummy as we stood there, faced with the outcomes of a tragedy I was trying hard to disown.

"It's a long story Zorean," I told her, unable to start laying bare my own tragedies and obscure victories. She shook her head, greatly moved, and tears forming in her eyes.

"It's so unfortunate my dear, but he's been like that since yesterday, and the doctor says he might not recover soon."

I looked about for signs of a doctor, but only saw that one nurse I had entered the ward with.

"Has he been operated on?" I asked, hoping something worthwhile had been attempted.

"The doctors weren't there when we came, but towards daybreak, a nurse helped fully arrest his bleeding, and then the wound was stitched and dressed by a doctor later on, but no further action has been taken, besides the drips of water and blood that he's been administered, and the medicines administered initially."

I asked Zorean about Dad, and she just kept silent. Looking into her eyes, I read the message – *I can't talk about it right now* - I adjourned my inquiries. She asked me if I had any money with me, "We have no money to pay the bills here," she indicated. I thought about it, and concluded; *regardless of the outcome, someone must pay the bills anyway.*

I inquired about the costs, and what exactly had been issued to Dan, and she did not have a proper quote. She also was not sure how long we had to stay at the hospital, "before being transferred to Mulago Hospital" as the doctor had already suggested.

I asked to privately talk to one of the doctors that later showed up, and after he explained to me the problems of their hospital, it was clear, we were losing time, and that we had to either "move north, to Gulu Hospital", or go south, to the country's largest referral hospital, Mulago.

Given Dan's state though, he suggested we try Gulu first, since it was closest. But then, "all the best brains and equipment are confined in Kampala", he declared. Kampala is about 211km away, and that didn't

seem to make sense, despite the one ambulance owned by the hospital being available at the moment. I agreed to meet the bills – I would deposit Shs500,000, and the rest would be paid later – the doc agreed.

We were assigned the available ambulance straightaway, and soon, we were on our way to Gulu. Unfortunately, as things turned out to be, while on our way – actually, just as we neared Kamdini town, Dan was declared dead! The nurse, who was with us at the back of the ambulance, after expressing signs of alarm, and continuously cross-checking her readings via the ECG, as well as the heart pulse readings, finally covered her eyes in pain, and told us the inevitable. We'd been watching her and the instruments too, and even before she made it official, it was clear, as the ECG graph somewhere went flat, immediately being accompanied by a single, continuous beep.

The nurse and her partner had really played their roles well – they had a small on-board CPR unit, and just after the signals went flat, one tried to provide artificial ventilation, as the other applied the electric shocks to his chest, in attempts to resuscitate him. But as I would later describe the event to Trudy; seated there, witnessing him die;

“For a moment, all other things seemed to fade from my vision and hearing. I was looking straight at Dan’s nearly covered body and was sure I was seeing the white sheets covering him, turn gray! It was as though a shadow was hovering over him. Seeing the shadow, I quickly turned my attention to where I expected the source of light to be – the overhead, cabin lamp. Instead, where the light should have been, I saw it – Dan’s ghost! He was looking back at me, and then he said, ‘*Look after her, and the child too*’, and then *it* vanished! Soon as it had disappeared, my attention returned to the bed upon which Dan was, and shockingly, the sheets looked as white as they had always been! At that moment, I knew without doubt, even though the nurse hadn’t yet said it, that my only brother had died right in front of me.”

It was devastating. None of us, except Zorean, doubted her – as any mother would. But she too, despite her wails and visible sorrow, finally seemed to accept what had been declared as being final. I sat next to her, holding her, both of us driven into deep tears as the nurses, in their “programmed” fashion, urged us to be strong.

\* \* \* \* \*

We returned to the hospital in Masindi. A postmortem was done, the police had come, and statements had been given – even the kids back home were quizzed, and one thing was for certain; wherever Dad was, if he even dared show up anywhere on a road, he would either be lynched by mobs, or the constables would have him beaten and on his way to Luzira, pretty quickly. No one, not even I, knew of his whereabouts. The police interrogator had asked me repeatedly where I'd been the night the fateful events had happened, and I kept repeating the same statement: "I arrived home that morning, having taken the first bus from Kampala, on my way from Makerere University."

