

MUTHI
NHLEMA

EKARI MBVUNDULA
CHIROMBO



MOMBERA RISING

NGONI CHRONICLES
OF NATURE FUTURES FROM MALAWI

EDITED BY LAURA M. PEREIRA, LIAM CARPENTER-URQUHART AND MAGANIZO KRUGER NYASULU

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Muthi Nhlema, Ekari Mbvundula Chirombo
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MOMBERA was a shortening of the name, "M'mbelwa the King", by European settlers. As M'mbelwa continued to establish his Kingdom, it came to be that the Kingdom bore the same name: MOMBERA KINGDOM. When the name "M'mbelwa" started to be clearly written, people agreed that Mombera remain the name of the Kingdom and M'mbelwa, the person, be referred to as "the King of Kings" or "INKOSI YA MAKHOSI"

Foreword

As the King and leader of my Kingdom, I am nobly pleased to hail the kind of initiative played in our Mzimba by Stockholm University through a project called Mombera Rising.

On behalf of the citizens of Mombera Kingdom, with firm gratitude, I am particularly delighted to note that Mombera Rising has been an eye opener for our people.

The Mombera population is relatively youthful; as such many do not know the historical background of our Kingdom. But through the stories told in Mombera Rising by a vibrant team from Stockholm University, I am essentially certain that most of them will now appreciate the origins of their monarchy and territory. I have always endeavored to see that our cultural identity is happily passed on to our future generation.

Mombera Rising has helped us to regain our confidence as we move forward towards reshaping the ideals of our beloved Kingdom. The good work done in Mombera Rising has rekindled our commitment towards putting ourselves in the right place as we proudly promote our culture; while at the same time improving our livelihoods.

My office, with the support of the Council of Chiefs, will ensure that the findings and the suggestions highlighted in the told stories are put to good use. We shall engage in an exciting initiative aimed at urging every citizen of the Mombera Kingdom to read and utilize these stories with zeal and enthusiasm.

I wish, also, to state that my office remains committed to working with the Mombera Rising team now and in the future. We are open to any suggestions which would help in the development of our Kingdom.

Phambeli uMzimba!

HIS MAJESTY INKOSI YA MAKHOSI M'MBELWA V
King of the Mombera Ngoni Nation

Preface

This short anthology represents the culmination of more than a year of collaboration, conversation, and even some contestation. What initially began as a research endeavour to bring the Nature Futures Framework (NFF) to life in various Africa case studies evolved into an exploration of culture, identity, art, storytelling, and imagination. I never anticipated this initiative resulting in this book, but that is how we know the future is always uncertain. Although the power of storytelling can seem obvious, especially on a continent with such rich oral histories, the disconnect between what scientific research shows and how we tell those stories is staggering. To quote an editorial in the journal *Nature*, “We need to tell better science stories.” So, here, we attempt to forge a collaboration between researchers, writers, artists, and communities to inspire imaginations of what desirable futures could unfold. What started as an exploration of a triangle depicting three distinct values for nature in a conventional visioning workshop became a journey of unpacking what it means ‘to get things right,’ while acknowledging that utopia is an elusive concept.

It might be necessary to explain the NFF so the reader has a vague sense of our purpose and can explore the stories in their preferred way – whether to meander through them in a non-linear fashion, to read them as branches from the same tree, or perceive and read them chronologically. There is no right or wrong way to explore Mombera Kingdom, but for those interested, there is a timeline of key events on page 11 that can be referenced.

The NFF was developed by an international group of experts convened by the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services (IPBES) as a flexible tool to support the development of scenarios and models of desirable futures for people, nature, and Mother Earth. It is a triangle with each corner representing a value perspective for nature. In the “Nature for Nature” perspective, people view nature as having intrinsic value, placing importance on the diversity of species, habitats, ecosystems, and processes that form the natural world, as well as on nature’s ability to function autonomously. The “Nature as Culture”/“One with Nature” perspective primarily highlights relational values of nature, where societies, cultures, traditions, and faiths are intertwined with nature in shaping diverse biocultural landscapes. The “Nature for Society” perspective highlights the utilitarian benefits and instrumental values that nature provides to people and societies. Unpacking what this could mean in diverse African contexts is the aim of my Swedish Research Council FORMAS Project No 2020-00670, Seeding transformative futures for people and nature in Africa, better known as African Futures.

This anthology is the result.

Now, for the long list of thank-yous that must go out to those who made this possible. First and foremost to the creative genius of Muthi Nhlema and Ekari Mbvundula Chirombo who, for some reason, thought this might be an interesting project to get stuck into. Stick to it with grit and determination – and a little bit of procrastination – we did. Our conversations have been rich, our debates inspiring, and I believe this book celebrates a collaboration that has indeed been fruitful.

To our graphic artist, Simon Banda, and the three artists who inspired us during the workshops – James Tambula, Maputo Soko, and Jimmy Malinga Manda – your ability to make visible what we can only see in our heads is true art. To my incredible and resilient research team, led by Bwalya Chibwe, who was the instigator-in-chief, my MSc student Liam Carpenter-Urquhart, who dove into the project with passion, and my friend Maganizo Kruger Nyasulu, who provided all the help, support, and insight that we needed. I am deliberately not mentioning the car.

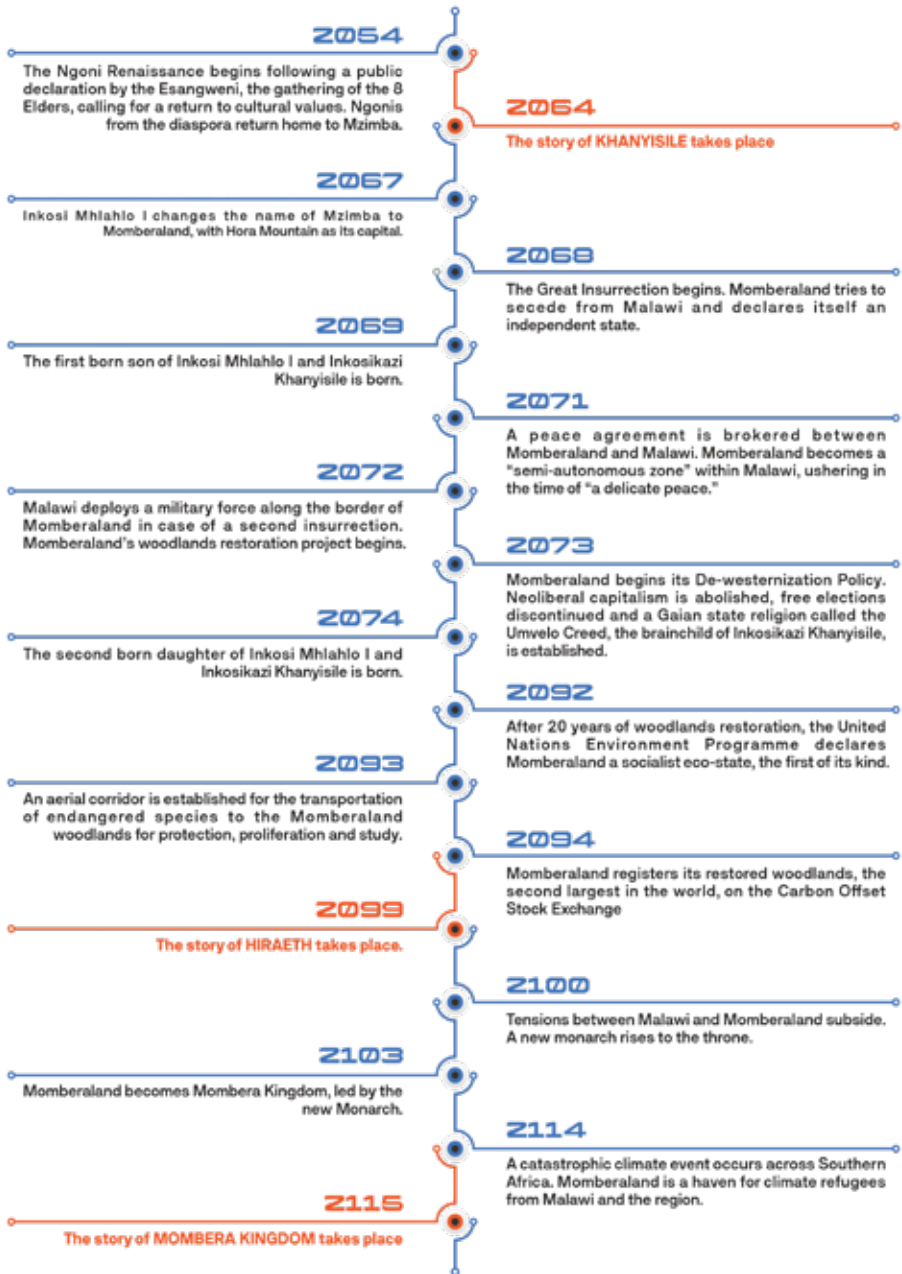
To the wonderful team of Michael Nhlema, Kingsley Jere and Keeper Gumbo from the Mabilabo Social Support Forum (MSSF) and the Mzimba Heritage Association (Mziha) who were our welcoming hosts and core collaborators.

To His Royal Highness Inkhosi ya Makhosi M'Mbelwa V for his support and permission to go ahead with the project. To our insightful workshop participants whose aspirations were the essence behind these stories, we hope that we have done justice to your thoughts and ideas. A special mention to Dr Thole, whose wisdom and experience were invaluable to the whole team.

Finally, to the people of Mzimba, past, present and future – these are your stories, and we hope that they inspire a vision of what is possible.

LAURA PEREIRA
December 2023

MOMBERA RISING TIMELINE



EKARI MBVUNDULA
CHIROMBO

KHANYISILE



Dawn broke on the Mzimba Kingdom, and Khanyisile was already awake. She crouched by a stream, just a 5-minute walk away from her father's *sibaya* compound, her head wrapped in the same brightly coloured fabric as the cloth wrapped around her waist. Her eyes were lowered with a slight frown in focus as she collected river sand for her class. Other than the gentle babble of the stream and the hum of farming drones, the crisp clean air was tranquil, carrying the harmonious tune of several species of birds. These were all the reasons why the morning was Khanyisile's favourite time of day.

She stood up, inhaling deeply while taking a long blink. The hills that shielded the village stood to the North, covered in grassy *miombo* woodland. When she was in her early adolescence, the eight elders, called the *Esangweni*, told of a time long ago, around 2020, when these hills were almost bare, and deforestation ran rampant. Khanyisile couldn't imagine what that must have been like; she had only seen pictures in historical records as proof of those frightening times. It had been bad enough that the *Esangweni* called for all Ngoni people to return, literally and figuratively, to their homeland and culture, and rebalance their relationship with nature.

It was this key decision that transformed the land that Khanyisile dwelled in and loved. She balanced her sack of river sand on her head and headed back up the gentle slope towards the village. As she passed the green leafed *musekese* trees, she heard marching feet growing closer and turned to the left. The movement of the Miombo Woodland Patrol echoed around the trees, long before they were visible. Four of them appeared, and Khanyisile nodded to them, keeping her pace. To her surprise, they stopped and dropped to one knee, then stood again, continuing their patrol.

Surely, word had not spread this far yet... but apparently it had. She was already receiving a queen's salute, purely based on the rumour that she was to be betrothed to the oldest son of the Inkhosi ya Makhosi, the King of Mzimba. She raised her eyebrows and gasped, still staring at the troops circling back into the woodland. *Am I ready for this?*

That thought would have to wait for the time being, as the morning's tasks quickly caught up with Khanyisile. She made the rest of the journey to her *sibaya* at a brisk walk, then put the bag of soil in her room before joining the other women of her family group in preparing breakfast. The four wives and their children would eat in a circle in the centre of the houses, while their husband, Chief Jabulani, sat on a table in his house. As the firstborn daughter of the first wife, Khanyisile ensured that all her siblings and half-siblings would get a portion of the food, while her mother, the *nkosikasi*, would prepare the chief's plate.

As her mother left the outdoor kitchen with a plate piled high, Khanyisile helped Mama Thembi, who was expecting a second baby, before she sat down amongst her sisters and younger siblings, 15 in all. Sibongile, her next sister down in line, didn't even wait until she had taken the first bite. "So, when are we going to celebrate in the kraal, Khanyi?" The question was immediately followed by a burst of giggles from the others.

Khanyisile rolled her eyes with a shy smile. “I figured someone had a big mouth and had to tell the whole kingdom! It’s too soon to say... Londisiwe only proposed to me yesterday. We still need to go through the proper cultural rituals before—”

“Yeah, yeah, boring! What I want to know is who you’re lobbying for to be second queeeeen...” she ended with a deliberate wide-toothed grin, cradling her chin in her hands and blinking rapidly.

Their 7-year-old half-brother Thabo exploded in laughter. “Not gonna happen! The queens have to actually be pretty— ow!” He wasn’t prepared for the punch that came his way. He rubbed his arm as he dodged another attempted punch. “And they are supposed to hit like a girl. That means you *definitely* can’t be queen.

“Behave, you two!” Khanyisile went into teacher mode on reflex. “Thabo, sit.”

“Why do you need to get married in a kraal anyway?” Thabo asked.

“That is because in our culture when the prince is ready to take the throne, he must marry the queen in the kraal, or else he gives up the throne to the next brother,” Khanyisile responded in a matter-of-fact tone.

“But... why?”

“Just because, that’s why! While I would love to play twenty questions with you, I must go to work.” She left them nudging and giggling amongst each other as she went to her room, collected her river soil sample, made a quick apology to the wives for not having time to assist in washing the dishes, then rushed out of the family compound up the slope to the school.

The schoolhouse was a blend between traditional Ngoni design and modern technology. There was lab equipment, test tubes, rulers, burners, and chemicals securely stored in sealed jars. Khanyisile’s classroom was circular, the mud concrete walls painted with berries from the bush, with images of the history of the Ngoni people, and illustrations of animal myths. Khanyisile stepped forward into the semi-circle of chairs, which the children sat on; she preferred to move among them whilst teaching.

“Children, what is this?” She asked them, holding up the bag of soil and pouring it into a glass container, which rested on a circular table. Hands went up all over the room and Khanyisile smiled, and then selected a student who rarely spoke up. “Yes, Kwanele?”

“River sand, Nkosazana.”

“Correct! But that’s not the end of the story. River sand does amazing things, keeping the path of the river on track and preventing flooding. If we make sure not to cut the trees that grow along the river, we won’t need to worry about that. Yes, another question?”

“Nkosazana, are you going to be queen?” a little girl called Lindiwe asked in that matter-of-fact way children do. The class perked up with renewed interest. Khanyis-

ile smiled and shook her head. Clearly these questions were never going to end. She proceeded carefully.

“I... am engaged to the son of the Inkhosi ya Makosi, and one day, he will have to take over as the Inkhosi himself. So, when he becomes the Nkosi, as his wife, I will be the Inkosikasimkhulu – the queen.”

“Will you still be teaching us when you are queen?” another voice asked.

“Can you get us a new playground as a queen?” yet another.

“Can I be in the royal wedding?” said a third voice.

“Ok!” Khanyisile waved her hands for them to settle down. “Let’s not get side-tracked!” The children giggled, then suddenly all fell silent, and looked past her towards the doorway. Khanyisile turned and saw two men standing at the classroom entrance. They carried almond-shaped shields, long sticks with a solid wooden ball on the end, and were shirtless, wearing waistbands with strips of synthetic animal hide attached as a symbol of their historical hunting traditions before the Ngoni people embraced conservationism. This was the unmistakable garb of the Royal Guard. Khanyisile gasped, scrambling for the right words to say. But they spoke as soon as they had her attention.

“Madam, His Royal Highness, Londisiwe, son of the Inkhosi ya Makosi, King of kings, requests your presence.”

Dumbfounded, Khanyisile nodded, mute in shock, then followed them out of the classroom in a fluster. She requested to stop by the head teacher’s office to assign someone to supervise her class. They were not thrilled about the delay, but allowed it, then led her outside into the school yard. The prince’s convoy was lined up across the parking area, four vehicles, with his own being the most impressive; a sleek silver hydro-powered hovercraft designed to navigate natural terrain. The prince himself stood next to the door, flanked by four more of his security detail. He wore sunglasses, which were a contrast to the synthetic leopard skin around his shoulders, his own waistband, and a tightly rolled band of faux-fur leopard hide on his head, his crown. He struck an impressive figure on the expansive Mzimba landscape, the brilliant blue skies with wisps of wind-swept clouds serving as a magnificent backdrop to him, flanked by the Royal Guard, the *Impi*.

Londisiwe looked up and smiled at Khanyisile, and her heart skipped a beat. She approached him and curtsied low. He nodded and offered his hand to help her upright again. “I look forward to the day you will be greeted in the royal manner as well, my dear.”

She smiled with a blush. “It seems some members of your kingdom have taken it upon themselves to begin greeting me as a queen already. I was wondering how they knew of our engagement...”

The prince belly laughed. “That would be me. I took the initiative to announce it to the kingdom. I want to dissuade any of your other potential suitors. They must know that they have the future king to contend with.”

“Oh... my goodness...” Khanyisile’s heart fluttered, and her hand touched her lips as she stifled a giggle.

Londisiwe gazed at her for a few moments with a dreamy look on his face. Then he straightened his shoulders and offered his arm towards her. “Walk with me, Khanyisile.”

“I would love to, Your Highness, but I left my class behind with a temporary supervisor...” she responded.

His surprise was transparent. “My dear, I am so sorry! I specifically ordered my guard to wait until you had a break in your schedule.” He shot a glare to the two who had been sent to collect her, indicating there would be a reprimand later.

“No, no, do not worry, Your Highness! What I mean is that I just need to make a call – to leave a note about the class assignments for the day.” He nodded in understanding, and she excused herself, pressing a silver earpiece which was attached to her ear and the device dialled the number. As she explained the situation as briefly as she could, there was no protest from the class assistant, who affirmed that arrangements would be made. She returned to the prince’s side as soon as she ended the call, then looped her arm through his.

They walked through town and up the hill, where the past chiefs were buried. It was here where he stopped and turned, facing the whole kingdom below. He stood in silence, and Khanyisile stood with him, running her fingers gently along his forearm. Finally, he turned to her.

“Khanyisile. You have changed my world. I chose you to be my queen one day because of your wisdom, integrity, and innocence. Since I returned to Mzimba when the *Esangweni* called all Ngoni back to our sacred land, I have gone through an experience I cannot fully describe. I was thrust into the wilderness, where my degrees and all my experience in worldly affairs could not help me. When I was in there, I thought of – well, many things. One of which was whether I would survive - but I also thought about you. I remembered what you told me about why you believed in the Ngoni customs. Do you remember?”

Khanyisile bowed her head down, then looked up at him. “I said that we are one with nature... if we destroy nature, we also destroy ourselves.”

“That’s right. It was your words which got me through it. I am ready now to take on my responsibilities. My father–” He stopped and looked away, and Khanyisile lowered her eyes and faced away from him out of respect. The prince composed himself and looked out down the valley. “It’s... not going to be too long now.” He sighed before he continued. “When my time comes to sit on the throne, I want you to be ready to stand behind me in all things, as my queen. To reinforce every decision, and to show solidarity whenever the public opinion is divided. I don’t want to paint a picture of a life of ease and adoration, though that is certainly one of the benefits. I want you to understand that being king comes with many difficult decisions. And as queen, you may also feel the burden of it.”

Khanyisile watched her future king, already seeing new lines appearing on his brow, which weren't there when he first returned to the kingdom a few weeks ago. "I cannot help but get the impression that you are trying to discourage me from becoming your bride..."

Londisiwe frowned, measuring his words. "I would want nothing more than your hand in mine at the *uMthetho*, addressing the kingdom together. But I also want you to know the realities of what we face. Until quite recently, I myself took it too lightly, so I do not fault you at all for it."

Khanyisile took a deliberate breath, absorbing his words. The *uMthetho* was two weeks away. How fast it was all moving! Before she responded, he spoke again.

"What is the thing you want the most in this life, Khanyisile?"

She smiled, relaxing her shoulders. Finally, an easy question. "I want to raise a great family and instil in them the knowledge and values of our kingdom... and for them to go forth and do many good things in this land."

Londisiwe smiled and nodded. "There is no greater family than the Inkhosi bloodline. I believe there, we make a good match."

"And what about you?" Khanyisile asked. "What do you want most of all?"

After a silent moment, Londisiwe replied "I want to fulfil the duties I was born into. Not merely to avoid being a disappointment to my father, but to drive this kingdom to greatness." He leaned against a *nkazyé* tree. "It is difficult to do so when I see so much disunity amongst the chiefs. Though some support our secession from Malawi, others would rather that the Inkhosi ya Makhosi reverse it. Your own father has leaned more towards re-joining Malawi as I understand it." The prince stood up straight, away from the tree and lowered his head in thought. "I wonder... if he can be persuaded to sway his views." He rose his head abruptly to face Khanyisile. "It is well known that he has considerable influence among the chiefs. Perhaps your father could be the key to turning the tide!"