"What had you been doing in Kampala?"

"Sir, I've been away from my family since I joined campus, and as school was finally done, I eagerly returned home, only to find abominable news."

One of the officers, a lady whose uniform badge read "Opolot A.", saved me the misery of having to sit through the dry interrogations, when she indicated to the man that I'd already "been through enough".

I was asked, concerning where I suspected my father to be, and all I could tell them was:

"I've never known my dad to be a man who runs away from responsibility. So, I don't even know where he could hide now."

The officers interrogated Zorean some more, and eventually, we were allowed to go to the mortuary and take Dan's body home. Before leaving though, I had to withdraw money and make the said initial installment. But, as our patient had passed away, in a death I could only consider to be *nosocomial*, I pleaded with the doctor to let them halve the fee, and so we paid less for the gone soul.

*Why spend on a man who's already dead?* I kept the answer to myself.

The villagers literally gathered at our home. After receiving a call from Trudy, who had called asking about my safe return back home, I shared with her the tragic news – she was too shocked, and audibly shared in my pain. When I later saw them walk into our house – she had come with her grandmother and Ninka, I not only felt consoled and a bit of my

strength restored, I also knew that whatever needed to be done to see to Dan's safe exit, was going to be properly done.

I only introduced Trudy to a few people; Zorean, and some of my uncles and aunties present. But she took it upon herself to introduce her entire team to them – without disclosing any of the more sensitive bonds that held us together. She knew Zorean or so it seemed, and I could see them exchange questionable looks every once in a while. Later though, I begged her to suspend the fury until when “we have a better forum from which to handle the hanging issue of my ‘embattled step-mum.” She was kind enough to listen, and the rest of the ceremony progressed smoothly, as though there weren't night-dancers, witches, rumor-mongers and enemies at the burial with us!

\* \* \* \* \*

The burial proper, took place the following day at exactly 14:25, and as we cast gravel, flowers and soil into that grave, and as the women wailed loudly, myself sandwiched between Trudy and Joan, I could not help but recall a not-so-different path, down which I had recently been.

*But you resurrected!*

*I didn't die perhaps...*

*No, he died for the wrong reasons.*

*We both died because of a woman.*

*Yet, here you are, standing right next to yours!*

*Shut up please! We are burying my brother here...*

I did not hear again from them – for the next couple of hours. Without a doubt, I was thankful – not just for Trudy, the girl who'd almost caused me a similar fate, but for her entire troupe of magicians and their spirits, who'd taken me into the depths of Sheol and back – stronger and better than before I had!

As we placed the final lid on him, and as the priest – a Catholic, said those last prayers, speaking of a “better life”, that is “awaiting him on the other side”, I knew I had found me a new life as well; a new family, much better than my biological one in many regards, even though it was too barbaric and very occult. I knew, I had found not just solace and power, but more meaning for having to stay alive.

I said my own prayers for Dan, not entirely trusting that the priest could really see to his safe voyage past Nyamiyonga’s *Okuzimu*. Trudy, Nyamaizi and Ninka did likewise – and we knew exactly what we were doing. Plus, there was the threat of cannibals and malignant sorcery – yes, at burials of that sort, I had come to learn that stranger things could happen. We lingered around the grave a bit longer than the others, and when the chance presented itself, the four of us joined hands, and summoned Nyamiyonga to see to Dan’s safe trip across those tricky depths.

*He will make it, but after a while.*

\* \* \* \* \*

That evening, as we sat outside the house, around one of the campfires that had been alight since the night before, Trudy asked me if it wasn’t “the right time”. I was holding her hand in mine, and was looking at Zorean move about the home, attending to guests and relatives. Part of me felt bitter, another felt remorse and yet some part of me had much sympathy and even a little admiration for her.