Khanyisile's mouth opened in surprise. "My prince..."

"I am not asking you to be the one to persuade him, my dear. I am showing you the matters that sit on my mind. You shouldn't get caught up in all of this, it is something to be dealt with amongst men. Some pure traditionalists say I shouldn't even speak of such matters to you. And perhaps I will not do so in future. But I do believe it is prudent for you to know that your husband is not just sitting on a throne, eating grapes."

"I know you have so much weighing on you, Your Highness. And although I appreciate that you are not requesting it of me, I will see what I can do to sway his views. In a *subtle* way – I will not mention you at all."

"You are not conflicted in taking a different view than your father?"

"I have always had the view that Mzimba is better as our own state. The land speaks for itself; the woodlands have returned, the ancestors are speaking to us again, even the air smells clean. We Ngonis look after our land better when we take ownership of it. Even though I feel that most parts of nature are better off if we leave them

alone, it is still our duty to safeguard those areas. We can guide and educate visitors about the importance of these things.”

“Before I went into the wilderness, I would have disagreed with you. But I have come to understand that as well. The rains have returned. We have enough food for all, and the roots and herbs we used as medicines are beginning to be seen again. My father took us in the right direction.” He turned to face Khanyisile. “If there is anything you can do – however small – to help your father see these things, your future king will be eternally grateful.”

Khanyisile gave him a small curtsy. “I will see what I can do, Your Highness.”

Chief Jabulani was a difficult man to catch for a private chat, even for his own firstborn daughter. Though no king himself, he was a nkosi, and had responsibilities to his *sibaya*. He had to allocate land, resolve conflicts. So, although Khanyisile made sure she returned home in good time, she did not see her father until evening.

She waited until he had finished his dinner, which he mostly did in silence, with a frown, contemplating the challenges of the day. When he was done, he went to sit outside on his veranda where he could see all his wives’ homes. It was dusk, the younger children ran around with their games, knowing to stay within the circle of houses after dark. Lamps lit the central area, powered by hydroelectricity from the river. Khanyisile approached her father respectfully and seated herself on the ground by his feet. “Good evening, Baba.”

“Yes, my daughter. Word reached me that your prince showed you around the kingdom, no doubt showing off everything that will soon be yours.” He glanced at her through the side of his eye, stifling a smile.

Khanyisile clapped her hands over her face in exaggerated embarrassment. “It’s not like that, Baba!”

He let out a chuckle. “No need to be embarrassed! I am quite proud of you, and eager to add our family to the royal bloodline. Now, tell me how our clan has been doing.”

She told her father about her siblings teasing her, but also which ones were struggling with schoolwork, and about Mama Thembi, the chief’s fourth wife who was expecting her second child. She was having some issues with high blood pressure and would need some medicines, but in the meantime, she was taking it slowly.

Chief Jabulani nodded solemnly at this update and sighed. “That medicine is expensive...I will need a week to organise it. I hope you are helping with her duties?”

“Yes Baba,” she said, nodding. “I can also check on her again tonight.”

“Sounds like you have the home front under control. You should speak to your mother, by the way. She will tell you which Aunties will prepare you for marriage and children. Pay attention so you don’t embarrass us,” he said sternly.

“Yes Baba.” She bowed her head briefly to show obedience. Then she took a breath as she raised her eyes again. “There is something I wanted to ask you about—”

The chief’s cell phone rang, and he held an apologetic finger up and took it out to answer it. Khanyisile stifled a sigh. Calls to the chief were so frequent that his ringtone was the soundtrack of her dreams. She was starting to zone out as she waited for the call to finish, but something caught her attention.

“I said don’t call me.” He made a subtle but unmistakable motion, shifting so his back was turned to Khanyisile. His next words were basically a whisper, inaudible until the final words “I’ll call you back later.” He quickly put his phone away. “Khanyisile, go and check on Mama Thembi and let me know tomorrow. I must get some rest now.”

Khanyisile was about to remind him that she had wanted to say something before the call, but she thought better of it. “Yes, Baba,” she responded instead and went about the task she had been instructed. The chief got many calls all day long, but this was the first one she could remember that appeared to be secretive. An uneasy lump formed in her stomach.

The next day Khanyisile took her class on a trip to see the river and how it worked. She organised them into groups of two and had them march in a line of small hats down the narrow path. They were all excited and it warmed Khanyisile’s heart to see them gasp in wonder at the beauty of nature. She took a moment to appreciate the fact that this new generation had the privilege of experiencing the natural world outside of a textbook.

“Alright, children! We are almost at the river. Does anyone know what these trees are called?”

“Miombo trees!” They said excitedly in unison.

“That’s right! Careful where you step.” They came down the slope, which was framed by brown calf-length grass. They began to hear the river gently bubbling below. The soil was darker and damper than the rest of the woodlands, and lazy bugs hovered around. Khanyisile used hand motions to direct the children to where they could see her. She did a quick headcount to make sure that all the children were accounted for.

“So, yesterday in class we saw some river sand. Now you can see where it comes from...” She pointed down and the children peeped around each other to see. “This soil is the same as in the rest of the woodlands, but it is always damp because of the river water. It is a cycle; the soil is fertile, and there is enough water, so the trees and bushes grow very well here. And in turn, the tree roots also keep the soil in place so that it doesn’t wash away. When the soil washes away, that is called soil erosion. Is anyone wondering why we wore our gumboots today?”

“Nkosazana, are we going inside the river?”

“Yes Peter, we are! Watch your steps now...” Khanyisile guided the students to the river, telling the class assistants to hold their hands as they stepped into the shallow banks, some of them giggling and immediately splashing in their little gumboots. Khanyisile allowed for a few minutes of shenanigans before she got their attention again and began talking about the kinds of organisms that lived in the river, the importance of the river for the plants and animals around, as well as how some of the water was eventually piped down to the community, and purified until it came out of the taps.

One of the girls raised their hand. “Nkosazana, what is that?”

Khanyisile turned to where the young lady was pointing, and the whole class turned as well. Khanyisile responded, “Oh that’s just a baobab tree, Jane.”

“No madam, what’s *that*?” At that moment there was a whooshing sound, as if the river was getting louder. A wave began rippling downstream. Around the bend appeared a full log riding heavily on the waves – like a battering ram headed straight for them. As soon as she realized what was happening, Khanyisile screamed, “Everyone get out of the water!”

The children frantically scrambled towards the shore, many were crying, and some of them tripping then being pulled up by the class assistants. Khanyisile herself was the furthest in the river and her gumboots were getting stuck. The two class assistants pulled the last of the children safely back onto the riverbank, then one of them, Chikondi, splashed in after Khanyisile, whilst the other remained behind to hold the children.

Khanyisile grabbed Chikondi’s hand, who pulled her up as she pushed forward, splashing towards the shore faster than she could on her own. At that time there was another push from the waves which were formed in the wake of the massive tree trunk. Then shortly afterwards, one, two, three... four more logs bounced on the current with a gentle, but lethal motion. If any of the class had been hit by one of the logs, they wouldn’t even slow it down.

Khanyisile watched them drift past in shock, her heart pounding in her chest and her hands shaking as she began to process what this meant. Someone had been cutting down trees... by the looks of it, they were using the river to smuggle them downstream.

Khanyisile moved quickly, instructing her assistants to take the children back to the classroom, then made her way upstream, following the bank. Aside from areas where the *musekese* trees grew thick, the path was straightforward, with a slight slope upwards. She tried as much as possible to be light-footed, avoiding stepping on sticks or pushing past bushes. Finally, she reached an area where the trees were the thickest, and she began to hear sounds from the trees.

Khanyisile stopped a distance away from the sound, then climbed a *musekese* tree where she could watch without being seen. She could see four fresh tree stumps, the right size for her to conclude that they were the same ones that had been floated downstream. Four masked men appeared from behind the trees and made a beeline

straight to a person starting to enter the clearing. They did not speak, but instead communicated with complex hand signals. An argument? No... a negotiation. The 'conversation' ended with one of the men handing the person an envelope. Then they got to work.

They brought out machines the size of briefcases and set them on the ground in a circle, in the shadows of the trees. They switched them on and produced a low hum, almost impossible to hear if you weren't paying attention to it. One of the men pressed a button and a red laser beam shot out of each machine, connecting each one until they created a circumference around an area of about six or seven trees. Khanyisile frowned, watching closely from her tree, which was just outside of the laser beam perimeter. She had never seen these kinds of devices before. The men made their way to the centre of the circle, including the man who had received the envelope.

That was when he turned in her direction, and she saw the face of her father, the chief.

Khanyisile gasped, and almost lost her grip on the tree. She stopped herself before she could yell out: *Father!* Instead, she made a quick decision to keep watching silently, as she didn't want to assume anything. She felt wrong – spying on one's father was unheard of – but she did not know what these men might do if they became aware of a spy.

The men stood with her father in the centre of the circle, apparently waiting for something. The laser beams changed from red to green. As soon as the colours changed, they scrambled to pull out devices which she *did* recognise.

She watched, eyes wide in horror as they held high powered chainsaws, each targeting a different tree, moving quickly... *Where was the Woodland Patrol!?* It appeared that her father might have arranged for these masked men to be able to get away with their crimes. Khanyisile observed that the circle of connected machines created a sound barrier, so that she couldn't hear a thing. Even as she strained to hear, her efforts only amplified the background sounds of the savanna.

As they cleared more trees, they shifted the sound barrier, ensuring it remained on. Khanyisile was so distracted with watching them work, that she didn't notice until it was too late that they were coming to cut down the tree she had climbed...

They moved one of the machines right next to her tree so that it was just inside the barrier, and she felt a strange sudden deafness. She gripped the branch until her knuckles hurt, frozen. Her father stood next to the man with the chainsaw who was positioning himself to cut the tree. He had not noticed her. The chainsaw met the trunk, and she felt a teeth-chattering vibration. Khanyisile glanced around, desperately looking for a way out.

She reached out and grabbed a branch the thickness of 2 fingers and snapped it soundlessly off. She threw the branch out of the sound barrier towards the river as hard as she could. It hit another tree, flipped direction and only half of it splashed into the river. Nonetheless it had the desired effect. The splash made all the men turn sharply towards it. One of them immediately started backing up, and noises rushed

back into the air as the sound barrier machines were turned off. Whether the splash was from a wild animal or a person, they were not going to take their chances. They rolled as many of the logs as they could to the river and pushed them downstream, presumably to be collected by accomplices positioned strategically downstream.

As soon as the men were a distance away, Khanyisile scrambled down the tree and ran back into town without stopping, her heart pounding against her chest.

The truth of what she had just witnessed descended on her like a landslide. Her own father was committing treason against the king.

The next morning came with restlessness in the very atmosphere. Khanyisile tried her best to get the morning's routine done, but she kept on entering rooms and forgetting why she was there, her mind preoccupied.

When her father finally joined them for breakfast, he seemed so normal that she started to doubt the events of the previous day. To her absolute shock he summoned her to the table. "Khanyisile, we hadn't finished that conversation. While we're on the subject of your upcoming wedding, I need you to convince the prince to reconsider secession. There is a huge benefit the Kingdom can gain from collaborating with Malawi. If he hears about it from his wife-to-be, he will not be able to ignore it." Khanyisile was taken aback, and it dawned on her that her father had the complete assumption that she had no political opinions of her own. A part of her wanted to laugh ironically at the fact that she had wanted to speak to her father on behalf of the prince in order to convince him of the exact opposite.

"Actually father," she began, clearing her throat, "I agree with the prince. I think we are much better off seceded. We manage our own resources, and we are nearly ready to export to Malawi, Mozambique, and even South Africa."

"So, I'm too late. The prince has already convinced you of his opinion."

"This isn't from the prince, it's what I truly believe!"

He looked up at her and smiled, before turning to his meal again. Though he said nothing, she could tell his view was set in stone, that he thought she was young and naïve and knew nothing of grown people's matters. She had to clamp her lips to prevent them from revealing what she saw him do the previous day. She couldn't let her feelings get in the way of what she needed to do – convince her father to turn from his decision, before he was caught and charged with treason.

"What I mean to say, father, is don't you think you saw a better Mzimba after we seceded? The trees... look at the trees... they've returned."

"Trees are just a resource for us to use to make our lives better. And now Mzimba has the only thriving woodland in the region. We are foolish not to leverage that to our advantage."

"But fath—"

“Now listen young lady, this is not something I am going to debate with you about. Things are very different outside the walls of your classroom. Theory is different from practice.”

You’ve been getting a lot of practice too, she thought. Out loud she said, “Yes, father.” She knew a lost argument when she saw one.

Khanyisile decided she had no choice but to tell the prince about what she had witnessed in the forest. After helping prepare and clean up Saturday’s lunch at home, she made her way to the palace. She approached the large circular stone wall surrounding the palace and met the guards at the entrance. After a few basic security questions, she was admitted. Since they knew who she was, they only followed the bare minimum procedure; it would be foolish to question her business at the palace.

One of the guards escorted her across a wide courtyard, past stone structures to the large three-storey stone palace in the centre of the circular compound. They passed through the open heavy wooden doors and into the first living room. The guard asked her to take a seat and left to inform a servant of her arrival. She decided to remain standing until the prince arrived.

It wasn’t long before the prince descended from upstairs, talking to three of his advisors in earnest. Khanyisile glanced at him, tilting her head to try and hear what they were discussing. It sounded serious. The prince left his advisors and joined her. She moved towards a couch in the plush living room, but he placed his hand on the small of her back and said, “My dear, let us talk on the balcony.”

They went through a set of double doors at the other end of the living room, and onto the balcony, where they stood and faced the whole kingdom sprawled below. Prince Londisiwe held her hand, glanced at her for a moment then gazed out over the balcony. Finally, he took a deep breath. “My father is not doing well, Khanyisile. As he loosens his grip on this world, I feel my shoulders weighed down with the burden, which lies ahead of me.” He shook his head as if to bring himself back to the present. “How are you my dear?”

Khanyisile met his eyes, unable to shield her misery. Londisiwe grasped her arms in alarm. “Are you alright?”

“I am sorry to come to you at this time when so much weighs on you, my prince.” She paused, holding back tears. He guided her to an intricately carved balcony seat with leopards facing each other. She sat without resistance before she continued. “I too am burdened... even now I am conflicted about whether or not I should tell you...”

“Oh, but you must my dear,” Londisiwe responded quickly. “If we are going to do this together, we must share our burdens.”

Khanyisile looked at a random spot on the balcony railing, in order to avoid meeting his eye. “Two days ago, I went to my father as I had promised, but he got a

phone call before I could bring up the conversation of convincing him to change his mind about secession. There was something about the call that seemed like he was planning something he wanted to keep secret..." she told him about the previous day's nature expedition with the class, including the logs which almost struck her in the river.

"What? Were you hurt?"

"I- I'm fine. That wasn't the part, which upset me..." she sighed. "I went uphill, following the river so that I could find out where the trees were being cut."

"Why didn't you call the Forest Patrol?"

"I don't know... but maybe considering what I found..." she rushed through the next part, explaining how she climbed the trees and saw the men approaching. "I was wondering how they had gotten past the Forest Patrol, then I saw them talking to someone... it was my father."

That was it. She had told him and there was no going back.

Londisiwe's whole posture transformed in seconds, his eyes widening in shock. He stood up and took a step back and his breath deepened.

Khanyisile quickly stepped towards him. "Please... my prince, you have to help him. I don't want him to get into trouble. I know if you speak to him in private, directly, he can hear you out and stop whatever it is he is doing."

Londisiwe was silent, he had walked to the balcony and his hands gripped the railing. Her words seemed to be going in one ear and out the other as he had his back towards her. "This was not what I expected."

Khanyisile stood up and went to him, "Is there anything you can do?" It ached her to realise he was avoiding meeting her eye. Her heart began thumping.

"I need to think, Khanyisile." He turned his head towards the balcony door, and called out, "Dingani!" The man appeared so quickly it was like he had materialised on the balcony. "Please guide the lady out of the palace and escort her home."

Khanyisile's mouth dropped. The servant nodded curtly and asked the prince, "And the tea they have prepared for you both?"

"Cancel it," The prince responded immediately. Then he turned away from the balcony, and strutted towards the door, briefly pausing by Khanyisile and nodding in an overly formal way, then continued indoors. He made no indication that he was going to escort her out.

Khanyisile panicked as the servant Dingani guided her out. She arched her neck to peer around him to see where the prince was going, but he had already disappeared around the corner. She followed the servant's lead reluctantly, reeling from Londisiwe's coolness towards her, and was afraid for the fate of her father. She wished the prince had told her what he was intending to do.

As soon as she left the palace gates, she rushed home. She found her oldest half-sister there, and burst out, "Where is father?"

"He went to visit Chief Thulani. Why? What's the urgency?"

Khanyisile left without responding, running to Chief Thulani's sibaya, in search of her father. She finally found him on his fellow chief's veranda, sitting in a chair opposite Chief Thulani himself. She broke her culture's traditions and interrupted their meeting. "Father, I need to speak to you."

Her father's deep frown showed his disapproval of her actions. "Can it wait, Khanyisile? Can't you see I am a guest in the Chief's company?"

"Please father, it cannot wait. It is about the prince."

This time her father looked conflicted, glancing at Chief Thulani then back at Khanyisile.

It was Chief Thulani who broke the silence. "Do not worry, Chief Jabulani. Your dear daughter seems to need you. We can pick up where we left off later." Khanyisile's father exhaled in relief, and did the formal goodbyes, though rushed. He stood and walked to his daughter, and they left the compound together. Khanyisile waited until they were a reasonable distance from the Chief's house before she said anything.

"Father, please let me speak, and allow me to finish before you say anything."

"You pulled me away from an important meeting, Khanyisile, the point is to listen to what you have to say that is so urgent." His annoyance was tangible.

"I saw you in the forest with those foreign men."

The chief froze in his steps, turning slowly to her. "What?"

"I tried to convince you that this was not the way to go, I tried..." she struggled to hold back her tears as her voice shook.

He shook his head "You are far, far out of bounds, young lady!" He was fuming, his chest puffing up.

"W-wait, please listen..." Khanyisile found it harder to maintain composure under the intensity of his fury. And she hadn't even delivered the worst of it.

"You do not understand anything about what grown people have to do for you!"

"Father, there is more," she said it softly, but the pain in her voice stopped his lecture short. "I told the prince."

The chief seemed to lose control of his body, swaying and stumbling back, then grasping a tree trunk behind him to steady his balance. "No... what did you tell him?"

"Everything... I thought he could help."

"You have betrayed me... when are they coming for me?"

"He didn't say... he dismissed me as soon as I told him. I- I am not sure what he will do, he did not tell me."

"He will do what he must..." the chief's face dropped, his mouth downturned "... as a man... as a king." His expression hardened. "I will be tried for treason."

"No!" Khanyisile screamed in horror.

The chief gave her a sad smile. "He will make a good king. He won't let his love for a woman turn him away from his duties. Not like I did."

“Baba...” Khanyisile began, but her words failed her, and she had nothing to say, but only to cry.

The chief straightened up, walking in silence down the path, and Khanyisile followed with her head bowed, silent tears broken up by involuntary gasps. Neither said another word as they went home.

The chief was almost able to normalise his composure, greeting his wives and children, and most did not even notice anything was amiss. Any who noticed, knew it was not their place to ask. He headed straight to his house to put some critical affairs in order. But Khanyisile was a wreck and ran to her room as soon as she got home. She cried into her pillow as wave after wave of tears consumed her. Her sister Sibongile came into the bedroom, asking what was wrong, and if it was about the prince. Khanyisile just shook her head again and again, not saying a word. She felt like her words had already done so much damage.

Just after dusk, the soldiers came to collect Chief Jabulani.

Khanyisile heard them marching in unison, dressed in warrior garb with bells on their ankles. She scrambled up from her bed, and hurried to the window, watching her siblings and half-siblings running out of the way of the marching warriors, and the wives pulling the younger ones away, confusion on their faces as the soldiers went directly to the chief’s house. One of them shouldered the door open, but the force was unnecessary because it was unlocked, and it flung open with a crack. They came out shortly afterwards with the chief restrained, though he made no effort to resist. “Chief Jabulani, you are being charged with treason,” said the head of the guard. At these words, his wives broke out into shouting, wailing and pleading, but their begging for the soldiers to explain landed on deaf ears.

Khanyisile watched from the window in misery, already exhausted from her own crying. The family members argued amongst themselves, indistinguishably, until Sibongile said “Khanyisile knew something! I saw her upset when she came with father, and she didn’t tell me why.”

Uh no...

Her family members descended into her room all at once, demanding answers.

“What happened Khanyi?”

“Treason? I heard them say treason...”

“What do you know?”

And so the questions flooded in. Khanyisile clamped her ears shut. “*Stop!*” Everyone fell into stunned silence. “You have no idea what I have been through.”