“Wait a little,” I told her, wondering how we would begin confronting her.

*What if she isn’t the real architect of all this? What if, I’m really the one to blame? Where’s Dad for God’s sake!* I was genuinely bothered.

“Forgive yourself Igni,” Trudy whispered, undoubtedly eavesdropping on some of my internal dialogue.

“It’s hard Trudy. I just can’t seem to be able forgive myself...”

“It’s not your fault at all. Think of all the possible ways death could befall someone, and all of us have to die at some point anyway. But it’s always at the hands of something or someone, even when the cause is Enkya ya Enkya himself.”

“I know.”

“Then let go, and let’s face what’s left to be faced...”

I would later learn, from my inner teachers, concerning the ‘proper’ ways of dealing with the dead and loss in general:

*A failure to adequately deal with emotion, or the loss of someone or something you were emotionally bonded to, will often have negative consequences on you instead.*

*But grief doesn't have to be projected onto other minds outside of oneself, for it to be effective. A lack of such external symptoms of grief, as well as the lack of grief entirely, is natural and healthy – if it's not merely suppressed that is.*

*As any healthy human, you are naturally resilient, so that sometime after loss, you should naturally return to normal. Loss and death are a part of life remember, even when it happens by your hands!*

*Crying is a normal and natural part of grieving; it purges. But if forced or excessive, can be harmful, and spiritually, it can prevent the necessary detachment between you and the lost thing or person – and uncontrolled, this could drag you into death or further loss, without you knowing it.*

*The real human survives physical death in one way or another, and you, who is still alive, can leverage spiritual links with such freed men – no matter how remote the links are, and so, you can either pass a favor or obtain one from them. It is possible, and they are often willing to help or commune.*

And so, with time, I learnt to let go indeed, and look forward to better things. One of those, was to find out what had become of my dad, as the sudden loss of both him and Dan wasn’t the kind I could just reason off or overcome with mere positive mysticism. I shared my concerns with Trudy, and she advised I talk with her grandmother about it as well.

“What does your heart say?” she had asked me.

“Nothing I can rely on,” I responded.



“Then listen more carefully, or walk off to a silent place, calm your mind and listen again.”

It was during those silent moments, having walked into the bedroom we'd always shared with Dan, that I got the lectures that caused me to reconsider my stance on the matter. When I walked back outside, Trudy called me, and she told me Zorean and her grandmother were waiting for me, “near the acacia tree.”

\* \* \* \* \*

I trembled as I walked in the shadows, to where they were waiting. To someone watching – and I kept thinking someone might be watching, we should have seemed like we were plotting something even more sinister. Except we weren't. Nyamaizi, that old, and wise witch, had seen to it that the three of us “talk the things that really matter at the moment.” Of those important matters, the first on the agenda was “witchcraft.”

“I personally know Isoke,” started Nyamaizi. “I've spent most of my life in this area, and so know nearly everyone worth knowing, especially those who either practised or still practise the craft.”

She went on, “I first saw him when he was young and still one of his father's favorites. Just like Irumba here.” Both Zorean and the wizard turned to look at me, and it made me a bit uneasy.

“He was initiated into these arts at a later stage of his life, having been lucky to have a grandfather and mother who were themselves initiates, and very good ones at that. But when he got his first wife, that woman ruined everything for him. She coerced him to convert to Christianity, and in the process, led him to abandon the wealth of wisdom and power that he had inherited from many generations before. This didn't go well with his grandfather and mother, and for the greater ancestors with whom he'd parted ways, it was even worse. The vows had been broken, and so he carried a curse.”

Zorean nodded politely.

“Your mother,” Nyamaizi said, turning to me once more, “suffered a mysterious death, and you were very young to know what had happened exactly. I also doubt you have ever been told about it.”

"I know a bit about it, but please share," I said, eager to hear more of the tale.

"You will find out how she died, if you succeed in contacting her. But all I can say is, she was the first victim of that curse."

The chills ran down my body uncontrollably, and even my teeth chattered. Both heard me.