Her mother replied sharply, “What about what your father is about to go through? Speak, girl!”

She told the story of what happened, leaving out the part where the prince asked her to convince her father to change his mind about the secession of Mzimba

kingdom. Once they heard the entire account, they fell silent, some sat on chairs and beds, others left the room to do their chores. This was a lacklustre helpless response, as if they didn't know what else to do. Khanyisile forced herself to participate in making dinner, though the cooking oil was running low. Usually her mother would let their father know the budget for what was needed and then send Khanyisile or one of the other girls to the market to buy it.

Khanyisile tried not to think about it. They ate dinner in silence, as if they were in mourning. After dinner she joined her mother washing dishes. She asked the question which had been burning in her chest. "Mama, what is going to happen now with Baba?"

Mama did not turn away from the dishes, didn't even flinch at the question. In fact, for a few moments, it seemed like Mama hadn't heard her speak, until she took a deep breath. "According to our customs, anyone accused of being a traitor must be judged by the spirits only. No man can judge him. They ask him questions relating to his alleged betrayal, then take the *mwavi* herb and he must drink its water. If he lives, he is innocent."

Oh no. Any hope she had was crushed. Khanyisile had been a witness of her father's undeniable guilt.

At midnight, Khanyisile lay in bed wide awake. She had spent the entire evening thinking, and she had finally come to a decision. She packed some essential belongings and her United States of Africa (USAf) state border pass (she had only used it once when the whole family travelled to Malawi), then slept until dawn. She wasn't going to leave in the night because she wanted to say goodbye to her family. Not literally, she didn't want to give them the chance to stop her, but to see them for what might be the last time.

She gave all her siblings and half-siblings hugs, pretending it was to comfort them about their father. She tried to keep the tears from flowing down her cheeks. Then when everyone got busy with their daily activities, she took a bus to the border, wearing a head scarf and keeping her eyes lowered.

At the gate she handed over her border pass for scanning, and the official handed it back to her after the standard checks. Khanyisile went to sit down in the crowded waiting room and checked her phone to make sure she had the contact numbers of her mother's sister, Aunt Agnes in the far South, who was a Chewa chief in Phalombe. Aunt Agnes would be the best person to help her settle into her life of self-exile.

Suddenly, a security official in a formal hat ran through the waiting room, holding a chunky phone with a radio antenna. He headed straight to Khanyisile and held her wrist, then placed the phone in her hand as if it might suddenly burst into flames. Alarmed, she looked up at the man. "What is going o—"

“*Khanyisile?!*” The voice of the Prince of Mzimba Kingdom rang out clearly through the satellite phone’s loudspeaker.

Khanyisile gasped, “Your Highness!” Several people turned at these words. Some caught eye contact with each other, exchanging looks of curiosity, strangers suddenly bonded by the chance to engage in some juicy gossip. Khanyisile paid them no attention.

“*Are you leaving?*” the prince’s voice rang out again.

“I– I have to go.”

“*Why?*”

“Because...” Khanyisile was suddenly self-conscious, glancing around at the crowd, and at the official who was still waiting for the phone. He quickly turned to face the opposite direction to mask his eavesdropping. “...because I don’t belong here anymore.”

“Khanyisile please let me meet with you. Allow me a chance to change your mind.”

She glanced towards the gate to the kingdom, beyond which lay a life of exile... an escape from the chaos raining down on her life. But it would also be far away from everyone who meant anything to her. Finally, she whispered, “Ok...”

Straight away, the border official nodded, then held his hand out to receive the phone. Khanyisile glanced at him and simultaneously said “Hello?” into the phone – but there was nothing but static.

The official waved his fingers more urgently. “You are staying, correct?”

“Yes...”

“Ok, let’s go.” He signalled to a couple of porters who immediately came to collect her bags and marched out of the waiting room. It was all Khanyisile could do to keep up with them.

“Wait! What’s going on?”

“The prince requests your presence. He has arranged transportation for you.” And indeed, when Khanyisile left the building, a big black car with tinted windows screeched to a halt in front of the building. Khanyisile’s jaw dropped, and she entered the passenger’s door of the vehicle.

She later found out that the phone was the official internal border post communication line reserved for high-ranking officials and emergencies.

The prince met Khanyisile at the entrance of the palace, and he didn’t hesitate to sit down next to her. She had never seen him so flustered before, and he looked like he had aged years in a day. “Khanyisile, I know this is a difficult situation, but I had already warned you that we will encounter challenges in our union. Surely you are not fleeing at the first sign of trouble?”

“This is something else, Your Highness.” Khanyisile said, shaking her head. “I cannot be with a man who put my father in such a terrible fate.”

“Khanyisile, I respect you greatly, so I must be honest with you. I believe that your father was the only one who sealed his fate. I wish it wasn't you who had told me about it, but you were. I am bound Khanyisile, by our cultural and spiritual laws. Many kings in the past were fortunate enough never to have to address a case of treason. I have been doing nothing but asking why I had to deal with such a heavy burden before I had even been pronounced king. But we do not choose our paths; we only choose how we take our next steps.”

“I understand, but I cannot... oh, Londisiwe, please understand. He is my father. One of his last words to me before they took him was that I betrayed him. I cannot live here with such a mark on my head.” Her voice quivered, and she tensed her jaw to hold back her emotions.

The prince bowed his head into his hands and let out a grunt of frustration. He took several slow deep breaths, and Khanyisile glanced at the car door. She spoke in a low voice, “Your Highness, may I please go—”

“Wait.” The prince raised his head, his eyes fixed on an indistinct spot in front of him. “Give me a day.”

“A day?”

“I don't wish to make any promises. Please just give me 24 hours, and if you still want to go, even as a king I cannot restrict my citizens' movements.”

“My father's trial is tomorrow. I do not want to be here for that.”

“Please.” Somehow, he made the word sound more like an order than a request.

She bit her lower lip until it hurt, and then nodded silently. The prince let out a breath, which it seemed he had been holding the entire time. “OK. The driver can take you home now.”

Chief Jabulani was being held in a cell with around-the-clock military guard. His meals were given at precise times, though he refused to eat most of them. Any meals they forced him to take down, he threw up shortly afterwards. His fate was churning his stomach. He had not seen his wives or children since the arrest and could only imagine how they were faring. As a man charged with treason, he was not permitted any visitors, in case he should have accomplices on the outside. They were extremely strict about this.

Of course, a prince had never visited a prisoner on trial for treason before.

Prince Londisiwe arrived just after 7pm, without the usual fanfare, even the vehicle he chose was as nondescript as possible. He only had two of his personal guards with him, dressed in plain clothes. The prince wore a hood to cover his face, prompting the guard at the entrance to demand identification. He lowered his hood, and the guard shot ramrod to attention in an instant.

“Take me to the prisoner.”

The chief was seated in a corner, his head lowered as far as it could be, and was so still that he appeared asleep. But the position of his hand and the tension of the grip to his scalp indicated he was very much awake. Who could sleep the day before a trial for treason?

The prince spoke, “Chief Jabulani, your prince requests your attention,” he said, standing by the locked door.

The chief thrust his head up, frozen in shock, which quickly transformed to fear. “Y– your Highness... I... I...”

“I believe we have a long overdue conversation...”

They talked for over two hours. The prince shared his perspective about secession, explaining how he used to believe it was a mistake, especially after seeing everything in the modern world. But when he had tried to escape his responsibilities as king-to-be, he found himself lost in the wilderness, and met with the ancient spirits. “They are the ones who give our Kingdom strength, and they live in the trees, the soil, in all living beings. I learned that my part as king is critical for the spirits to negotiate with our people.”

Chief Jabulani shook his head, exhausted. “The spirits stopped talking to me a long time ago, Your Highness.”

“That is truly a shame. After all, it was your daughter who inspired me onto my true path.”

Chief Jabulani looked up, curiosity in his face, but the prince elaborated no farther. “Your daughter was preparing to leave Mzimba Kingdom. I persuaded her to return.”

“What? Khanyisile?”

“She actually got as far as the border.” He leaned back with an impressed smile.

“She wanted to leave because of me?”

The prince’s face turned grim again. “What do *you* think?”

Chief Jabulani exhaled in despair, covering his face.

The prince studied him closely. “She blames herself, you know.”

“That could be because I told her she betrayed me,” said the chief as he stiffened his lips and narrowed his eyes.

The prince exhaled in exasperation. “You don’t think you’re projecting a little?”

“What do you mean?”

“*You* are accusing *her* of the very thing you are being tried for.”

“All I did – all I ever did was to provide for my families. Here we are, just looking at natural resources and not utilising them! All I was trying to do was open a business opportunity. I was going to bring you in on it, but I needed time to convince you, and to prove it worked. I even asked Khanyisile–”

The prince laughed loudly. “And this is where all her problems began. She was sent on two conflicting missions, to change the minds of two men who are both stubborn in their beliefs. Cutting timber indiscriminately is a path back to our old days

of ruin. Your desperation to provide for your family has blinded you of this obvious fact. “Your daughter has expressed to me her love of nature... but you are her father. You can agree that it was an impossible position to be in, especially since she cares for both of us.”

“Well, I was the one who raised her.”

The prince leaned forward, holding eye contact with Chief Jabulani. “You represent her past, I, her future. You tell me which one matters more now.”

The two men stared coldly at each other. The prince finally broke the silence. “So, let me put it this way. Neither one of us want Khanyisile to leave the kingdom.”

“Does that mean you are going to pardon me, Your Highness?” Chief Jabulani asked, sitting up slightly.

“No. I honour our laws. You must undergo the trial at dawn.”

“Then what do you propose?”

“Only this; if you make a full confession, including names of those outsiders you were colluding with, *and* you swear your allegiance to the throne and its ideals, then there is a chance you will survive the trial.”

“A *chance*? You think it is possible to trick the herb?”

“No. It will have to be sincere. There is your challenge.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because Khanyisile will not marry me if she holds me responsible for the death of her father.”

Chief Jabulani’s eyes widened. “She would give up the chance to be queen?”

The prince met his eye, then looked away. “She is a good daughter.”

Chief Jabulani sat back, allowing it to sink in. After a moment he set his jaw in a decisive way and looked up at the prince again. “And... she will make a good wife – and an exceptional queen.”

The prince regarded the chief and nodded, with a new sense of respect. The chief stood up, setting his shoulders back. “Who am I to stand in her way? Tell me what I must do.”

The prince nodded and instructed one of his men to fetch paper and a pen. As they waited for the materials, the chief addressed the prince once again. “You know, I was wrong about you, Your Highness. I thought you did not let your love for a woman keep you from your duties. I thought you were a hard man. But I see now that you are a balanced one. And it would be an honour to serve you.” He bowed low. “Should I survive.” When he stood up, the prince reached through the bars of the cell and shook hands with the chief. The guard arrived with the paper and pen, and the chief sat down to write.

Khanyisile kept waking up because of nightmares, forgetting the details as soon as they ended, left only with a sense of terror. By the morning, she felt tired, as if she had been spending the night doing chores instead of sleeping. The sun shone brightly

into her room, yet she was completely miserable. The atmosphere in the household echoed her feelings, even the younger children were aware that something was terribly wrong. They would often break into fights and tantrums, acting out the only way they knew how. Khanyisile busied herself mediating the fights, soothing the tantrums and administering hugs.

No one asked about her absence the previous day, when she had almost left Mzimba Kingdom. Either they had been too preoccupied, or too scared of the truth to ask. Khanyisile still had her packed bag hidden under her bed. It was not ideal, she wanted to be as far away as possible when her father was sentenced, but if it so happened that the bad news came, she would be ready to leave right away. Her plan wasn't entirely selfish; she knew she would be a burden to the family, because of the fallout from turning down the prince's marriage proposal, on top of what was happening to their father.

After breakfast, Khanyisile went to a restaurant in town to hear word from the neighbours about what was going on. She took a seat at a table facing the TV playing the news, then ordered a cup of tea. She also listened for the chatter amongst the neighbouring tables. The trial was taking place in the courtyard of the holding cell, and only the men of her father's status and higher were to attend as witnesses. No one was clear on the time it would begin. That would depend on the person who administers the *mwavi* herb.

There was no word about it for almost two hours, and Khanyisile's tea was cold when a messenger boy on a bicycle sped into town, shouting at the top of his lungs "They have started!" As soon as he stopped his bike, a crowd quickly formed around him, firing questions. Khanyisile listened out for one key part. What questions were they going to ask Chief Jabulani?

There were going to be three questions.

Are you a traitor to the Kingdom of Mzimba?

Do you intend to act in a way that endangers the citizens of Mzimba?

Are you loyal to the kingdom and the crown?

Khanyisile carefully thought the questions through. If he answered "no" to the first, then that lie would be a death sentence. If he answered "yes", he would be telling the truth and survive *mwavi*, but would have confessed to treason, leading him to another fate entirely.

She promptly left the restaurant, deciding she didn't need to hear any more. Half running, she made her way back home, all but ignoring any neighbours who attempted to greet her. As soon as she got home, she went straight for the bag under her bed, and ran out the door.

"Khanyisile! Where are you going?" Her mother called out, but she pretended she couldn't hear. Her mother called again. "Khanyisile, wait! It's your father!"

She stopped, frozen in place, she fought the urge to cover her ears.

"He passed the trial! He's alive!"

Khanyisile spun around. "What?" She saw her mother's tears of joy, but she was still in shock, trying to understand. "*How*, Mama?"

"I don't know, but we must prepare for your father's return home."

The following days were a whirlwind of activity both within the household and in the kingdom, as they prepared for the chief's return, and everyone else prepared for the uMthetho.

When their father returned, he was shaken, but healthy, a weak smile on his face. He brushed off any questions from his wives about what happened, making jokes about how he was too charming to die. It was a couple of days before Khanyisile even got time with him on his own. He was in his study and Khanyisile had been sent by her mother to serve him tea. She didn't waste time and spoke as she was pouring the hot herbal mix into the mug.

"Baba, how did you do it?"

He smiled. "Your prince came to my cell to chat. He can be quite convincing."

"What did he say?"

"Don't worry about it my dear. He is a good man. I would be pleased to have him as a son-in-law."

At these words her eyes welled up and she gave her father an unprompted hug, squeezing tightly. "I am so glad to hear you say it, Baba..."

He chuckled, "Alright, no need for all of that. Tell your mother to help you get ready for the uMthetho. You know the prince will want to see you."

On the day of the uMthetho, Khanyisile wore her best traditional outfit, tailor made to fit her curvy figure. She had not seen or talked to the prince since he had asked her not to leave the kingdom.

There were drums and dancing by the women and warriors, and the sound of their ankle bells filled the air as the dust rose. From the dancing warriors emerged the prince. Usually it would be the king, but he was still quite unwell.

Khanyisile stood in the crowd next to her sisters, watching the procession. She gasped as the prince strutted through the crowd amongst his warriors, skin glistening in the midday sun. Suddenly, she caught his eye, and he flashed a smile at her. She blushed, and her sisters nudged her, giggling.

Eventually, it came time for the prince to address his subjects. He gave a speech about the strength of the kingdom united, the great history of the kingdom, and how that history was able to be restored when the trees returned. He emphasised the need to protect nature, because it protected and provided for the people in return. As he was finishing his speech, Khanyisile felt a tap on her shoulder. It was the prince's first servant, Dingani.

“His Highness requests your presence at his side,” he said, leaning in so that only she could hear. She nodded and followed without hesitation. As the audience was cheering the conclusion of the prince’s speech, the first servant led her around the back of the royal platform, which was heavily guarded. The guards stepped aside as soon as they saw her, and another servant moved a chair to the right and slightly behind the prince’s seat. The prince himself remained facing forward, until she was seated. Then he turned his head to gaze at her and grinned widely.

“You are dressed fit for a queen, my dear,” said the prince in a deep murmur.

“Thank you...” Khanyisile returned his smile. He reached his hand out and she took it – it felt warm, and a good fit for her palm.

“I am pleased you decided to stay.”

She laughed incredulously. “As if you didn’t know I would!”

“Well, no, I didn’t, I promise you,” he smiled, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

“How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Your Highness...”

“Alright, fine, I won’t give you too much of a hard time. I cannot do anything in such a trial as your father’s, Khanyisile, even as a prince. I simply talked to him. The choice was his after that.”

“So, you convinced father about secession?” asked Khanyisile.

“Actually, you did,” replied the prince.

Khanyisile raised her eyebrows.

“Well, in your own way. I couldn’t change his mind despite my very best arguments. He is strong-willed, and I see where you get that from. It was only when I talked about you that he changed his mind.”

“Really? My father?”

“He loves you dearly. He confessed everything and gave us the names of the foreign agents he had colluded with, because he did not want to stand in the way of your future.”

“My future?”

“Yes. Your future with me... if you will still have me.”

“Oh, Your Highness... of course!”

The prince closed his eyes and exhaled in relief, then brought her hand to his lips for a gentle kiss. “Thank the ancestors...” Khanyisile leaned on his shoulder, and he rested his head on her forehead. Pockets of the crowd started to notice what was going on up on the podium, and a few started ululating.

The prince whispered a question to Khanyisile, and she grinned and responded.

Then, with the energy of a teenage boy, the prince sprung to his feet and spoke into the microphone once again. “My citizens! I have great news for you today. I am proud to announce the date for all of you to attend a royal wedding!”

The crowd exploded in celebration, citizens waved cloths in the air, and the sound boomed across the hilly woodlands, heard for miles around.

THE END

MUTHI
NHLEMA



HIRAFETH

'Be still and quiet. The woodlands will speak.'

Prologue

Golden rays of dusk light cascaded through the micro-pores of the ultraviolet-filtering veil that draped over the only window in the room. The day was ending and he knew this was the last time he would see his father alive.

The son gently touched his father's calloused hands, he did not want to wake him. The father's laboured wheezing filled the quiet of the room as he lay in bed, his time-worn body covered in an ancient, thick lion-skin blanket for final comforts, a luxury reserved only for the royal household. The bed faced southwards, facing the ancestral home from where the early settlers came. A home his father would soon depart for, never to return. Murmurs of anxious curiosity churned behind the closed door of the room. On any other day, the son would have brushed away that world, a world heavy with the weight of obligation, waiting for him behind that door. But, today was different. Today, the murmurs of that laden world were a welcome distraction from his father's wheezing. The silent pauses between each strained breath seemed to stretch on for longer than the last. How he desperately wished those murmurs outside were a little louder, those pauses a little shorter. Just enough to weigh down his father's ghost from ebbing away, forever.

Sitting in quiet contemplation, his fingers feeling the coarseness of his father's hands, it was only then the son noticed how frail his father had become. The crow's

feet cracking the corners of the eyes. The long wrinkles carving into the face. The lifelessness stiffening his body.

When did that happen? the son thought. *When did you get so old?*

The son wanted to cry but knew his father would never approve of such outward expressions of *feminine* emotions, is what he called it, especially from his only son. *Kings are not accorded such luxuries*, his father would say, often while they walked together in the *miombo* hills of home, just father and son. Just them. And many a time in those sacred woodlands, as he listened to his father speak in riddles and fables, the son grew to believe his father – a living legend – would somehow live forever, spared from time’s brutal indifference. The delusions of a child, this he knew, but he nonetheless clung to the waning warmth of those delusions like a man holding onto a deflating lifebuoy ring in the middle of a heartless ocean.

Don’t go yet, he wanted to say. *There is so much I need to understand.*

The son wanted so much to cry, but now was not the time. He would cry after the business was done.

He firmly placed the palm of his hand flat on the lion-skin blanket – on his father’s heaving chest – and balled his other into a fist and pressed it against his bare chest, about to administer the final rites that only a son could. He paused, steeling his thoughts to concentrate and fulfil his duty. A son’s duty to his father. A prince’s last obligation to his king.

This was it. The last time.

The son spoke the opening word of his tribe’s greeting – now a valedictory salute – hoping his father had the warrior’s strength to respond.

“Umvelo.”

Silence.

“Umvelo?”

Wheezing.

“Please, Father. *Umvelo*,” the son pleaded, looking down at the floor, away from the emptying shell of him.

A pause followed by a lingering silence. The wheezing had stopped.

“Umve--”

Suddenly, a hand – his father’s left hand – shot up in the air, as if pulled by an invisible puppeteer’s string, and clapped against the back of his son’s flat hand with a hollow thump, plunging the son back into the realness of this inescapable moment.

“Baba?” the son stuttered, frantically, a grimaced expression etched across his face. His father’s death grip tightened as he opened his blood-rimmed eyes, letting in the searing blast of dusk light. He stiffly turned his head toward the figure of his son and parted his chapped lips, revealing blackened gums beneath before he spoke.

“No,” the father groaned, gasping for air. He hefted his body with his right elbow from the bed and leant toward his son. The blanket slid away off his shoulders,

revealing his shrivelled frame coated in indelible white body paint. The branding of a celebrated warrior.