"No, the curse has been lifted for you," said Nyamaizi, responding to my unvoiced reaction to the ominous threat.

"How?" Zorean asked.

She spilled the beans... "He's been initiated already."

"Really? When did this happen?"

"Over the weekend, right Irumba?"

"Yes. Friday through Saturday," I confirmed.

Zorean was silent, but I knew she was fully aware of it, even though remotely so.

"We initiated him, and not because I knew of his father's story, no. Actually, until when I started doing the work, I didn't even know he was related to Isoke at all. I wouldn't have believed it if he had merely told me, but there was something about him. My daughter. No, my granddaughter, Abwooli, she's the one who brought him to us."

I wanted to look at Zorean's reaction to that, but avoided the temptation. I let the old woman proceed – she had paused as well, perhaps to see if anyone might have a question thus far, but we all merely listened.

"The MaxiDozi will definitely need him more than us – we are just village shamans, and he's not just a shaman, but a highly learned young man, with much potential ahead of him, not just in witchcraft, but all the things he has studied and more. But, that's a matter for another day. What I wish to say is, the curse that had afflicted his father and mother, and maybe the entire family tree, has been lifted by his willingness to restore the family's position as the keepers of The Great Mystery. We are Banyoro, don't you forget that. And if you didn't know, that means we are free men and women. Children of The Sun, Kitara Wenka. Not bound by anything on the earth, and if we wish to, not even bound by anything in the spirit realms, besides Enkya ya Enkya himself."

New wisdom and ancient wisdom imparted; the lesson sank-in deeply, as I could readily relate with her sentiments – she possessed a *different*, special kind of light. She wasn't done though...

“You, Byabasaijja Nondi Zorean. I know we’ve not met before, but maybe we’ve just not met in person.” Zorean wasn’t looking at her, but the shadows playing on the ground between us.

I knew the witch had started on a very exciting and sensitive leg of the subject, and so I forced myself to listen even more...

“I thank you for having kept the work alive, even though I don’t know to which lineage you belong. I have experienced some of your magic when I first met this boy.”

Zorean was shier than I’d expected. She was playing with her left big toe, drawing tiny circles as her cover got busted too.

“You are older than these children, and I regard you with the same respect I would give to another senior of our work. I know you are capable of much, but I only beg of you one thing; now that you have a child, and especially since Irumba here likewise has a child with my granddaughter, that you become for them, a supportive and loving elder.”

*You shouldn't have told her please!!!*

But she did, and knowing she was my grandmother-in-law, didn’t want to portray fear, or weakness before her at all. So, I looked up at Zorean, seeking her acceptance of what had just been said, but Zorean’s gaze wasn’t leaving the ground any time yet. But then, she also had something to say...

“It’s totally fine with me.”

We stayed quiet for a while. I was trying much, to read her thoughts, but she was adept at shutting me out, just as the old witch was.

*Maybe someday I shall crack in...*

*[Stop your games Ignatius]*

I looked towards her again and was shocked to find her looking straight at me.

*Was that you Zorean?*

*[Let's be done with this. I only ask that you forgive me for what happened please.]*

Nyamaizi was merely gazing at us, saying nothing. But I knew that she could listen and hear all that was being exchanged between us, even though not a word was being uttered. I loved that moment more than any I'd ever shared with my step-mum.

*I have no qualms against you, as long as you promise to not try anything evil against me, my little sister or cousins.*

*[I'm not evil my dear.]*

*You attacked us.*

*[I was just furious.]*

*Why were you after me?*

*[At that time, I didn't believe the oracles that said I had conceived, and so, part of me was still seeking a solution.]*

*And I was the solution? Why not Dad or some other men?*

*[It's complicated.]*

At that last response from Zorean, she interjected, verbally so: "She, likewise, was under a spell."

*[True. And I'd already tried several men, until when I was led to your father.]*

It was such a tremendous amount of information to swallow in one go, I took a deep breath, looked around for anyone that might be watching or listening to our silent conversations, and there didn't seem to be any. I returned my attention to the two great witches, amazed at what I was learning from both.