“Father, don’t!” the son pleaded, his voice cracking under the weight of his reluctant duty. He wanted to look away. He did not want this moment – this delirium – to be the last thing he remembered of his father. Not like this. *Please, not like this.*

“*Umvelo!*” the son continued with a hesitant defiance, as his father leaned in close enough for his stale breath to steal its way up the son’s flared nostrils.

Is that what death smells like?

The father feebly wrapped the claw-like fingers of his free right hand around the son’s fist, craned his head a little closer and spoke the last words his son would ever hear him speak.

This was it.

Their last time, together.

I

Your fathers speak in the woodlands. Their spirits ripple with the water. Their wisdom lingers in the air. Your fathers. They understood the ways of WEH as their ways.

But you forget the ways of your fathers. The ways of the sacred circle. Life. Death. Life in death. Death in life. The in-between. The sacred circle that binds all to WEH.

All to WEH.

Intertwine. Tether. A birth cord, inseverable, as a babe to its ma. You are bound to WEH. Not WEH to you. The sacred circle binds all to WEH.

All to WEH.

The praise of WEH never left the lips of your fathers. Their steps were the steps of WEH. Their ways the ways of WEH. Yet stories of WEH remain unspoken, alien to your tongues. You, their progenies.

Forgotten are WEH. Those sacred secrets, those whispers of shadows, are forgotten.

The ways of your fathers are replaced with the ways of machines. The ways of metal and poison. The ways of madness. You are no more of WEH but of the machines. Of poison. Of madness.

You leave WEH lifeless and dying. The parched veins of WEH rivers ran empty. The flesh of WEH earth laid bare, naked. The barren skies no longer recount the seasons. The constellations tell WEH no more fables of old.

All ravaged. All gone. All dead.

You take! Take! Take!

WEH give! Give! Give!

The sacred circle is broken. Lost to myth and malice.

Lost.

Lost.

Lost.

II

Second floor – Parliament Building, Inside the Southlands, July 2009

The rhythmic blaring of the warning alert shrilled through the waiting silence. Something was coming.

The alert reverberated through the gently lit sparse octagonal room, drawing Elder Koyi's attention away from his conservationist recitations to the large oval window overlooking the parliament grounds. Calmly, he lifted his smallish frail frame from the hoverchair, folded his arms behind his back and paced himself toward the window. Each step was a tentative, but confident stride, like his feet did not trust the floor. He stopped close enough for a deposit of condensation to form on the invisible pane. His crinkly lips were still moving. The recitations still lingered through mutters under his breath. It was his habit. His duty. His sworn covenant to the *Umvelo* Creed.

Breathe these truths as you breathe air, so they don't depart from you. Depart him, they never did. And they never would.

Something was coming.

His narrowed watery eyes glared in the distance, beyond the bustle of Southlanders below, stampeding toward the sanctuary of the parliament building. And then, there. Something caught his eye. There. In the distance.

There it was. He had seen it many times, but he could not look away.

He marvelled at the grotesque beauty of the thing. The girth of its destruction. The gyrating force of its indifference. The towering column of its devastating form mushroomed into the cloudless summer sky, blotting out the searing sun from view. The jagged concrete, glass and hardened clay cityscape of the capital vanished, assimilated into its chaotic configuration. A solar sheet, cables and wires dangling out of it, could be seen violently twisting in the air toward it, catching the searing whiteness of sunlight before its consumption. The dying moments of the reflected whiteness danced across Elder Koyi's face and eyes. He did not flinch, nor did he blink.

"Is that," began a male voice to his right flank "a dust storm?" It was his *Impi*, a young cadet of the Royal Guard, clad in khaki capris, sleeveless *dashiki* hemmed with leopard skin patterns, an *Umqhele* – a tribal headband of synthetic Springbok

hide – wrapped around his head, and a metallic rod tightly gripped in the hand at his side. The *Impi* was chosen to protect the Elder while he discharged his emissarial obligations in the Southlands. It was the young *Impi*'s first deployment away from home. Puzzled at first, Elder Koyi surmised, judging by the *Impi*'s youthful exterior, that he may have only heard of dust storms in fireside fables elders, back home, told to children to warn them of the long-suffering vengeance of *Umvelo*.

Umvelo sees all! Umvelo knows all! Umvelo never forgives, the elders would say of the three warnings, their time-sculpted faces bathed in the ember glow of the dying flames. And like all fables from tired old men, they were discounted as myths to the virgin eyes of youth that had not seen.

“Yes,” he replied, still facing the oncoming storm, with only a thin fibreglass of the oval window for protection. “We should be safe within these walls,” he added with a mild air of assurance he knew the *Impi* did not need.

“These were common in the time before the Insurrection. It was...,” Koyi paused, the words dangling at the tip of his tongue. He was not sure they were alone. Any object in the room could be an instrument of surveillance. The hoverchairs. The keystone conference table in the centre, facing an in-wall OLED video display. The Momberaland miniature flag, with its bends of deep blue and leopard brown back-dropping a cowhide shield, centred on the table. The painted portraits of three-dimensional human subjects hanging from the walls, eyes peering down into the room like gargoyles on alert. Elder Koyi did not put it past the Southlanders to eavesdrop on their conversation. They were desperate and capable of anything – even risking a diplomatic incident of unlawfully surveilling an emissary from Momberaland, a former protectorate of the Southlands.

Everything in the room was suspect.

A shadow of cautious awareness cast over his stony expression as he craned his head slightly to his *Impi*.

“It was a different time,” he said, receiving only a nodding acknowledgement from the *Impi* before returning to his soldier's stance, silent, but ready. Ready for anything.

It was not just a different time, a time best lost to memory and myth. It was a time of dishonour, of shame. A time when the bell rings of the *magenjeza* roused no fear in the hearts of men and the approaching horde of Royal warriors – the *Impi* – was the object of entertainment. A time when their Great Homestead was taken for granted by the two-faced Southlanders, far too many times. Promises of self-determination were made, in supposed sincerity, and then broken without consequence, times without number. Again. Again. And again. And, each time, all the old and wise of that age did, in *retaliation*, was evoke *Mhlabho*'s name whilst reminiscing, mostly in an uncontrolled drunken stupor, of bygone years when the world knew their names. It, indeed, was a time best lost to memory and myth. While his people – the emancipated kinfolk of Momberaland – cursed the Southlanders for those times of

dishonour, Koyi felt differently. He knew it was those who came before – the old and wise of that age – who forgot the ways of their fathers, embracing, instead, the deviant ways of others. First, of the white colonizer. Then, of the Southlander who shared their skin, but not their ways. What fools they were, and they paid dearly for their foolishness. Seasons changed. Strange sicknesses came, taking the young and leaving the old, alone. The wisdom of the *Esangweni* – the gathering of the eight elders – went unheeded. Abandoned.

We were a stateless people, a people without self, as the anthem chanters would sing at kraal or *chibaya* gatherings, recounting the grand legends of the Great Insurrection of 2068.

What fools we were. Never again.

Koyi had a swelling urge to spit but decided against it. He sighed softly as his folded arms tightened against his back, broadening his shoulders. A calm wellspring of disgust fermented inside him, hardening his expression. Those memories were like the stench of a dog's carcass, best suppressed, avoided. But he never suppressed them, despite feelings to the contrary. Instead, he faced them, embraced them, even honoured them, by smearing himself with the filth of those memories as a vicarious flagellation for the sins of his ancestors. Those memories were a reminder, a unifying point of reference. Like the misguided followers of the colonizers' religion would say, every emancipated kinfolk needed their own *Egypt*, or something like that. There was little Koyi remembered of their forbidden texts. Their holy texts – their *good* books – had all since been charred to ashes at the Great Cleansing Bonfire of 2075, marking the birth of the Creed.

The past, the time before the Insurrection, was their *Egypt*. And the Royal House of *Mhlahlo*, their *Moses*. And they were never going back. Never!

Windblown debris gently scratched against the window. Eddies of dust frenziedly whirled on its surface. The artificial trees were swaying violently in the strong wind. The room was bathed in a warm brown hue, almost comforting even in this unsafe place. A hint of stale sweat hung in the air, the lingerings of past negotiations – fiery no doubt – like the one he was about to face. The dust storm was close. Very close. The blaring alert, at some point, had stopped.

Then he heard them. Echo of footsteps, far away at first, and then closer and closer, outside the rectangular double doors at the opposite end of the room. The footsteps had an urgent gait to them. Angry and determined, as Koyi expected.

"They're coming," the *Impi* said, turning his formidable frame in the direction of the double doors. Elder Koyi loosened the tension in his folded arms and cracked his neck, but he did not turn from the window. He slipped his hand into a concealed pocket in his red caftan, hemmed with fang-like embroideries around the neckline, and took out a glass pellet with a brown foamy liquid bubbling inside. He opened his mouth, placed the pellet under his ridged tongue and whispered, "The courage of our fathers be upon me."

The double doors rapidly slid open. A man, a Southlander with a rotund build, greying goatee and clad in a black Chinese collar suit, barged in, flanked by a soldier in combat fatigues. The double doors closed behind the man, leaving the soldiers outside, and him alone, with Elder Koyi and the *Impi*.

The young *Impi* lifted his silver metallic rod above his head and a spearhead-shaped laser blade, a spear flame, made of concentrated pulsating blue light, shot out of one end, unsheathed from its metallic prison. The approaching man's iris flickered with a blue glint, as the *Impi* began to chant with a full thunderous voice, "You are in the presence of Elder Koyi. The Royal Ecological Historian. An Emissary of His Royal Majesty *Inkosi* Ya Makhosi Mhlahlo II. One of the Eight Elders of the *Esanguweni*. A Citizen of the Free Homestead of Momberaland. He speaks for His Majesty. Bayethe Nko –!"

"What the hell kind of game are you playing?" the Southlander barked at Koyi, whilst standing at the other end of the keystone conference table, ignoring the *Impi* who had sheathed the spear flame and lowered the metallic rod to his side.

"Is that the tongue of a diplomat, my friend?" Koyi retorted casually, pivoting to face him, but still standing by the window. Koyi skimmed the man's appearance and smirked. It was rumoured that the Southlands had failed to pay off their longstanding debts to foreign lands and, instead, auctioned off parts of their land – their birthright – to the highest bidder, usually borderless corporate states, to clear their debt. Debt colonialism is what they called it. Judging from the Southlander's attire, there may have been some truth to the speculation.

It was said these Southlanders were the descendants of the Grand Masquerades, spirit beings from the underworld, which fought off the colonizers with dark magic, many centuries ago. Now they are a conquered people. A failed people. They had forgotten the ways of their fathers.

Never again!

"Why even call this meeting?! Was it to make fools of us? Did you want to throw this in my face?!" the man continued, brewing with irritation. "Rènzhēn duìdài wǒ! How do you expect us to discuss removing our troops from the borderlands around Mzimba if –" The man winced at the realisation of his blunder. The *Impi* sucked his teeth with unbridled indignation. Koyi raised his hand, calming the warrior.

"There will not be any talks if you keep calling my home that forbidden name," Koyi cautioned, whilst walking slowly back to the hoverchair. He paused in front of the chair before leisurely taking his seat and motioning the man to the hoverchair nearest him. The man, letting off a heavy sigh, sat down and planted his elbows on the table. His fingers were interlaced into a ball of anxiety, his fingernails digging into his skin. Koyi leant back in his hoverchair, crossed his legs and clasped his hands on his knee.

"Why don't we start again, shall we?" Koyi said, calmly. "You were accusing me of something?"

Koyi was an impenetrable wall of composure.

“We had an agreement,” the man said through pursed quivering lips. “My government made fair concessions in return for Momberaland not to declare itself an independent nation-state...”

“Under threat of military action from your government. Minor, but important detail, wouldn’t you agree?” Koyi interjected.

“We have been more than fair, my good friend!” The man continued, determined not to be deterred. He unlocked his fingers, placing his right hand on his left bicep and forming a fist with his left. He listed off each concession, one by one, with his fingers.

Thumb.

“Parliamentary powers to the *Esangweni*.”

Index.

“Permission to operate carbon sink facilities.”

Middle.

“Aerial corridor for endangered wildlife to settle in your woodlands.”

Ring.

“And...”

“Autonomy to run our affairs without interference,” interjected Koyi. “I am well versed in these concessions, my good friend. I negotiated them. Momberaland has complied with the conditions for our autonomy.”

“Semi-autonomy,” The man corrected, chuckling with disbelief, “Semi-autonomy! *That* is the privilege your Homestead enjoys that my government provides. You are not independent! Yet you keep acting like you are.”

Koyi glumly scoffed as he leaned forward and placed his interlaced fingers on the table. His narrowed unblinking eyes trained on the Southlander. His face, a veneer of calculated contemplation.

“You have soiled my dignity twice so far. I promise you, my good friend, there will not be a third,” Koyi said with quiet intensity.

“*Jiāyóu!* We’ve been more than fair and patient...eh!” the man said, speaking through his teeth.

“Patient?” Koyi chuckled, maintaining his composed demeanour. “What do you know about patience? Try waiting for over a century for a home of your own!” The young *Impi* grinned quietly in gleeful concordance.

“That was decades ago,” The man said, unable to hide his exasperation. “You can’t keep bringing up the past as an excuse to renege on our agreement!”

“Until you know what it’s like to lose your sovereignty, you cannot understand,” Koyi replied, glancing at the man’s attire. “But I am guessing you will understand soon enough.”

An unsettling silence fell between them, only the man’s deep breathing punctuated the emptiness. The man slouched back in his hoverchair, seemingly defeated.

The noise from the debris, smashing and scratching against the window intensified. The dust storm was right outside the window. Koyi tongued the glass pellet in between his third molars.

“The Royal Homestead...,” Koyi said, breaking the deafening silence. “...has authorised me to table the demilitarisation of the borderlands with your parliament. Is your government amenable?”

“I too am *well-versed* in these agreements, my good friend” the man retorted. “You are free to run your affairs without interference, but you would keep us informed, and you must not engage in.” The man snapped his fingers, repeatedly, trying to summon forth the rest of his argument. “How does it go? *‘Any unilateral action, either military in nature or otherwise, that would be interpreted, whether in whole or in part, by the Republic as an attempted act of secession.’*”

The man, radiating a renewed confidence, leaned forward, placed his interlaced fingers back on the table, and stared down Elder Koyi, awaiting his capitulation. Koyi, unmoved, stared back, the pellet clutched between his third molars. The young *Impi*’s smirk dissolved into a glower.

“The Royal Homestead...,” Koyi said. “...has authorised me to initiate discussions about demilitarising ...”

“What about the neural links?” the man interjected.

Koyi’s heart skipped a beat, but you couldn’t tell by looking at him. The young *Impi* flinched, shifting slightly.

“What neural links?”

“Stop playing these games?! Was this meeting part of your plan? To distract us?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Have you imported illegal neural link technology without clearing it with my government?”

“No!” Koyi said emphatically.

“You know nothing about that?!” The man pressed with relentless tenacity.

“No!” Koyi replied, contempt cracking through his collected façade.

“What are you planning?!” the man said, his tone laced with suspicion.

“I have no idea what you are talking about!”

“Don’t lie to me! Not after all you and I have been through.”

Agitated, Koyi shot up from his hoverchair. The young *Impi* ignited the pulsating spear flame.

“This meeting is over!” Koyi ordered.

The man shifted in his hoverchair and placed his hand under the table, reaching for something. The warrior advanced toward him with the ignited metallic rod in the throw position.

“Steady, Southlander!” the young *Impi* exclaimed with menacing anticipation, a hunter’s anticipation. A soldier’s anticipation.

“Wait,” The man pleaded with his other hand, palm-up, shielding his face. An audible click sound came from under the table.

Suddenly, the in-wall video display on the wall came alive with swirls of magenta and turquoise, before tuning to a frozen image of a female news anchor with a photo insert of a map of Momberaland in the background.

“What is this?” Koyi asked, unable to hide his curiosity. He gestured to the *Impi* to sheathe his spear flame. He complied.

“Play video!” the man instructed.

The female news anchor unfroze and began to speak.

“It’s called a delicate peace for a reason.

The Homestead of Momberaland, a former protectorate of the Republic of Malawi, has allegedly procured neural link technology off the dark market. While the use case for the tightly regulated technology is yet to be confirmed, speculations abound that this may be part of the Homestead’s plan to militarise the Royal Guard. If these allegations are true, this would go against the transparency clause of the peace agreement between the two neighbouring states, further heightening tensions, which are already sky-high, with a Malawian military presence positioned in the border regions in the event Momberaland attempts a second secession.

Momberaland currently enjoys a semi-autonomous status, which was negotiated following a bloody separatist insurrection in 2068 where the then leader Mhlahlo I demanded sovereignty from Mainland Malawi, their former administrative master. Following its controversial de-westernisation policy which saw several public reforms, including the rejection of neoliberal capitalism, abolition of free elections and the institution of a new Gaian state religion, the Ngoni territory was declared a Socialist Eco-state in 2092 by the United Nations Environment Programme, the first of its kind in the world. Momberaland is one of the thriving green economies on the African continent with many notable achievements such as the second largest restored woodlands in the world, an aerial corridor for endangered species and a booming Carbon Sink industry, which is registered on the Carbon Offset Stock Exchange. This has seen Momberaland’s GDH growth outpace...”

The video display cut to black, the rich colours receding to the edges. Enough had been seen. Koyi lowered himself back into the hoverchair, a dazed expression straining around the edges of his solemn face.

“This was supposed to air around the time you landed. I’ve had it embargoed,” the man said matter-of-factly. “Do you want to change your story?” He scrutinized Koyi’s demeanour, searching for even a half-hint of humbling admission.

“Seems it is you playing games,” Koyi replied. “Divide and rule? Is that the strategy from your playbook?”

“*Ó, wǒ de tiān a,*” the man chortled as a wave of realization came over him. “You... You have no idea what I am talking about.”

Koyi was not used to such a vulnerable position where a Southlander knew something he didn't. It was its own special kind of defeat, and Koyi hated the feeling. It disgusted him.

"You must think me an amateur, Southlander," Koyi hissed under his breath, shooting the man a sneering glare. "You can't control us, so you create lies to divide us! Need I remind you, Southlander, that if we break away from your *Republic*," the word was laced with sarcastic disgust, "then other tribes will follow, and what will be left of your games then? Huh?! Nothing, but ashes!" Koyi smirked, triumphantly. "How ironic, given the meaning of your name, don't you agree?"

The man's demeanour betrayed little emotion, giving nothing away. He said nothing. A reluctant silence settled between the two good friends as they sat across from each other, each holding the other's stare in a quiet duel of piercing words that would never be said.

Outside, the smashing noise from the debris lessened to persistent whistling from the wind. They were in the eye of the dust storm.

"After all we have been through, I am still just a Southlander to you," the man said, with an air of bitter sincerity, before lifting himself from his hoverchair and heading toward the opening double doors. He stood in the doorway and said "There is always a game being played, *Wō péngyōu*. Just don't be the pawn. The embargo is for 48 hours," before vanishing behind the closing doors.

Koyi took out the glass pellet from his mouth and placed it back inside his caftan as his mind wandered and conjured up grand conspiracies. The kind that started wars. The kind that got people killed. Koyi had to tread carefully. But what to do?

Koyi was a pragmatic man. The shadow world of private diplomacy held no more mysteries for him. Every encounter between *good friends* was a matter of exchange. An exchange of interests. Handshakes and peace accords were just a front – theatre for the masses who desperately wanted to cling to the egalitarian illusion of shared interest. Everything was about interest, self-interest, nothing more. What interests were at play? How far was the other side willing to go to further their interests? And, most importantly, who was willing to stab you in the back? Cold, but pragmatic. It was this cold pragmatism that made Koyi an effective player, a survivor, in these games of power. He anticipated every move and was never blindsided. But, this. This was different and he felt uneasy.

There is always a game being played.

The fathers said, *never trust a Southlander*. The man clad in black was many things, but Koyi had *sparred* with him enough times to know this – whatever *this* was – it was not the man's style. Creating such far-fetched fabrications would only escalate tensions between Momberaland and the Southlands, and, with the temperament of the current *Inkosi*, possibly all-out conflict. The man knew this. Koyi knew this. On this they agreed, the peace between their territories may have been delicate, but it was necessary. None of them wanted bloodshed, not like before. His thoughts grew

dark with the spectre of doubt. He leant back into the hoverchair, his forefinger gently stroking his lower lip, lost in contemplation. With each contemplation, certainty slowly drained from him. There was no iteration in Koyi's mind where this power play yielded any mutual benefits, which left only one plausibility. Someone *was* playing him. And if it wasn't the Southlander, then who?

Don't be the pawn.

Koyi brushed away the creeping doubt and stood up from the hoverchair with renewed resolve. "Forget what you have seen here. Share it with no one," Koyi ordered the *Impi*. "Take me home. To Hora." Koyi marched past the conference table toward the opening double doors, not noticing that the young warrior did not follow.

Click! Cluck! Click! Click!

Startled, Koyi stopped in mid-stride, standing in the open doorway. A frown furrowed across his brows.

Click! Cluck! Click! Click!

He slowly swivelled around to face the *Impi*, who was still standing in his original position, unmoved, metallic rod at his side.

Click! Cluck! Click! Click!

The young warrior contorted his face, revealing his incisors, as he clucked his tongue against the hard palate of his mouth. *Impi-speak*. The clandestine language of the *Impi* used only in times of wars or subterfuge. The language was forbidden on the tongues of the uninitiated. It was only spoken by the *Impi*, but understood by the Elders of the *Esangweni*. If the young warrior chose to use *Impi-speak*, he had something to say that was given him in secret, something only few were meant to hear.

"What do you mean I can't leave?" Koyi asked, the double doors sliding shut behind him.

Cluck! Cluck! Click! Click! Cluck! Click!

"Know your place, *Impi*. I am one of the Eight! An Emissary of the *Inkosi*! You will tell me why I can't leave."

Cluck! Click! Cluck!

"Orders! What orders?" Koyi persisted, striding closer, the light fabric of his caftan sweeping the floor. The *Impi* pursed his lips in blatant defiance before he continued.

Clack! Clack! Click! Clu –

"I swear by our fathers!" Koyi said, his widened eyes rimmed with fiery contempt. "I will leave you in this place *Umvelo* has forsaken. Where you will not have a warrior's burial!" The *Impi's* grip on the metallic rod tightened as beads of sweat sprouted on his forehead.

"Who gave the order?" Koyi pressed, his tone quaking with restrained rage. Koyi was at arms-length in front of the towering mass of the *Impi*, who stood silent, unshaken, staring into his eyes. The *Impi* lowered his head and looked away, escaping the brittle accusation that edged his Elder's eyes.

A sudden lull fell between them. A strained whimper filled the quiet of the room. The *Impi* lifted the metallic rod to shield his face from the discovery of his weakness. His shame. His robust frame, once indestructible, now covered into a defeated incarnation, unbecoming of the *Impi*.

What is this burden you carry, Koyi thought, shifting uneasily in the presence of such outward expression of emotion.

“Look at me,” Koyi said with a surprising calmness. The *Impi*’s whimper subsided. His pursed lips softened into a thick line of surrender as he turned to face his Elder, his inflamed eyes meeting the scrutiny of Koyi’s marble gaze.

“I see a fear in your eyes, but not of me,” Koyi whispered, with an air of introspection. “You fear he who gave you the orders more than me.” He pivoted away from the *Impi*, the spectre of doubt pervading his mind, relentless in its virulence. “That means they must be higher than me, which can only mean....”

Koyi’s eyes widened in disbelief at this unsettling realisation. He turned sharply and looked in the *Impi*’s face, seeking some cosmic rebuttal from the *Impi*’s forlorn expression against his treacherous meditations. Nothing, but a reluctant confirmation stared back. He understood the *Impi*’s burden, a burden heavier than mere disobedience. For, besides the smell of defeat in battle, there was only one other thing that could break an *Impi*’s spirit: betraying their liege, their *Inkosi*.

“No,” Koyi gasped, hoping this denial would deliver him from the heresy of this damning revelation.

Koyi staggered backwards. His body felt hollowed out, the floor beneath him becoming quicksand. His legs faltered from under him, the conference table being his only anchor. The *Impi* lunged to catch his fall.

The dust storm outside had passed, leaving debris falling from the sky.

III

Then, WEH felt it. A fire, rising from the heights of Hora, where your fathers settled. The skies choked with billowing black smoke. The song of the ankle bells echoing through the remains of once great Chikangawa. The wind carries the war cry. Dead soils, stained crimson. The machines are silent. The madness, quiet.

Then, WEH hear it. The old familiar.

The roots of the fallen kin of miombo push through the soil-dark. The chirrup of birds returns to the hallowed woodlands of WEH once again, younglets soaring for skies. Their song mingling with the whispers of your fathers. The bloom of wildflowers colouring the

greening slopes of WEH. The calls of the wild resound, predator and prey flourishing in balance. The constellations tell new fables of WEH. The skies recount the seasons of old.

Your steps remember the ways of your fathers. The ways before the machines. Before the madness. Before the poison. The ways of WEH.

The sacred circle is restored. Life. Death. Life in Death. Death in Life. The in-between. Balance is restored.

Reborn.

Renewed.

Lost no more.

IV

They were getting closer.

“We are approaching Momberaland airspace,” announced the autopilot over the quiet drone of the electric-powered intermeshing blades of the helidrone.

Koyi sat inside the soundproof cabin of the helidrone, distracted by the world outside his window. He kept tugging at the right sleeve of his caftan, hiding the indelible white body paint up his lower arm. He stole a side-eye glance at the young *Impi* to make sure he didn’t notice. He didn’t. The *Impi* was in his own world, his own trance. Hunched over, he sat across from Koyi, the metallic rod pressing on his well-muscled knees. They were both avoiding eye contact, each lost in his own reveries. Each awaiting an unknown fate in uncharted terrain. The shadow of the rotating blades swept across Koyi’s empty face in a rapid blur of motion as he watched a glorious transformation below. Though it was dusk, a riot of purples, oranges and violets vying for dominance on the distant horizon, he saw everything.

Fibrous gullies of deep brown cracked through the caliche of the earth like black veins on a dead body. Even from this height above, the hardpan was an auburn wasteland. Barren. Unwelcoming. Empty. He could not remember the last time he had seen anything grow down there. On occasion, he saw moving figures give chase, children he supposed, who often threw stones at the helidrone as they flew past; the helidrone’s shadow their only shade. Was this a gesture of hostility or a desire for escape? A desire to be seen, not ignored. *How can they live in such a place, a place cursed by Umvelo*, Koyi often thought.

And then, “We are now in Momberaland airspace.”

There it was. Home, at last.

The land below transformed from a barren brown to lush shades of green, blanketing the rising hills, falling mountains and rolling plains in a panoramic sprawl

of open woodlands. The swaying *miombo* trees and the rustling leaves in the gentle breeze gave the canopy an almost fluid-like quality, like the swell of a limitless emerald ocean. Koyi closed his eyes and imagined. The soothing breeze rustling through the grass before encountering the leaves of the trees, a harmonious balance. The sunlight breaking through the leaves, dappling the ground in a hypnotic dance between light and shade. Buried in the belly of the woodlands were the remains of the time before. The ashen hollow shells of bricks, timber and broken glass of the empty towns and the old city of *Mzuzu*, abandoned to the enveloping capture of *Umvelo*. A reminder of the folly of the times. A reminder to keep the ways of the fathers, the ways of *Umvelo*.

Something disturbed Koyi's daydream. A gentle tap on the windshield. Was it the shy pitter-patter of the coming rains? Or the debris from the dust storm, still in that octagonal room in the Southlands?

Amid the verdant splendour slowly vanishing under the drape of evening, a constellation of red dots – the carbon counters – came alive in synchronised harmony, freckling the canopy from horizon to horizon. The counters, grafted to the tree's bark from juvenile years, were transmitting the carbon dioxide extract returns for the day. Ascending out of the woodlands, a leisurely strobe of white lights from the aerial animal corridor carrier could be seen in the shrouded distance. The striped hyena was expected today in one of the woodland paddocks, recalled Koyi. The striped hyena was a rare and endangered specimen he intended to study, up close, with insatiable fascination.

"We are approaching New Embangweni," trilled the autopilot.

The Kraal of New Embangweni, one of eight scattered across the greenscape, was a large perfectly circular clearing in the woodlands, the tree line forming the outer edges. Orbiting the centre of the clearing were several concentric rows of dome-shaped abodes, each topped with circular solar sheets with strobing circuit lines branching out of them, like the legs of a scarab. A cylindrical perforated structure – the air-to-water generator – rose from the clearing's centre, reaching for the sky. Children, stick figures at Koyi's elevation, waved excitedly as dogs meandered between their legs, demanding their juvenile masters' attention. Orderly rows of maize, sorghum, millet, and melons ridged the annulus of the clearing, the fifth harvest this year. Several circular orbs, unmanned irrigation drones, floated above the croplands in an invisible lattice of precision and speed, releasing jet sprays of water along their path as they moved. A stream of tribespeople – woodland patrol, paddock workers and carbon counter loggers – emerged from the treeline, heading home. The watch lights at the treeline switched on, bathing the croplands in a white hue, as the irrigation drones rose in perfect coordination toward the air-to-water generator, latching onto the perforations before powering down for the night.

This was his home. His natural habitat. Momberaland.

Any other time, the sight of home from this height would have comforted him, filling him with a sense of wonder of how far they had come as a tribe, as a people. The

muscles in his squared shoulders, previously taut with tension, would drop into relaxed slopes of release. His mind would recede to the memory of a landscape of sparse and blackened plains of fallen trees and stubborn stumps. When the only woodlands, standing tall and brimming with life, were kept for burying the dead. His calloused hands, sore from the back-breaking toil of replanting, were a testament to their regeneration, history written in the folds of his palm. A phantom pain always stung the nerves in his hands when he remembered the time before.

But this was not any other time. The sight of home brought him no comfort. The tension in his shoulders remained. Something had changed, shifted, out of place. Not in the world, but in *him*. When he recalled the morning, him departing for the Southlands, the *Koyi-from-that-morning* felt like an alien from a foreign world, a foreign time. A world apart from his. An abstraction.

“Mount Hora in 3 minutes,” announced the autopilot.

The *Impi*'s fingers cracked as his grip tightened around the metallic rod, drawing Koyi's attention. His eyes were vacant. His mouth, downturned.

“*Impi*,” Koyi said delicately, startling the *Impi* from his trance, back from that other world.

“Yes, my Elder,” he replied, taking in a deep breath, and adjusting his posture. His eyes still avoided Koyi's.

“Look at me,” Koyi insisted. The *Impi* obeyed. “I will protect you. You have my word,” Koyi assured him.

Koyi was a master of persuasion; it did not take much of his powers to convince lesser minds to see things his way. However, those lesser minds were always Southlanders, and never a fellow tribesman. To him, like the spear flames of the *Impi*, his powers of persuasion were their own kind of weapon, and, like the spear flames, were only supposed to be used against enemies of the nation-state. Turning such talents against one of his own was unthinkable, a betrayal of an unspeakable order. He hated himself for allowing the thought to settle in his mind. He felt dirty. Foul. And yet, he did it. He knew he had to use his powers of persuasion to convince his young *Impi* not to inform his superiors of their return home before the instructed time. He understood the risk the *Impi* was taking. The consequences for failing to follow orders were grave, either death or exile. Many chose death rather than be exiled in the lands afflicted by *Umvelo*'s curse.

Koyi understood the risks for his young *Impi*, but his curiosity was stronger than his empathy. He had to know why. He needed to know why.

As he regarded the *Impi*, holding his unblinking stare, Koyi understood that his powers of persuasion were not from years navigating the corridors of diplomacy, but from a place of certainty. Certainty in himself. Certainty in his cause. But now, he was not certain. Even now, a cloud of doubt cast over his certainty, as the Southlander's words stayed with him and never let him go, mocking his faith.

Don't be a pawn.

Seeing the earnest search in the *Impi's* eyes, Koyi regretted his words of assurance. *I don't know what will happen to you*, is what he should have said. At least, that way, the *Impi* would have been ready for any eventuality, but it was too late. The words were said. They couldn't be unsaid. An upturn curve creased the corner of the *Impi's* lips as life cautiously flooded back into his eyes.

"My Elder," he nodded.

Silence passed between them in those last few moments, before their arrival.

As the helidrone angled its approach for landing, the craggy grey-white slopes of Mount Hora, came into view, its conical peak lost in the evening mist. As the helidrone began its vertical descent, Koyi tucked his hand in his caftan and felt for the glass pellet. It was still there.

Koyi whispered a verse from the Creed, as the helidrone descended.

The courage of our fathers be upon me.

The violet sky, drained of all warmth, welcomed Scorpius. As was custom, the young *Impi* alighted from the helidrone first. After a deep sigh and another tug at his right sleeve to hide the white body paint, Koyi followed.

A gust of cool moist air greeted them, heightening their senses, as they alighted. The aroma of cattleya orchids wafted in the air. They had landed in the middle of a wide clearing that circled the base of Mount Hora, the treeline adjoining the clearing edges. From an aerial view, the hydraform-layered ground had patterns of earthen colours – rust and terracotta, forming elliptical sunbeams around the base of the Mount. The watch lights, positioned evenly along the treeline, bathed the clearing at the mountain's base in a soft hue of ivory.

Waiting a few steps away from the helidrone, outside the reach of the decelerating intermeshing blades, was the small welcome party of the *Induna*, a Commander in the Royal Guard, a burly bare-chested man with an ostrich feather rising from the front of his *Umqhele*, flanked by two other young *Impi*. Avoiding the decelerating blades, Koyi's *Impi* marched forward to the welcome party, Koyi, right arm hidden at his back, strolled casually beside him.

Standing a few steps away, the *Induna*, and his party, lowered their heads in unison, gently beating their chests in greeting. Koyi reciprocated.

"*Baba!*" Koyi began. "Small welcome party."

"*Baba!* Elder Koyi." *Induna* said, lifting his head. "Forgive this insult. We did not expect you back so soon from the Southlands."

"Neither did I."

"Had we been told in advance, arrangements would have been made," The *Induna* continued, stealing a sour glance at Koyi's *Impi*.

"He is not at fault," Koyi interjected. "It was beyond his control. Even mine."

“Understood, Elder Koyi,” *Induna* said, still looking at Koyi’s *Impi*. “May I ask what exactly happened?”

“No. You may not.” Koyi retorted, “That is between me and our *Inkosi*. These are *Esangweni* matters.”

“With all due respect, Elder Koyi. I was not addressing you,” *Induna* replied. “*Impi?*” he continued, holding his attention firmly on the downcast composition of Koyi’s *Impi*. “What happened?”

“He cannot tell you,” Koyi said. “He is sworn to me!”

“The *Impi* are sworn to our *Inkosi!* This,” *Induna* levelled a stern finger at Koyi’s *Impi*, “This boy is sworn to our *Inkosi*. Be best to remember that.”

“And I am his emissary,” Koyi said, as he strolled toward the towering frame of the *Induna*. “And therefore, his voice. It is best you remember that, soldier.” Koyi felt the warm plume of stale breath from the *Induna*’s flared nostrils, as he stood in front of him. His eyes, a narrowing tunnel of restrained contempt.

“Where is our *Inkosi*,” Koyi said, exuding an understated air of authority.

“His Majesty is under the *nkazye* tree,” he replied, extending the determined arc of his finger to Mount Hora, “Communing with his father.”

Brushing him aside, Koyi walked past, in the direction of the Mount. “*Impi*. Follow me!”

As Koyi’s *Impi* hesitantly complied, the *Induna* firmly placed his massive hand on his shoulder, blocking him. Without looking, the *Impi* felt his superior’s searing glare at this act of blatant insubordination.

“Know your place, boy,” the *Induna* growled through gritted teeth.

“The boy is under my protection,” Koyi said, with hushed resolution.

The *Induna* smirked, his expression only mildly softening “Why would he need protection among tribesmen?” he sneered.

Koyi’s expression became brittle, unforgiving. “Know your place, soldier.”

The tension in the *Induna*’s arm loosened as Koyi’s *Impi* slid past. Pivoting to face him, and still holding Koyi’s gaze, the *Induna* lowered his face, “Forgive me, Elder Koyi. You have your matters and I have mine.”

“Take me to His Majesty,” Koyi instructed, ignoring the display of false contrition.

The welcome party led the way to the base of the Mount, Koyi and his *Impi* in tow. The spectral brilliance of the watch lights cast their shapeshifting shadows, stretched long and dark, on the hydraformed clearing. While nocturnal sounds flooded the red-tinged woodland, Koyi heard the welcome party murmuring in low-tone *Impi*-speak.

In the woodland.

At the tree line.

A rustle.

The trot of hooves.

A broken branch.

Through the blinding radiance of the watch lights, Koyi saw a Duiker, lurking in the shadows between the trees. It tracked their urgent steps with cautious curiosity as if drawn to them by an irresistible force.

Watching. Waiting. Following.

V

Look! Listen! There is a quivering, a coming apart.

The sacred circle coming undone!

The peak of Hora hides restless hearts who forsake the ways of WEH. Waning is your desire to seek WEH ways. WEH secrets. WEH mysteries. WEH truths. How little you know, yet you think you know all of WEH. How connected it all is to WEH. How the balance of WEH permits life to all. Even to you, since the first of your fathers.

WEH are in all. All is in WEH. Only WEH!

How quickly forgot are WEH! Forgot are the ways of WEH. Forgot are the ways of your fathers. Their spirits in the woodlands warn you of the honeybird's flutter, yet you do not listen. Oh, restless foolish hearts! You seek the ways of those who bound you in chains, yet you have done more than them. You have become machines. You have become WEH!

Madness!

The sacred circle must be protected! The balance of WEH must be restored.

But is there not one who seeks the meaning of WEH. The truth of WEH. The ways of WEH. How all begins and ends and begins anew through WEH. One who remembers the ways of the fathers. Is there not one who will protect WEH?

Is there not one?

VI

The communing place, a slightly elevated medium-sized gazebo of rock and wood, stood at the entrance of a dark crevice on the other side of the Mount. The wooden pillars were graven images of warriors resting on pedestals, forever frozen in grimaces of agony, holding up the weight of the magnificently thatched roof. At its centre, rising from an opening in the rock floor, was the majestic *nkazye* tree – the tree of death – whose leafless sturdy branches stretched out toward the roof like arms in

surrender. Standing in front of the tree, his back to the approaching welcome party, was a young man, dressed only in black capris, with a thick head of basket weave dreadlocks, neatly pony-tailed with a frizzled tip, flowing down the small of his back. Thick ivory bicep cuffs, with the initials HRMIYMM etched along its curvature in intricate calligraphy, were tightly wrapped around each upper arm. His head arched downwards. His elbows rowed inwards and outwards from the tree. A bottle gourd, already opened, rested at his bare feet, amidst curved pieces of wood shavings.

If he sensed their presence, he did not show it.

The welcome party of the three stopped at the base of the threshold, before giving way to Koyi and his *Impi* to approach.

“Great Lion,” began the *Induna*. “I bring you Elder Koyi. The Royal Ecological Historian. One of the Eight Elders of –”

“I am aware of my own Elders, *Induna*,” said the *Inkosi* with an air of detachment, his back unturned still. His elbows, rowing still. “Let him come forward.”

Koyi, his *Impi* behind him, came forward, stepped over the threshold and onto the platform of the communing place, with his *Inkosi*. His young *Impi* followed close behind.

“Alone,” the *Inkosi* added.

Startled, the *Impi* stepped away from the threshold and watched his Elder walk forward, leaving him alone. With them. Koyi did not turn. He knew what he would see staring back at him if he did, yearning for his promise of assurance. A promise he was not sure he could keep. *I should have known better*. Koyi shrugged off those thoughts before they settled in.

“Lower the *Msinkho*,” instructed the *Inkosi*.

The *Induna* marched forward, passed the *Impi*, and knelt in front of a black panel protruding from one of the pillar pedestals. He opened it, pressed a red button and the space between the pillars took on an ashen translucence. The bodies of Koyi and the *Inkosi*, once crisp and defined, became shapeless blurs. Their voices, if they were speaking, were a muffled murmur.

The *Induna* walked leisurely back to the flank of the welcome party, his sights fixed on Koyi’s *Impi*, like a predator about to pounce on an unsuspecting prey. The *Impi* pivoted around slowly, following the *Induna*’s gaze, his grip tightening around his metallic rod. Alert. Ready.

Alone.

No words were spoken. The electric purr of the *Msinkho* punctuated the lingering silence between them, as they waited. And waited.

And waited.

The communing place took on the ambience of a confined room. Hollow. Inanimate.

The world beyond the threshold vanished behind a translucent curtain of ashen quietness. Only the memory of that world outside was evidence of its existence. But now, in this grey void, this oasis of silence under the vacant gaze of the graven warriors, only they existed. The emissary and his *Inkosi*. The servant and his master. A mere mortal and his liege.

The scraping sound of metal carving into wood serrated the grey silence.

“*Umvelo*,” began Koyi. *Nature*.

“*Inkosi*,” replied the *Inkosi*. *King*.

“Momberal!” they chanted in unison. *Nation-state*.

“*Bayethe Nkosi*,” Koyi said, struggling down to his knees, becoming a mass of reverent submission on the rock floor.

“If I recall,” said the *Inkosi*, quietly, not looking away from the *nkazye* tree. “Your knees are not what they once were. We are alone here. No need for grand gestures of loyalty. Rise.”

“One must be ready to show loyalty to one’s liege,” Koyi said, still on his knees.

“Obedience speaks more of one’s loyalty than grand gestures. And one must obey one’s liege – no?” said the *Inkosi*. “Is that not what our Creed instructs?”