*I forgive you Zorean. I have no further reason to hold a grudge against you. But, what really happened to my father then?*

*[I've tried to contact him, but it seems, he's gone somewhere my methods can't reach; I can't contact him anymore or he did something, I don't know!]*

There was a long streak of silence, and then Nyamaizi offered a solution I was reluctant to take, but which I could not find any meaningful reactions to. She did not speak either, just sent the message to both of us...

*"If my experience counsels me right, I know that any initiate, no matter how distant they go from the work, especially those who are born-again into our mysteries, can't readily suffer another death. Most will merely vanish, if their lives are not taken by their own hands that is."*

*So, what are you suggesting then? That he has gone for good?*

*[Personally, I wouldn't think he was merely hiding – I would sense him still, just like I've been sensing you ever since you left this place years back. But, now that I can't even faintly feel him, I think she's right.]*

*It will take me time to accept this...*

*[I totally relate]*

“You must let go,” concluded Nyamaizi, after which, she walked ahead of us, as we all returned to the rest of the group. Things were getting better... and merrier by the moment, given that free alcohol, food and music from BBS were already replacing the sombre state that had lurked over the home the entire day. It was kinda obvious; my dad had several close friends at the local FM station.

I did not tell Trudy about the things we'd silently discussed, until about a year later. Also, though it wasn't openly stated, I was the likely heir to my father.

On the day of the burial, they returned to Bitanga late in the night – I suggested they stay and travel in the morning, but the old woman laughed and said, “We can't really fly out in the morning. The authorities wouldn't let us get away with it.” I stayed with that joke for the rest of the night, and when I finally retired to sleep – the compound abandoned to village hooligans and drunkards shouting obscenities, I smiled, when the thought crossed my mind:

*Seriously, think of what you would be missing, or imagine what could have happened, should you not have been initiated!*

# Chapter XXI

Approximately one year later, the tears we had shed were totally wiped away, and joy had replaced most of our sorrows. Zorean bore her child a few weeks before ours, and when Trudy's turn came, it was even more joy, as we already had confirmed she carried twins!

Delivered in a private clinic near the place we were renting in Entebbe, the arrival of the beautiful boy and girl was the greatest hallmark of the first quarter of my life. Before they were even born, we had used a queer array of techniques, to determine what their traits might be, and what names would best suit them. "Until they grow rebellious and self-aware," said my wife, concerning the names we'd given our kids.

The boy, we called "Muhesi Tahuti Akiiki", and the girl, "Nkiro Nyx Amooti". Lovely names I hoped they would not entirely discard, and whose meanings and power would stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Zorean wasn't lost for nice names either. She'd gotten a boy, whose name it was decided would be "Mugenyi Azrael", and for whom she had declined to explicitly assign *empako*, but for whom we stubbornly chose "Apuuli".

\* \* \* \* \*

It is seven years since these things took place. We get along well with Zorean, who we helped start a successful grocery store in Masindi town. She visits us every once in a while, especially to share insights about her work, or just to let Azrael spend a couple of days exploring bugs, our cats and other things in our neighborhood – playing with our twins – his favorite cousins.

Talking of our twins, they are fond of playing in the dirt, and often return home with really stunning things; Tahuti brought home a giant centipede one day, and Nyx countered the feat by bringing home a baby tortoise! There's a bush we refused to clear near our house – for spiritual

and aesthetic purposes, and we failed to keep the kids away from it! It's from there, as well as other, unredeemed, charged places nearby – actosias mostly, that they love to play the most.

A year after Dad's disappearance, I performed a powerful working, using a tupla we had jointly created with Zorean, and thus managed to make the first, effective contact with him since his disappearance. We needed a tulpa because the communion was inside of dreams. He assured me he had suffered much pain while in Okuzimu, and had sought Dan for revenge, but had failed to locate him. When I told him about what had happened, and how we had helped Dan cross over quickly, he begged that I help him do the same.