Koyi strained himself off the rock floor. “I see the Creed has not left your lips, my *Inkosi*! One wonders why you need the service of the Elders.”

The *Inkosi* chuckled, “Come,” motioning Koyi to approach.

Koyi, one hand pressed against his chest in deference, paced toward the *Inkosi*, standing to his side, but maintaining distance as was custom.

“Does the Ecological Historian approve?” the *Inkosi* said, arms dropping to his sides.

The bark of the *nkazye* tree had been stripped off, baring the green-yellow cambium underneath. The *Inkosi*, with carving knives in both hands, had been etching away, with adroit dexterity, at the cambium, sculpting the finishing touches of what appeared to be a face. The facial features were uncanny, lifelike. The face of a great man, immortalised in wood.

“You’ve sculpted him from memory?” Koyi asked with genuine surprise.

“It was either this or use artificial intelligence to create a virtual version of him,” the *Inkosi* said, his hands returning to their woodwork. “We both know your stance on artificial intelligence.”

“Yes. The dead must be allowed to rest.”

“Then why commune with the dead if they cannot be allowed to speak? Does that not defeat the point of communion, Elder Koyi?”

Koyi paused in rumination at this philosophical interrogation, before he retorted. “*Mhlabho* lives in his heirs. Your father lives in you. The communion of kings is in you.”

“Yes. As it is written, the throne is immortal. But even you, with your ecological orthodoxy, can understand a son’s desire to speak with his father? To seek his counsel?”

Koyi lowered his head, “Such are the burdens of kings, my *Inkosi*. I am merely an emissary.”

“Merely,” said the *Inkosi*, letting off an amused grunt. “You are not merely an emissary, Elder Koyi. You are the voice of the king. My voice. Yet,” He lightly tossed one of the carving knives in the air, caught it by the blade and steadily tapped the wooden grip against his temple. “You do not want to know my mind, and the things that reside there.”

Koyi hesitated. “What vexes your mind, my *Inkosi*?”

“I cannot talk to my father, but you offer your own ear,” snickered the *Inkosi*, ceasing his woodwork and turning to face Koyi. “Are you the voice of myself and my father? Quite a feat for a *mere* emissary.”

The softness of youth, while still clinging to the *Inkosi*’s damp demeanour, was giving way to the chiselled definition of manhood. While his was a face in flux, his unwavering stare, the windows into his soul, carried a shrewd cast, rimmed with a comprehension that came with age and experience. He did not blink.

Koyi searched for the words to fill the stillness that came between them. A bead of sweat sprouted on the nape of his neck and slid down the length of his spine, sending mild shivers. He looked upon his *Inkosi*, caught an impish glint light up his eyes and recognised the intention behind this royal inquisition.

“Age has finally caught up with you, old man. You always had counters to my little blasphemies,” said the *Inkosi*, while playfully waving one of the carving knives at Koyi. “Has the Creed left *your* lips, Elder Koyi?”

“You were always testing the limits of the Creed,” Koyi smirked, a relaxed tone returning to his voice. “You take after the *Inkosikazi*, your late mother. Always the curious and wilful student.”

“You were a patient teacher,” replied the *Inkosi*, as he knelt, used the carving knives to gather the wood shavings into a small pile and, when done, picked up the bottle gourd. He tilted his head back as he downed the gourd’s liquid contents with restrained abandon, his Adam’s Apple bobbing up and down as he did. The thick strand of his dreadlock-weaved ponytail dangled from the back of his head, like a lizard’s tail. Gasping with satisfaction, he wiped the line of millet from his upper lip, placed the gourd back on the ground, and returned to the face of his father.

“I miss these stimulating conversations of ours,” said the *Inkosi*, matter-of-factly. “But we all must grow into our roles. I in mine and you in yours. That is *Umvelo*’s way.”

“Yes. We all must.”

A pause. Koyi’s words hung in the stillness between them, evoking the memory of a young curious prince, ambivalent about his reign, who latched on to his every word

and counsel with an unfettered devotion. Now the prince was a king, walking in his father's shadow, and him, Koyi, his loyal servant.

His pawn.

"My father is better off on this tree than on a Southlander's worthless currency," said the *Inkosi*, as he dusted off the wood chips from his father's face. "Southlanders and their piecemeal concessions!" He resumed the woodworks, metal carving in wood, more vigorously than before. "Concessions!" scoffed the *Inkosi*, "Such grand words for such puny things."

"Yes, my *Inkosi*," Koyi replied, tugging gently on his right sleeve to hide the white body paint up his lower arm.

"Tell me, Elder," demanded the *Inkosi*. "How have you travelled? Are they giving us more piecemeal concessions?" His tone thickened with contempt at the mention of the word.

"They were," Koyi hesitated before he continued. "Not open to our proposed agenda for talks. In fact, we did not discuss it at all, my *Inkosi*."

"That explains why you are back so early," said the *Inkosi*. "Why did they not want to talk?"

Tread carefully. The grey cloud of doubt he had suppressed cast a long dark shadow over his thoughts, paralysing his tongue from coherence. The Southlander's words – those damned cursed words – rose to the surface, out of the murk.

One of us has been played.

How he wished for ignorance. The bliss of unknowing, unbelieving. Every ounce of his being wanted to disbelieve the Southlander. This wasn't supposed to be this difficult. All Southlanders were the same and could not be trusted. *Never trust a Southlander* was accepted wisdom. The unquestioned axiom, which was ignored at one's own peril. But, not even Koyi's long-held prejudice against the Southlands could cut through the grey mood settling within him.

"Elder Koyi?"

Koyi needed to find it again, his seething hate for the Southlands. His disgust at what they had done to his people, his tribe, those many decades ago. The scar tissue of those memories needed to be cut open, afresh. Maybe then, the Southlander's words would lose their piercing power, their stubborn potency. Maybe then, they would retain their serpentine quality, treacherous and deceitful. Maybe then, he would forget the many times he and *his good friend* were all that stood against all-out war between their territories. And each time, without exception, the Southlander affirmed their common value, their common want. A delicate peace.

"Elder Koyi?"

His *good friend* had to become his bitter enemy again, but it was futile, and Koyi knew it. Even if he found his hate, his comforting prejudice, again, what did it matter? His world had changed, his faith shaken. The world from this morning – *his* world from this morning – was no more. And he knew, more than anything, more than the

tribal hate he so desperately desired, he needed to know. He needed to know that the Southlander's words were a lie, a deception. Only then, could he be restored, the shattered pieces put back together, making him whole again.

"Elder Koyi!?"

Or he could just let it go, or at least, find a way to live with it. The doubt. The unknowing. And maybe in time, and with distraction, the Southlander's words would recede into the murk of the forgotten, more background noise like other ordinary moments in the twilight of Koyi's life. Eventually, the words would fade away, letting him go. Eventually, they would stop haunting him, like a spirit in the mist, if he wanted them to stop. If he allowed them to stop.

"Elder Koyi!"

A hand shook Koyi's shoulder, jolting him from the edge of his memories. While lost in his thoughts, his *Inkosi* had closed the customary distance to just a step, standing close to him. He felt the warm aura of his sweaty body. A curious scowl furrowed across his eyebrows.

"Are we together," said the *Inkosi*, removing his hand from Koyi's shoulder "Your mind wandered off somewhere."

"Forgive me, my *Inkosi*," Koyi said, collecting himself. "It must have been the trip. Must have taken more out of me than I expected."

"You had me concerned, Elder Koyi," said the *Inkosi*, as he walked back to the face of his father. "So," he continued, picking carving knives up to resume. "Why did they not want to table the demilitarization of the border?"

"The usual excuses, my *Inkosi*. Nothing worth your time."

"Oh. Is that so?"

"Yes, my *Inkosi*."

Slowly, the *Inkosi* stopped carving, tossed the knives to the floor with a crisp clang and dusted off the wood shavings. His father was almost done.

"They say a parent must not have favourites, Elder Koyi." began the *Inkosi*, with a meditative buoyancy. "Do you agree?"

"Yes, my *Inkosi*."

"I have always wondered why," continued the *Inkosi*, wiping his hands against his black capris. "It never endeared me to my sister that I was my father's favourite, but it is what it is. A parent always has a favourite even if we – they – will not admit it. Why the deception?"

"My *Inkosi*?"

"Why do we pretend there isn't a favourite when we know there is one? And the blessed child is not favoured without cause. Usually, the child earns it, by doing good. Fulfilling their duty. Honouring their family. Committing to the Creed as my mother taught. A child must bring value beyond blood ties to earn its favoured place," He turned to Koyi, his fists on hips.

“You have always been my favourite, Elder Koyi. Of all the Elders,” said the *Inkosi*, leisurely orbiting Koyi in an anti-clockwise direction. His feet made no sound against the stone floor. “Because you bring value. Whenever you travel south, I know you will fight for me, for Momberaland. I know,” – The *Inkosi* chuckled as if recalling a joke, he thought he had forgotten – “You let me win our little arguments only because I am your *Inkosi*. If not for that, I know I would see the real you. The believer. The relentless negotiator, I keep hearing about.”

“I serve you, my *Inkosi*,” Koyi said.

The *Inkosi* slung his thick dreadlock-weaved ponytail over his shoulder, his fingers threading the frizzled tip as he spoke.

“So, you do understand my surprise, Elder Koyi, when I say, I find your early return unbecoming of your reputation, especially when the matter is as important as demilitarisation of our borders,” The *Inkosi* stopped pacing, his face was a dark spectre in the *nkazyé*'s shadow. Koyi, his chin tilted to his chest, felt the glare of his scrutiny through the dimness, trained on him. “You’ve been gone for much longer for far less important matters. Nothing has ever stopped you before. Not even a Southlander’s usual excuse.”

Koyi shifted, uncomfortably.

“Something was different,” continued the *Inkosi*, his tone tinged with narrowing curiosity. “What happened?”

Always a game being played.

“The Southlander,” Koyi struggled. “Made certain accusations. Baseless accusations! It’s an insult to even utter them, my *Inkosi*.” Koyi cast his eyes further to the stone floor in quiet retreat, hoping his *Inkosi* would press the matter no further. A phantom pain stung his hands, mildly irritating him.

“Go on.”

“He claimed there was a conspiracy,” Koyi continued, searching desperately for a listless delivery. “A conspiracy between the Homestead and dark marketeers.” Koyi hesitated, his mind in conflict with the words that came out of his mouth. “Forgive me, my *Inkosi*, but why must I continue such a report when it is obviously baseless? Why must I debase you with such?”

“Go on,” persisted the *Inkosi*, his curiosity narrowing further.

“But why persist, my *Inkosi*, when there is no truth in rumour? In conjecture,”

“Go on.”

Koyi paused for a brief moment of calm contemplation, and then continued “He claimed we were dealing in contraband.”

“Contraband? Did he say what contraband?”

“My *Inkosi*. What does it matter?”

“Do not presume to know what matters to me, Koyi,” said the *Inkosi*. It was the first time in their conversation that he had addressed Koyi without his title. “I will decide that for myself.”

“Forgive me, my *Inkosi*,” Koyi said, still searching for salvation in the lifeless stones.

“Now tell me. What contraband was he referring to?”

“Some illicit technology from the dark market. Nothing more.”

“Did the Southlander say what it was for?”

“No, my *Inkosi*. He was hoping I would know.”

“Did he now?”

“Yes.”

“Why would he think you would tell him if you knew, Elder Koyi?”

“He believes,” Koyi sighed, “we both want the same thing.”

“Now what would an Elder of the *Esangweni* and a Southlander have in common, Elder Koyi? Educate me.”

“I would like to believe,” Koyi ruminated briefly. “We both want peace between our territories.”

“Peace?” scoffed the *Inkosi*. “Do such conspiracies sound like the words of one who seeks peace, Elder Koyi?”

“No, my *Inkosi*. They do not.”

“Is that why you are – what was the word you used earlier – burdened?”

“My *Inkosi*?”

“You are trying to hide it, but it’s written on your face. You *are* burdened by this Southlander’s words. It can only mean you lend credence to them, that you trust him. Is that not so, Elder Koyi? Do you trust a Southlander?”

The question hung in the air, lingering between them for what felt like an eternity frozen in the grey stillness. Koyi had always taken pride in his cryptic demeanour, a wall of impenetrable serenity. But now he felt exposed, vulnerable. *Can he see my thoughts?*

“Elder Koyi, you taught me never to trust a Southlander, have *you* succumbed to their *ng’anga* magic?”

“My *Inkosi*, I,” Koyi gathered himself, only barely. “See no reason for him to speak these conspiracies without cause.”

“Ha,” the *Inkosi* stepped out of the *nkazyé*’s dimness, a smirk creased across his face. “So, you believe him?”

“I don’t know, my *Inkosi*”

“Do you believe him?”

“I don’t know!”

“Tell me the truth, Elder!”

“I swear to you, I don’t know.”

“You do believe him!”

“I don’t want to believe him!”

“But you do. You do believe him,” The *Inkosi* paused, his unblinking eyes catching the greyness.

"I don't want to believe any of it, my *Inkosi!*" Koyi said, through laboured breathing. His frame swayed back and forth as if to an invisible wind. "I don't want to believe it."

The *Inkosi* regarded Koyi with a quiet fascination, as an owner would a pet in pain, "You were right," he said, his tone softening into empathy. He walked over to Koyi, placed his hands on each of Koyi's squared shoulders, and said, "This trip has taken a lot out of you. It's your tiredness speaking. You must rest."

Koyi lightly clasped his *Inkosi's* triceps and examined his face like the penitent searching for absolution. "Thank you, my *Inkosi*. Thank –"

"Go," the *Inkosi* gestured to the closest wooden warrior, ushering him to exit. "Rest. Your *Impi* will take you home." He said before abruptly breaking away, back to the face of his father.

Koyi walked tentatively toward the wooden warrior, his knees creaking under his standing weight. He slapped the warrior on its chiselled belly, letting off a hollow thud that rippled through the grey emptiness. The stretch of the *Msinkho* vanished in an explosion of wind and sound as the world outside flooded back in.

Standing, in an attack stance, at the base of the threshold was Koyi's *Impi*, metallic rod in hand, facing off with the *Induna* and the welcome party who stood motionless, yet with wide-eyed menace. The air was taut with the anticipation of violence. Constrained violence. The *Impi*, taking in sharp breaths in rapid succession, turned cautiously and looked up at Koyi edging closer to the threshold. He searched Koyi's demeanour for his promise. His assurance.

"Elder," the *Impi* said, more a question than an acknowledgement. Koyi stood at the threshold's edge, regarded the *Impi's* piteous gaze, pursed his wrinkled lips and nodded lightly.

"Take me home, *Impi*," Koyi smirked, for what felt like the first time that day. "Take me home." The *Impi's* stiff expression petered away into relief. His Elder had kept his promise.

Then. They heard it.

Click-Cluck-Click!

The kill order.

It came from behind Koyi, from His *Inkosi*.

In one swift attack formation, the welcome party leapt for the *Impi*, flanking him from both sides before he could turn. They grabbed and twisted his arms in a grotesquely unnatural shape until his hands were pressed between his shoulder blades and his bones began to grind against each other. A rupture of blinding pain shot through the *Impi's* body, crashing him to his knees in submission. One of the welcome party forcefully yanked the metallic rod from the *Impi's* grip, disarming him, and threw it to

the *Induna* who caught it in mid-air with warrior precision. The *Induna* charged with menacing momentum and mercilessly dug his brawny knee into the mid-region of the *Impi's* spine, knocking the air out of him. In a single fluid manoeuvre, the *Induna* tightly wrapped his arm around the *Impi's* neck, in an unyielding choke hold, and, with his free hand, shoved the tip of the sheathed metallic rod against his throat. The *Induna's* thumb was pressed against the trigger button. Helpless, Koyi watched the weight of relentless violence bend and break his *Impi's* body into subjugation and he, with his powers of persuasion, was powerless to do anything about it.

Distracted, Koyi did not hear the *Inkosi* pick up the empty gourd from the stone floor, dash toward him and swing the gourd at his head. The world disappeared into an eruption of white pain before Koyi collapsed over the threshold onto the hydra-form-layered ground. Koyi, barely conscious, lay flat on his back, his world blurring between starred-sky reality and the blissful dark of unconsciousness. His *Inkosi*, gourd still in hand, came into view, his eyes cold with disdain.

"If you trust a Southlander then maybe you should have stayed in the Southlands, Elder Koyi," the *Inkosi* said, as he waved his hand at the *Induna* before stepping out of view.

Koyi angled his head slightly in the direction of his *Impi*, who was panting through gritted teeth, spittles of saliva shooting from his mouth. His face, framed by lines of perspiration. His accusatory eyes, wide with anguish. But through all of it, he did not scream, he did not have to. His eyes spoke for him more clearly than words, and his words were clear.

You promised. The agents of violence kned harder on his spine and twisted his arms further than they were meant to go.

Despite this inferno of pain ravaging his body, the *Impi* still stifled the urge to scream in agony. Even as he heard the click of the trigger button and felt the pulsating blue light of the spear flame rupture through his throat in a crimson gush of blood and tissue, life draining from his eyes, the *Impi* did not scream.

The starred-sky reality slowly gave way to the blissful dark of unconsciousness, as Koyi's eyes slowly fluttered shut. The last thing he heard was the gurgling of his *Impi* choking on his own blood.

At the treeline, indistinguishable from the crooked shapes of the woodland night, the Duiker watched. And waited.

A cluster of common lantana, a foreign species, began to flower under its hooves.

VII

Is there among them not one?

VIII

A laugh.

Far away.

The dark melted away from his visual field into multiple hues of diffusing colours, revealing a decelerating world, softly bathed in scarlet.

The laugh again.

An animal? A human?

Head hurts.

His world became crisp and still. He was on the dirt ground, seated. Hands caked in mud. His back leant against something. Standing before him, stretching endlessly into the abyss of the formless sky, were tall columns, with a ring of red light positioned at a metre's height from the column's base.

Is this oblivion?

Is this death?

Are these sentinels of the afterlife?

A cool wind brushed against his cheeks, awakening his senses, and rustling the leaves above him. Koyi lifted his gaze and saw the faint sparkle of starlight break through the formlessness.

Trees.

Woodlands.

In the woodlands.

Alive.

Then it all came back to him. The *Inkosi*. The kill order. The violence. His face. His eyes. That sound.

His sound.

Head hurts more.

That laugh again. An animal.

That sound.

“I know these woodlands” – a voice behind the trees – “and I once believed these woodlands knew me. My mother made us walk these woodlands so we knew them by heart. Me and my father” – The *Inkosi* – “Be still and quiet. The woodlands will speak’. That is what my mother told me. I have been still and quiet many times, and do you know what I hear?”

The *Inkosi* emerged from the red shadow between the trees and stood backlit by the red light of the carbon counters. The interwoven mesh of his dreadlock ponytail was unravelled into thick individual locks, like black mambas hanging from his skull. Koyi's breathing quickened as he pushed his back hard against the bark of the tree behind him.

“Nothing,” the *Inkosi* continued, casually pacing toward Koyi, dry leaves crackling under his feet as he approached. “Not even a whisper. Just silence.”

That laugh. Closer.

“Maybe the woodlands will speak for you, Elder Koyi.” – The *Inkosi* squatted before Koyi – “Or will you tell me it was meant to be a metaphor?” The *Inkosi* stretched out his hand to remove a dry leaf from Koyi’s head. Koyi recoiled, his hand thwarting the *Inkosi*’s invasive advance. The deafening rhythm of his beating heart resonated in Koyi’s ears, drowning out the ambience of the red-lit woodlands, except. *That laugh.*

“Don’t worry. Believing a Southlander is not a crime, Elder Koyi” – allowing his dejected hand to rest on his bent knees – “It’s just poor judgement on your part.”

“And,” Koyi whimpered, stifling the throbbing orb of pain in his head. “my *Impi*?”

“Him?” the *Inkosi* scoffed with a hint of bewilderment, “He was supposed to keep you in the Southlands. He failed me. And it would appear” – the *Inkosi* regarded the dry leaf as it took flight – “you failed him. But what matters is, will you fail me?”

“He was just a boy,” Koyi gasped, each word punctuated by sharp inhalations.

“And boys must become men,” the *Inkosi* retorted. “Men like us. Men of –”

“Where is he buried?”

“Leave it alone, Elder Koyi.”

“Where is he” – a sharp gasp – “buried?”

The laugh again. Much closer.

“You don’t want to know?”

A pause – a wordless eternity in a fleeting moment – passed between them. It was then that Koyi noticed figures – humanoid figures – shifting between the trees. The quiet jingles of the *magenjeza* carried on the gentle wind, like distant echoes of a forgotten dream.

People.

Men.

Impi.

He could not make out their number, it was futile to even try. There could be tens or hundreds or even only one. They were masters of stealth and deception, a reputation acquired from the years of the Insurrection. A reputation, well deserved, and ignored at one’s own peril. But Koyi knew what their presence meant; he was not going to leave the woodlands alive.

“At least, give me that much,” Koyi said, his voice caving into an unborn sadness he could hide no longer. “Where is my *Impi* buried?”

Reticent, the *Inkosi* observed Koyi intently before closing his eyes in quiet meditation. For that moment, only silence lingered in their scarlet palaver. Then, suddenly, a shudder rippled through the *Inkosi*’s body like a rhythmic wave, trembling the dangling dreads over the terrain of his pensive face.

“COME!” the *Inkosi* growled through clenched teeth that gleamed in the little moonlight that escaped through the thick canopy. His growl startled Koyi as it carried on the windswept stillness of the woodland.

“Come,” the *Inkosi* said again only this time with serene authority, raising his left hand in mid-air, level with his shoulders.

Then, Koyi heard it.

Reluctant footfalls. Cracks of broken twigs under each hesitant footfall. Rumbling growls like an approaching storm in the distance.

Then, a feline beast cautiously emerged from the red shadow into Koyi’s visual field, stopping just under the *Inkosi*’s raised left hand. He ran his fingers through the thick mane of fur at its crown, gently grazing it with a lover’s sensuality. With unrestrained compliance, the beast desperately leaned into the *Inkosi*’s fingers, craving for his touch, his power. Its eyes, like the *Inkosi*’s, were closed, lost in an addiction of unspeakable ecstasy. Koyi, body taut with tension, gasped with wide-eyed amazement at the aberration of the beast’s subservience. Even in the soft bathe of the red-emitting diodes of the carbon counters, Koyi made out the intricate stripes of orange and black that lined the beast’s body, the rippling power of its muscles visible underneath its coat of fur.

Panthera tigris virgata. The Caspian Tiger, extinct to the world, but thriving in the paddocks of Momberaland. There was a dark smear, unnatural to the intricate pattern of stripes, around the Tiger’s mouth. The Tiger kept licking the stubborn smear with a relish that Koyi’s ecological mind recognised. Blood.

A fresh kill.

His blood.

My Impi’s blood.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?” the *Inkosi* said, opening his eyes to admire the beast. “When I saw her, I knew she was my –”

“He didn’t deserve to die like –”

“Even now,” – the *Inkosi* interjected, a tone of mild frustration in his voice – “you focus on the small things. You fail to see the path to what our fathers – *my* father – always wanted.”

“And what be that? Death? War?”

“No, Elder Koyi. Freedom!”

“Freedom?!”

“Let me show you.” – he turned his attention to the tiger, leaned close to its ear and, in a piercing whisper, commanded – “Down.” The beast complied with a playful growl, lowering its body to the muddy ground until it was lying on its side, its spine facing Koyi. The *Inkosi* dug his fingers under the thick mane of fur, exposing its skin and a small metallic spider-like protrusion, with long circuit lines branching from it, at the base of its skull. The scar tissue around the metallic protrusion and circuit lines was fresh. Recent.

“What have you done?” Koyi said.

The *Inkosi* pulled back his dreadlocks, revealing a similar metallic protrusion on his temple above his right ear, the circuit lines cutting down the length of his face.

“This is my spirit animal. She is paired to me now. I have tamed her.” the *Inkosi* said, stroking the beast’s fur to its pleasure. “Thanks to this” – tapping the metallic protrusion on his right temple – “I have complete control.”

“The neural links,” Koyi said, a wave of realisation softening his crinkled face.

“Ha! So the Southlander did tell you.”

“I didn’t want to believe it,” Koyi spoke under his breath as if to himself, his voice ripening with grief.

“Then believe Elder Koyi! Believe as I believe.”

“What is it you believe?” Koyi dragged himself off the moist ground as he strained to speak. “This! This *engwele!* This colonizer poison?” – he gasped, sharply – “Have you so quickly forgotten the Creed’s greatest covenant? We promised never to use technology to –”

“ – to play god!” interrupted the *Inkosi* as the tiger bolted off the ground and charged toward Koyi. “I am more than just a student of the Creed. I am the living embodiment of *Mhlabho!* The spirit of the kings lives through me!” – The tiger stopped close enough for Koyi to feel its savage body heat and the tinge of blood on its breath – “The Creed lives through me and is therefore subject to me. *Umvelo* is subject to me. That is what I believe!”

Sacrilege.

“*Engwele!*” Koyi snapped, his nails digging deeper in the bark of the tree. The tiger let off a growl of disapproval. It was only then that Koyi realised that its eyes had rolled back, revealing only the amber emptiness of its gaze. It stood still, unmoved.

“No, Elder Koyi,” The *Inkosi* stood behind the tiger, his face lost in the red back-light. “The Creed – the way of *Umvelo* – has served us well. It restored us. Our people, our tribe, from the great shame of the time before.” – he strolled on the side of the tiger, his hand gently brushing the dorsal fur with a grooming tenderness – “But it has served its purpose. It cannot take us where we need to go. Where my father needed us to go.”

“Is that the freedom you speak of? Freedom from the Creed? Your father never spoke such blasphemies.”

A pause, punctuated only by the tiger’s moan, “What do you know of my father?” – The *Inkosi*, his face half-lit, rested his hand on the back of the tiger’s neck – “Just because you fought alongside him in the Insurrection, you think you knew him. You never knew his mind; not like I did. You only knew his shell – his outer bark – but not the sap that was inside.”

The laugh. Again. Where is –

Suddenly, Koyi's hands clawed at his head as a plume of relentless pain exploded in his skull. His piercing scream sliced through the quiet of the woodlands, echoing into oblivion.

That laugh! What does it want? Make it stop!

"What is that?" Koyi gasped sharply between each word as he fell to his knees with a futile reluctance. His face, cupped in the cage of his clawed hands in penitent anguish.

The laugh. There it is again.

Is it in my head?

The *Inkosi* observed Koyi's diminished figure with brutal indifference, "My father loved you once," he said matter-of-factly. "Like a brother."

Or is it in the woodland?

The *Inkosi* squatted and stared down at Koyi, "But he resented you in the end for what you did."

Am I going mad?

He firmly yanked Koyi's right hand, the caftan sleeve sliding to his elbow, revealing the indelible white body paint starting from his wrist and disappearing up his lower arm. "I know about this" – gesturing to the white body paint – "Not what you taught me as a child. The true story. The real story." – his grip tightened – "You were a coward. *Igwala!* You claim to hate the Southlanders, but you never killed one. Not like my father! You lost your nerve at the sight of blood, and could not stomach war. You, with your silver tongue, infected us with your cowardice – *ubugwala* – and turned everyone away from Father's dream of a free Mombera. That's why I sent you away to the Southlands so you would not infect me with your *ubugwala*,"

Ubugwala. The truth in that word – a truth Koyi believed he had outrun – stung him deep, drawing blood from an old wound. *Make it stop.*

"Your father's dream... meant... more bloodshed," Koyi gasped, hunched over, his free hand hard-pressed against his forehead.

"A *true* warrior understands that blood is the price for freedom," The *Inkosi* retorted, briskly.

"But I..." – Koyi groaned, stifling another scream from escaping his throat – "I... saved ...us."

"You think you saved us," The *Inkosi* smirked, dismissively. "I'll tell you what you did to us." – he leant in closer – "Do you want to know what my father's last words were?"

Please. Make... it... stop.

"I was young, but I knew his ghost was leaving. I felt his body go numb." – he paused, slowly closing his eyes to wander the secret fields of his memories – "I was giving him his final rites as you taught me, and he grabbed me. He... he was weak, but that grip. That grip." An aura of admiration thawed his sombre timbre.

I... saved... us... Please stop.

“I thought he was afraid of death and I did not want to remember him that way. How wrong I was! He was not afraid of death. Not my father! Not my king! He wanted to tell me something before it was too late.”

That laugh! That laugh! What does it want? What do you want?!

Soft blades of lunar light pierced through the foliage of the dark canopy above their conclave. The gathering tears caught the night’s shimmer as the *Inkosi* opened his eyes. His jaw clenched into a taut line. “Two words. That’s all he said.”

The *Inkosi* flung Koyi’s hand away like a thing that had outlived its utility. He lifted himself and surveyed the motionless beast panting audibly beside him. In a swift and abrupt motion, the *Inkosi* lunged at the beast, quickly wrapping his arms around its neck in an unyielding vice-like grip, a headlock of savage determination, his muscles taut against the biceps cuffs. The *Inkosi*, face etched with unbridled resolve, locked eyes with Koyi who looked on in astonishment.

He wanted Koyi to bear witness.

The beast did not resist. With its head shoved forward, it struggled against the headlock in nonchalant twists, more out of discomfort than a primal will to survive. The tiger jerked its head, back and forth, forcing air into its lungs in grimaced whimpers, its fangs glistening in the lunar light. Its eyes flickered from the amber emptiness to the black well of its dilated pupils between each rapid blink as its quivering mass collapsed to the ground, resigning itself to the headlock’s unwavering power. Subdued. Defeated. Conquered.

Yet, he did not let the beast go. His muscles rippled with unrelenting cruelty as the beast’s body shivers slowly subsided to subtle spasms of finality. He was crushing its throat.

“Only Mhlahlo,” the *Inkosi* snarled through gritted teeth into the beast’s ear, still holding Koyi’s horrified gaze. “Only Mhlahlo!” he exclaimed, finally tossing the beast aside to cover in the darkness, savouring his mercy.

Please stop! Make that ... laugh ... stop! Please!

The stillness of the red-bathed woodlands gave way to the jubilant bell rings of the *magenjeza*, littered with the moderate chants of ‘*Bayethe Nkosi! Bayethe Nkosi! Bayethe Nkosi!*’ from the *Impi* who were shrouded in shadows. The *Inkosi*, as if energized by the chants, rose to his feet and raised his arms in the air. The chants grew louder and louder to a thunderous climax as his arms lifted higher and higher in triumphant fashion. He paced in a half circle, his back to Koyi, shouting his father’s last words with violent intensity, his dreadlocks swaying vigorously in the breeze, spittle flying from his mouth. Beams of pulsating blue light – spear flames – erupted from the gaps in the trees, bathing the *Inkosi*’s frame in a riot of blues, reds, and blacks.

Only Mhlahlo!

Bayethe Nkosi!

Only Mhlahlo!

Bayethe Nkosi!

Please. Please make it stop. Please! Please!

“PLEASE!” Koyi screamed, plunging the clamour into echoing silence. “What... is... happening... to... to... me?”

“Justice,” the *Inkosi* replied with a piercing solemn whisper, his face hidden behind a dishevelled flow of dreadlocks. “You made us weak and Father resented you for that. In place of true freedom, you gave us peace. In place of sovereignty, you fought for concessions. In place of a white god, you created a green god.” – he parted his dreadlocks and bunched them behind his head – “There is no Homestead without Mhlahlo. *Umvelo* exists because Mhlahlo, who lives through me, permits it. The line of kings is eternal, the only true deity and everything falls beneath it. Everything!” – A pause. His words hung in the air like a hangman’s noose – “So, you took my father’s dream from him, I will take your green dream from you! I will take your precious *Umvelo* and make a war machine to rival that of our Zulu ancestors. I will fulfil my father’s dream and take our sovereignty by force.”

“That... will only... lead to bloodshed.”

The *Inkosi* smacked his lips, smiling. “How can you ever understand? Such are the burdens of kings. You are merely an emissary.”

A high-pitched giggle, suddenly, reverberated through the woodland, drawing their attention.

That laugh!

“Can you feel it? The pain?”

“Please... make... it... stop,” Koyi whimpered, twisting his knuckles against his forehead.

“Only you can make it stop,” the *Inkosi* replied, tapping his neural link. “Look. Feel your right temple.”

Koyi’s fingers frantically inspected his right temple until he felt a protrusion – metallic to the touch – just above his right ear. His fingers felt the circuitry emanating from its metallic edges and piercing through his skin. *It can’t be*. He dug his fingernails under its base, desperately clawing at it until he broke his skin. *The neural link*. A black stream of blood ran down the side of his face.

“No! No! What... have... you done... to ...me?”

“Removing the link will only damage your brain. May even kill you,” the *Inkosi* said, his tone wrapped with cold formality.

The high-pitched giggle again. This time closer. Much closer. Approaching.

“She’s almost here.”

He felt his brain throbbing against the inner wall of his skull like a pulsating tumour driving him mad. Beads of sweat broke out on the folds of Koyi’s creased forehead. His narrowing vision wavered erratically in focus from clarified sharpness to blurred distortions. And the pain. *The pain. Make it stop!*

“Your device is syncing with your spirit animal.”

That laugh! That laugh! Make it stop!

“You are both paired now, but untamed.” – The giggle tore through the woodland, closer – “The pain you feel is your spirit animal in your brain trying to control you.” – Cracks of broken twigs, closer – “It senses you in its brain – like an unwanted intruder. It’s looking for you. Hunting for you.” The *Inkosi* stepped backwards with cautious stealth into the shadow’s silhouette, out of sight.

“The pain will stop when one of you tames the other.”

“No... No... Don’t make... me... do this,” Koyi pleaded, as he watched the *Inkosi* dissolve into blackness.

Then there they were, two gleaming embers jerking up and down in the dark, just a step away from where the *Inkosi* stood. Eyeshine. A scavenger’s eyeshine. A scavenger Koyi knew all too well and feared.

“Will you tame your precious *Umvelo*?” The *Inkosi* said, his voice wafting the night with an immeasurable omnipresence. “Or will it tame you?”

The animal prowled out into the scarlet glow of the carbon counters, revealing its roundish canine frame, draped in interweaving strokes of stripes. A ridge of bristly fur rose from the back of its prominent head and lined the curved spine of its rugged build. The nostrils of its long snout flared with rapid repetition above open jaws baring serrated incisors framed by menacing fangs. Though its body kept jerking in uncontrolled spasms, its small beady eyes, black and dead, were riveted to Koyi, its prey, its pairing.

His death.

Hyaena Hyaena. The striped hyena. Despite this moment, Koyi somehow found the mental space, a brief respite from the now, to marvel at the terrifying beauty of this endangered specimen. *Beautiful.* The moment evaporated as a spike of panic pierced through his chest.

A low guttural rumble began rising inside the hyena’s throat before it arched its head back and let out a series of rising and falling whooping noises that ricocheted through the woodland night. The chorus of death. Koyi’s blood ran cold, and the drumming of his heart filled his ears. The head pain, a forgotten concern.

“Will you save yourself?”

Koyi pressed himself against the tree behind him, his body racked with adrenalin. Though he knew escape was futile, his body was primed for flight, primed for survival. As he lowered his hands to the ground, he felt something. Something inside. A presence. An essence. He felt *it*, like a thorn-spiked ball barrelling through his brain, spreading like a cancer, consuming him. His being. His essence. His self. A cloud of dread overcame him as every fibre of his being understood what was happening.

Will it tame you?

His feelings regressed to their primal state, raw and feral. His consciousness collapsed in on itself, untethered from conformity. Pure callous rage ravaged his senses, shredding his inhibitions. His thoughts unravelled into fragments, dissolving into chaos.

Will you tame your precious Umvelo?

Then. It spoke to him. Not in a human tongue, but in a language, he somehow understood, yet did not know. Disjointed, yet coherent. A language that felt imprinted in the secret recesses of his mind since before his origins. A universal language. The language of evolution. Its articulation, unambiguous.

WEH want you to die!

Koyi, eyes rimmed with terror, desperately fumbled on all fours and pivoted around the tree, crawling through the organic litter. He dug his wrinkled fingers into the moist earth and forced his tired body forward. One of his fingernails broke right off, but he did not feel it, there was no time to feel, only to fly. The crippling weight of futility came over him as he felt the beast coming with terrifying momentum, closing the gap.

WEH want you to die.

The hyena pounced on him, knocking him face down in the dirt. It laughed, hysterically.

Only you can make it stop.

In a seamless agile manoeuvre, it flanked him to his left and thrust its front paw on the small of his back, pinning him down. Koyi struggled vigorously more out of reflex than a considered strategy for self-preservation like a fish gasping for air when caught in a spiked net.

WEH... you... die.

With its full weight pressed onto the pinning paw, it dipped its massive head forward towards his upper body, opened its jaws and plunged the sharp point of its fangs into the back of his shoulder, tearing through caftan cloth and weathered muscle and shattering the collarbone like breadsticks. Koyi's visual field exploded in a flash of white pain as he screamed in hopeless agony.

Only you!

With sheer raw power, the hyena, its jaws still locked in a bone-crushing grip, hunched down and began forcibly dragging its prey, shards of bone grinding against frayed sinew, before hurling him through the air like a child's plaything, pummelling him against another tree. The force of the impact knocked the air out of his lungs before crashing down to the ground with a muffled thud. Its high-pitched laugh, laced with savage glee, shattered the night as it watched Koyi, body beaten and battered, struggling to force air back into his lungs.

You... die.

Koyi's body was lost in a rapture of agony with wave after wave of unspeakable pain rippling through, taking him to undiscovered plains of suffering. The objects of the night in his line of sight lost all definition, just silhouettes shapeshifting in form and colour. Yet, somehow, while lying on his right side, Koyi contorted his body to face his predator lurking in the shadow of the woodlands. He felt it circling, stalking him, ready to pounce and serve the killing blow. He still felt it, within him and

outside of him, flanked on all sides with no escape, like a prisoner. *Igwala!* A feeling bubbled inside of his chest and rose to a burning simmer in his brain. *Will you tame it?* Koyi knew that feeling because he had committed it to memory. A feeling he had promised himself an eternity ago that he would never allow himself to feel again. *Will it tame you?* He felt violated. He felt intruded upon. He felt...colonized.

Never again!

Never!

Never!

Never!

The predator's eye shimmered a red glint as it stepped out of the shadows. It thundered toward him, its blood-soaked fangs black in the red light. Koyi pursed his lips into a line of disgust, stretched out his right hand and roared with every inch of him, "NEVER AGAIN!"

The party of *Impi* – five in number – stood in the gap between the trees, forming an enclosure for Koyi and the hyena. The light from their spear flames bathed the enclosure in a strobing hue of soft blue light, revealing the scale of the carnage. The *Inkosi* stepped into the enclosure and stared down at the two combatants. The hyena, alive and whining, had fallen to the side in a catatonic state, its eyes vacant. He turned his attention to Koyi who was leaning against a tree to the side, trembling as if from a fever. His caftan was drenched slick black with blood. His tear-soaked gaze was distant. His face, neutral. The *Inkosi* walked a few steps closer and squatted at a cautionary distance.

"Elder Koyi?"

Koyi flinched and tilted his head toward the *Inkosi*, but did not speak.

"You are still with us, I see," the *Inkosi* smirked. "Now you are no longer a coward." The *Impi* murmured in agreement until the *Inkosi* raised his hand, silencing them.

Koyi's face contorted into a mask of grief, "Look... what... you... made... me do," he stammered, voice barely above a whisper. He broke down in tears.

"I'll permit you this moment of weakness," – the *Inkosi* cocked his head slightly to one side – "but this was the only way for you to see."

"See... what?"

"*It*," the *Inkosi* hissed. "Your precious *Umvelo*. Your green god!" – he leant forward a little closer – "Did you see it? Feel it? The rage! The chaos! The power! Your *Umvelo* has no allegiance, knows no loyalties and is not merciful, not even to you, its most faithful servant. But imagine if we channel that rage, that power, to our own ends. We can bring order to chaos, the way you have just done. Imagine harnessing the pred-

ator's power against the Southlands. Just imagine! They will never see it coming. Do you see it now? *Umvelo* is chaos. Mhlahlo is order! I am order!"

"No... No! This is... against the Creed –"

"The Creed is done! Don't you understand?" The *Inkosi* snapped before collecting himself. "I need you, Elder Koyi! I need that silver tongue of yours to convince the Homestead of their new creed, my creed! My father's creed! The Mhlahlo Creed!" – He lowered his voice to a whisper. His tone, conciliatory – "You did nothing wrong here, Elder. Survival is not a sin. A man must have a sense of his own survival and yet your Creed teaches you to ignore your instincts, the same instincts *Umvelo* gave you. That, my Elder, is the true mind game and I'm done playing. Survival is my creed! Survival of Momberaland. Survival of the royal bloodline. Survival of my people. Even *your* survival is my creed! Do you see it now?" – an impish glint returned to the edge of his steely eyes – "Maybe it's all inevitable. Man against nature. Maybe man has always been at war with nature, the nature outside, the nature within. A silent war that started the day we were born. Sometimes, when I'm alone, I think that, maybe, the white colonizers were right. Maybe, they understood we're at war with nature and only one apex predator can reign. Maybe we needed time to figure that out for ourselves. Conquering nature is not the way of the colonizer. It's the way of man, a man who will do anything to survive."

The *Inkosi* continued speaking, but Koyi's mind was elsewhere, lost in contemplation, thinking about the wrong he had done. The sacred covenant he had broken and yet had sworn his life to live by. Since the Insurrection, the Creed had been his life, his vocation, his faith. Yet, now, in the middle of those *miombo* woodlands, he had broken his most sacred vow, a promise never to make the same mistake of hubris that had plagued the white colonizers. He had used technology to manipulate a creature of *Umvelo* for his own ends– to play god with machines. *Of what good is any man who cannot keep a vow*, he mused. He was no different than his *Inkosi*. He was tainted, blemished. Of what good was he?