"You musn't keep the grudge though," I warned him.

"Son, all I wish for now, is to find him, so we can settle the matter in a more eternal manner, since suffering a further death here, is not such an honorable thing."

"Holding onto guilt or fear or anger, will keep you trapped in the dark," I told him.

"Have you been here before?" he asked, very astonished.

"Oh yeah Dad. I've been there, on invitation by Nyamiyonga, and I shot through quite easily, to Kitara."

"Oh my dear Son! You got initiated?"

"Yes Dad. I met a girl or the Cwezi sent me a girl, and she helped me get initiated."

"Don't make the same mistake I did. Keep the good faith, study and practise the work. And most of all, teach the young ones as well."

"I got twins Dad! And the boy is definitely unlike me when I was young – he really is fascinated by all things occult."

"I'm proud of you!"

"More proud of you Dad. I only learnt after you were gone, that you were an initiate too!"

"Not really. And perhaps, in a different lineage. Just don't make the mistakes I made," he repeated.

After that encounter, I performed another working, with help from Isaza and another adept of the MaxiDozi whose labs I was actively working from. We managed to get Dad out of the dark realms, and into Kitara.

However, he said he would join the Seers, as he had always been fascinated by oracles and divination arts.

Concerning the MaxiDozi, I eventually joined them, and apart from the esoteric research we were doing privately, there were also some more publicly accessible results; I had gone ahead to obtain a second degree in psychology, and so, coupled with my background in chemistry and Trudy's natural or acquired adeptness at psychology, we set up a powerful consultancy, focusing on research into fringe applications of science and 'esoteric philosophy' (that's the name we used, to refer to the craft, when dealing with the mundane).

Most of our work bordered on trying to solve otherwise intractable problems of the modern (and especially urban) human mind and the spirit it served. Thus far, we are doing well, and no other calling in life could have made any more meaning to us.

\* \* \* \* \*

My little sister, now two years into her ambitious teenage phase, once remarked, when we visited her at school with the twins:

"Tahuti was speaking to the statue, while Nyx pointed at a 'girl' he was speaking with, but who I totally couldn't see! Are they fine?"

Zorean, who had come with us to the Visitation Sunday, laughed so loudly, she caused the groups eating their buggers and cokes nearby, to turn and look at us scornfully. In a silent tone thereafter, she recounted her own tale to us:

"About a month back, I was angered by a puzzled customer at the shop, when he found Azrael playing and talking with his dog, telling it to go 'chase away the cat', but one which the customer couldn't see anywhere! Thereafter, he came to me claiming the boy was 'troubled'. To show him all was fine, I walked round the counter, and asked Azrael to call the cat into the shop, which he did. But you should have seen the reaction of that dog! The "cat" was our own making, but to see the dog bark wildly



and run off as though a bucket of hot water had been spilled onto it, was a most hilarious and telling thing. The man went away clearly shaken and astounded, his dog having fled so far away, so fast, he couldn't trace what route it had taken! He spoke of the matter no more!"

"What was Azrael's reaction then?"

"I advised him to not talk to his 'invisible friends' while around other people, or his visible friends would shy off."

"Did he understand that?"

"Well, they are supposed to be free children I guess..."

\* \* \* \* \*

And I won't add more to that.

*If you should not stagnate or suffer a swine's death, wake up the free human, otherwise sleeping inside of you.*

**So Mote It Be.**

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# ∞ DEDICATION

Finally...

This is dedicated to the many, various special shrines around the world, perpetually manifesting and keeping alive the ancient & modern human mystery traditions, under the infinitely many cloaks and doctrines.

Further, this book is dedicated to all the surviving shamans, wizards, druids, psychonauts, philosophers, poets, creatives, seers, diviners, priests, seekers, adepts and mages across the Void - some not *too* human.

Keep the Great Work evolving, and much thanks for your visible & silent contributions to the advancement of mysticism with utility.

The Mystery can never die; it only keeps changing.