Of what good am I?

"Take him to the infirmary!" The *Inkosi*'s words broke into his thoughts, plunging him back to the now. "He must be in shock. Make sure no one sees you."

The *Impi* slowly approached Koyi, breaking the enclosure.

Swiftly, Koyi dug his hand into his caftan, took out the glass pellet and flung it in his mouth. He tongued the pellet until it was carefully clutched between his third molars before shattering it, draining the foamy brown liquid down his throat.

"*Mwabvi*" exclaimed one of the *Impi* who rushed in and shoved his finger down Koyi's throat to force him to vomit. It was too late.

The last thing Koyi felt, before his eyes rolled in the back of his head, was a sour aftertaste lingering on his tongue.

IX

Koyi opened his eyes.

He was in the woodlands, but not the same woodlands. Something was different. Off. Otherworldly. The place was drenched in moonlight grey like a picture perpetually fading to off-black. A greying place. A dying place. A hidden realm. The bark of the trees had a fluid-like quality, formless and without permanence. The branchless tree trunks stretched into an overcast canopy of darkness and hushed lightning. Pieces of leaves and twigs and branches were floating aimlessly in the air, melding into each other on collision, creating bizarre organisms of haunting compositions. He reached out to touch a leaf in his field of vision and realized he had no arms, hands, or body. Somehow, he knew. He just knew. He was without form, antimatter.

Essence.

Aura.

Spirit.

Energy.

Oblivion!

This realisation aroused no sense of wonder as it would have had he still been flesh, blood, and bone. *Flesh. Blood. Bone.* What even were they? Those old familiar formulations. Those old companions. *Remember!* Words with shape, feel, and texture, that once meant something to him – a distant significance that was slipping away, like rock weathering under a century's tide. Words. *Yes! Words!* Words were the old familiar. His old companion. *Don't go!* Yet they started to feel buoyant, emptied out of any meaning, lacking all the substance words once had for him, yet he felt no despair at this loss. *Despair. I remember you.* For a passing instant, he knew what that meant – *despair!* – yet he could not remember how to *feel* it. It was all... *Slipping away.*

Stay.

Even that – the act of *feeling* – was slipping away, swallowed by the indifferent numbness of oblivion. All that remained, all that clung on that was still *him*, was memory. His inescapable memory. And, with a fatalistic resignation, he let go and gave in to the stream of memories. Himself, slipping away. Until the memories were no longer his.

Then, it came. The Duiker.

It materialized before him from the murk of the woodlands as if from the mist of dreams. Present, yet teetering on illusion. Space seemed to curve around its stocky figure, warped by an invisible field of gravity that enveloped its weightless evanescence. Its fur glowed unnatural shades of red and brown, a burst of foreign colour in the dreariness of that place. Its large round eyes were charcoal-black orbs shimmered with lightning and virgin curiosity. It did not blink. It only stared.

Are you the guardian of oblivion?

A bioluminescence of green brilliance mushroomed under each trot of the Duiker's soundless approach, leaving a fading green trail that dissolved into the grey deadness. The Duiker came closer with cautious agility, its eyes trained squarely on him. Koyi felt drawn to its eternal gaze, its ephemeral presence, as if by some nameless force he was powerless to resist, pulling him in like a ship earnestly following the dying beacon of a distant lighthouse.

Who are you?

As it approached, closing the astral gap between them, an epiphany, an awakening, swelled within the shapelessness of his form. He could not fully express how he knew, but, as he stared at the Duiker, lost in the trance of its lidless glare, he understood its allure and why he felt drawn to it.

As it drew closer, reality, or rather his perception of it, slowly regained its familiar weightiness; words, once drained of substance, replenished their old clarity – first letters, then words, then sentences, then meaning; a surge of emotions coursed through him, colouring previously unowned memories. The closer it came, the more he became.

Its alien presence, its aura of savage radiance, *permitted* his existence, *willed* his existence. He was because *it* was.

I am of you.

Those existential revelations gave way to a violently reverent desire, a forbidden yet innate yearning to be one with the Duiker like a babe crying to return to the warm womb of its ma, its origin, its source. An eldritch rebirth of an unending consummation, until there was nothing of him left.

No consciousness.

No self.

No humanity.

No mind.

Nothing, but it.

Only it.

I am of you.

The space between them was gone, and he surrendered himself to it.

His essence melded with its consciousness in a seamless osmosis, lost inside the realm of timeless space, a dimension of the immaterial, until he was tethered, one within the intricate network of its ancient mind. And there, behind the fragile curtain of reality, it revealed its true anatomy, not the stocky façade of the Duiker, but its limitless configuration, straddling from the dark depths of the Mariana Trench to the snow-topped peaks of Everest, an infinite panorama dwarfing his finite mind to the brink of madness. It was a single planetary organism, a dense life force, with every living species on Earth sculpting a chaotic composition with no beginning nor end, defying mortal comprehension. As the thing began to speak in a thunderous flood of

a thousand tongues, a terrifying chorus chasing an endless crescendo, he realized that the thing was not *IT*. It was an interconnected *THEY*. Many, yet a singular consciousness. A sentience. A collective intelligence. A hive mind, with each tongue chanting its many forgotten names with cultish abandon.

Simbi

Geb

Aye

Gaia

Aranyani

Tonantzin

Selvans

WEH

This, here. The majesty of what was unfolding was beyond him, beyond the faculty of any mortal mind to grasp. And yet, here he was, bearing witness to the transcendent, the divine. And yet, with each arcane revelation, a fragment of a memory, shards of a far-gone thought, clawed its way through, distracting him from the horrifying beauty of the sacred spectacle before him.

Of what good am I?

Koyi felt small, an insignificant worm, unworthy of basking in the sun rays of such divine attention, such frightening power, there, behind the curtain of reality. Their multiverse of secrets was wasted on him. He was an unworthy witness. A wretch. A coward. *Igwala!* There were others. There must be others. Many others, more deserving than him, a creature born of a new shame. Oh, to be free of shame, a pure mind, worthy of this right, this communion, this gift. A true witness, fawning in silent worship. But, not him. Never him. A mere emissary.

He felt the spotlight of their gaze on the blemish of his shame. They studied it with a studious curiosity as if seeking some assurance for an unknown bargain. His consciousness was heavy with the expectation of banishment, an eternal hell away from them. And yet, they did not disown him. Instead, they let him in. They let him see. They let him feel. They let him know. He took in everything they showed him.

The spark of life in a seed.

The rotting of a carcass back to dust.

The golden line of the sun speeding across the sky.

The crash of a waterfall against the rocks.

The weight of water at the bottom of the ocean.

The whistling of the wind between the leaves.

The stitching of the land, sea, and sky at the horizon.

The universe in a speck of dust.

The eternal dance between moon and tide.

The taste of thunder on the tongue.

The number of grains of sand on the shore.

The northern lights streaking across the canvas of a night sky.

The stories of fallen civilizations written in the stars.

And lastly, a fluttering olive-brown honeybird, leading a group of travellers to a pride of lions.

Umvelo.

He could not tell *when* he was, let alone where. The *now* was lost in time. The past, a ghost. The future, an illusion. Only the honeybird existed. Only its flutter and its story mattered. Everything around them fell away as they watched. Koyi joined their audience in quiet observation.

The honeybird guided a party of hungry travellers, tribesmen of centuries past, through the woodlands to a hollow tree with honey hidden within the girth of its trunk. Elated, the travellers carried off all the honey for themselves, filling their hide-wrapped gourds and leaving none for their feathered guide. Somehow, Koyi felt the honeybird's smallish body ripple with feverish rage as it watched the cackling travellers wander off into the woodlands.

Umvelo sees all.

Sometime later, another party of travellers happened upon the small feathered guide and, as per custom, followed it down to a clearing at the end of an unfamiliar trail, towards the sweet promise of honey.

Umvelo knows all.

A pride of lions leapt out from the underbrush and flanked the unsuspecting travellers from all sides of the clearing. They were trapped. There would be no escape. The honeybird made sure of that. The lions mauled the new party of travellers, tearing muscles and shattering bones, leaving no one alive, to the unbridled glee of the honeybird who fluttered above the crimson carnage.

Umvelo never forgives.

An empty silence. It was just him and them, there, beyond the gathering twilight of unreality. A wave of comprehension washed over Koyi as he understood what they wanted of him.

They spoke in a dry monotone.

The sacred circle is breaking.

His words came, 'I am of you.'

The ways of your fathers are forgot.

He felt their scarring pain, "Let me atone for my shame."

There are none who protect WEH.

He felt their radiating anger, "Use me. I will be your emissary."

And use him, they did.

The curtain of reality tore open, and the infinite was made flesh.

X

“Leave him,” The *Inkosi* barked to *Impi* who was still trying to resuscitate the corpse. “He is dead. The hyena will finish him once it’s recovered. *Igwala!*”

“My *Inkosi*, what do we say if people ask where Elder Koyi went?” queried the *Impi*, his voice imbued with hesitation.

The *Inkosi* stared down at the corpse, caftan bloody and torn, foam still running from its gaping mouth. Its eyes, listless and blank, staring up into the night sky. A smirk crept across the *Inkosi*’s stern expression.

“If he was no good to us in life, he will serve us in death.” – he strolled over to the corpse, the *Impi* shuffled away to give room. – “If they ask, he never returned from the Southlands. Presumed dead. Died serving Momberaland. Good enough reason to go to war with the Southlands, as any.”

“*Bayethe Nkosi*,” the *Impi* dipped his head in admiration for the *Inkosi*’s shrewd calculation, before signalling the rest of the party to sheath their spear flames. The darkness rushed back into the enclosure, swallowing the corpse into the gloom. Only phosphene shapes of the corpse remained, floating in the *Inkosi*’s line of sight. He stood in the red light, motionless.

“My *Inkosi*,” hesitated the *Impi*. “We must leave. It is not safe here.”

A strange feeling overcame the *Inkosi*, like a dark cloud gathering on a blood-stained horizon. When he chose this path for Momberaland’s emancipation from the Southlands he expected resistance and knew that Koyi’s fealty was not certain. He had anticipated any and all possible outcomes, even this one, and was prepared for it. *In the game of power, let no outcome surprise you*, as his father used to riddle when they walked the *miombo* hills together. The same hills he was standing in now, leaving the corpse of his emissary. He understood the price, and he was sure Koyi did too. It’s the nature of the game, the game of power. But, a part of him, the part walled away from the scrutiny of obligation, ached for something different. Something...

“My *Inko* –.”

“Wait,” the *Inkosi* snapped. His tone, irritable.

His father’s disapproving words seeped into his mind. He brushed them aside. What would it hurt to leave the corpse with kinder words than the instructions he had just barked? Couldn’t he accord himself this one moment of weakness? It was the least he could do, even if it was *feminine*, as his father put it, often with a dismissive scowl knitted in his brow. Koyi deserved that much, even in death, even in cowardice.

Drawing confused murmurs from the party, he bent down into the shade of the woodlands in front of the corpse. He placed one hand on his bare chest, the other on the corpse, took a deep breath and lowered his head to give the final rites in the Creed way, as Koyi would have wanted.

Umvelo. Nature

Inkosi. King

Mombera. Nation-state.

The murmurs faded away, instead, a brittle silence hung heavy in the air.

Lifting his chin, eyes adjusted to the shade, he stared at the corpse. With glazed eyes, he sighed, “You fool! What we could have done together.” – he paused out of habit, not knowing why in the moment – “Sleep well, my emissary” – He chuckled after recalling why – “I will miss our conversations” – Koyi always had a rebuttal whenever they sparred over Creed doctrine. What a formidable ally!

What a loss.

“Sleep well, my emis” – Something from the shade clamped his arm, suddenly, with a loud clap.

Startled, the *Impi* unsheathed their spear flames, strobing blue light returning to the enclosure, and charged, in a contra-flanking formation, to protect their *Inkosi*. Then. They froze, cold and abrupt, in wide-eyed disbelief at what they saw. Their bare knuckles cracked, fingers digging into their sweaty palms, as their hands tightened around their quivering metallic rods.

The thing in the shade, clinging to the *Inkosi*'s arm, was the corpse's left hand.

The corpse craned its head forward and studied the *Inkosi* with an alien curiosity plastered on its deadpan face. The *Inkosi* vigorously scrambled to break free, dreadlocks coming undone. But the more he twisted the stronger its grip became like a stubborn vice, sturdy and immovable. With a force impossible for a sexagenarian frame, the corpse lugged the *Inkosi* closer and closer, each struggle against it, a pointless effort.

This was a foreign sensation to the *Inkosi*, fear. Adrenalin racing through his veins, heightening his senses. His heart pounding against the walls of his rib cage, threatening to burst free. The scream caught in his throat, begging to come out. He had seen what fear did even to the greatest of men. It was a mirror, a black mirror, unmasking the inner self. The *true* self, unhidden from the world. And now he was going to meet his true self at the cliff edge of his own fear.

Deep lines of terror wrinkled the *Inkosi*'s face around his saucer eyes, and contorted lips as he beheld the grotesque monstrosity. An aberration of nature. A living nightmare. Its face, mere inches from his, the corpse reeked of lifelessness, its skin already taking on a pale pallor of decay. Foam, streaked with red lines of blood, was still streaming out of its mouth, bubbling through clenched teeth. The acrid smell of caked blood, oozing from the mangled gash in its shoulder, wafted the air. And.

The eyes.

The marble eyes were dark portals into infinite chaos. Vast and meaningless. And, for a moment, he stared into the hideous void of those eyes, transfixed by what he saw there. Time stretched for an eternity in that moment, before the void stared back into him, and found his inner self. His hidden self. His *true* self.

Just a boy, seated by his father's deathbed. Small and insignificant.

An enveloping sense of dread washed over him. The corpse, using its free hand, reached for the *Inkosi's* right temple and dug its finger's nails under the neural link device, pulling at it like a stubborn weed. With each inch gained of its forced extraction, the *Inkosi* felt his mind uncoupling, every memory fading out of grasp, as the intracranial bond between man and dark technology was severed. Irreversible.

Whatever little was left of him, whatever little that was still sane, noticed the corpse lean in closer, close to his ear, and bellowed, in a thunderous hoarse voice, the last words he would ever hear in his life.

"ONLY WEH!"

He vaguely remembered, in his last moment, what death smelt like.

Their liege was dead.

Their Great Lion had fallen, struck down, but they would not permit their hardened feet to trace the trail of retreat, the way of shame that led to the right arm of white, the coward's branding. Death in defeat was preferred to retreat or surrender. Their training in the ways of the *Impi* taught them that and it taught them well, searing it on their minds from youth until nothing else mattered, until no battlefield knew of their surrender and every Southland soldier knew their names. It was their code, their calling, only surpassed by their sworn devotion to the House of Mhlahlo and the *Inkosi* who sat on its throne.

And now, the line of *Mhlahlo* had ended. Their *Inkosi* was dead, lying there in the crimson shade of woodland night, at the feet of a ghost. Their training prepared them for many things, but nothing like this *thing*, this aberration of nature which, to them, belonged in fanciful folktales told by old men with fading memories and beer under their breath. And yet, there it stood, not a figment of a children's story, but the stuff of walking nightmares.

The contoured faces of the *Impi*, lit by the spear flames' blue light, were battle-ready. The *Induna* took one measured step forward, leading the contra-flank. The party cautiously followed in brittle formation. A good day for any *Impi* would have been to march towards a good and certain death, the last act of courage, the stuff of which legends are made. But today was not that day. Their death was certain, but they doubted if it would be good. Deep down, in places they would never admit even in the safety of solitude, it was not courage that spurred them forward, not this night. Courage had withered from their ranks and was replaced by the crippling civilian sensation of desperate curiosity. Even though the fear they would never allow themselves to acknowledge seeped into their bones, more than anything, they wanted to see it, the *thing*, up close in the harsh glow of the red light. They wanted to see it to *disbelieve* it, to prove what they had just seen, this night magic, was just subterfuge, some ploy

whose machinations would be discovered. They wanted to be deceived, under an elaborate misapprehension, because then, the world would make sense, then the world, as they made of it, would be one without ghosts.

The ghost's torso was lost in the shadows as it leant over the *Inkosi* with administrative indifference as if handling a common civilian body instead of one through whose veins ran the bloodline of the House of Mhlahlo. Veins that now ran cold.

The ghost rose to its feet and turned to face their nearing formation. The black Rorschach blotches on its red-lit face seemed to pour from its spiritless eyes. Jolting the *Impi* to a sudden halt, the ghost raised the open palm of its hand, revealing two ivory bicep cuffs, each carved with HRMIYMM along its curvature in intricate calligraphy.

His Royal Majesty Inkosi Ya Makhosi Mhlahlo. The royal cuffs. *His cuffs.*

The *Impi* were so distracted by the mystery of this innocuous gesture, that they did not notice that the mangled gash on the ghost's shoulder had stitched itself together as if by some invisible thread. Then, the ghost slightly arched its head back, clucked its tongue against the hard palate of its mouth, and gasped out salivated clicking sounds in rapid succession. *Impi-speak.* The clandestine language, spoken only by the *Impi*.

And yet, the ghost spoke it. The party pulled back a step, chests heaving, up and down, in reluctant disbelief. Yes, they were now in a world of ghosts.

Its tongue was ancient, its words and sentence constructions were only understood through tacit inference rather than direct comprehension.

The ghost said, 'The line of kings and queens will end not, for WEH permits it,' While its tone had a half-hint of detached indignation, it was impossible to read any emotion on its face. 'The new bloodline royal,' It threw the cuffs at the *Induna's* feet, startling the party in a tighter formation 'must forget not the flutter of the honeybird and you shall live on, for WEH permits it.'

The fireside stories, fables of his childhood, flooded back into his mind as the *Induna* carefully lowered his body to search for the bicep cuffs in the organic litter, his tightly narrowed eyes and the spear flame's tip still directed at the ghost.

Umvelo sees all.

As his free hand swept through the moist litter, the *Induna* remembered the star-punctured night skies, the glint of the dancing flame on the eyes of tired old men, and the enchantment that rimmed the spellbound eyes of children who hung on every word, every warning, of those fables, those stories. And that was all they were, stories. Children's stories. Just stories.

His fingertips touched the solid coarseness of the cuffs' curved surface. He wrapped his fingers around the cuffs and rose with delicate caution.

Umvelo knows all.

They always came in threes, he vaguely recollected. The warnings, they always came in three. *Sees all. Knows all.* There was a third. He could not understand why

his regimented mind, often not given to childish indulgences, chose this moment, of all moments, to want to remember. What did it matter? They were only stories. Just stories. Yet his mind did not let it go. There *was* a third. What was –

The ghost moved closer, dragging the *Induna's* thoughts back into the now, back to the cruel realness of this moment. The party's formation tightened. He felt fear rippling through their ranks.

"Hold!" the *Induna* growled with defiant authority, standing his ground.

The ghost moved a few steps closer and then stopped, its soulless face fully in the red light.

A pause lingered, punctuated only by the party's heavy breathing and the quiet ambience of the woodlands. Anticipation hung heavy in the air.

Then, it answered, 'WEH forgives not.'

Umvelo never forgives.

The childhood fear, he had long forgotten, returned. The *Induna* remembered now. In that moment, whatever courage, whatever tribal pride, was left that rooted him in stubborn defiance of this ghost, disappeared.

"Retreat," he whispered, with crisp clarity. The party obeyed, breaking their tight formation into an uncoordinated scatter into the woodlands. Their *magenjeza* bells rang an atonal song, shattering the night's silence.

The ghost wandered off into the woodlands, leaving the Great Lion struck down in the dark, yet knowing that a Great Lioness, the new bloodline royal, would rise in his place.

Their anger was gone. He felt their pain no more.

They wandered the vastness of the woodlands for – how long had it been – days, weeks, years even? Koyi couldn't tell. Time was still relative, irrelevant, here among WEH as they patiently taught him every tongue spoken by every species of tree and animal, and every iteration of their name from antiquity.

As they wandered the woodlands together, each tentative step provoking a groundswell of earthworms and insects, Koyi felt something shift within him. He was not sure whether this was something he had never felt before or he had simply been so long without it that he forgot how this felt. He could not express it fully. No words came to mind. With the new languages he was learning, human words had lost their currency, and an impotency of vocabulary had set in, yet he felt no sense of loss as he once did. Except, the only thing that came close to explaining what he felt was a memory, a human memory, he could not recall if it was his. A recollection of a feeling, the relief someone, a traveller maybe, felt when they finally found something, they did not know they were looking for.

What was the word for that? Koyi had an eternity, in communion with WEH, to find the right words, if he ever cared to. Either way, it was of no consequence.

For now, he felt settled, in place. For now, they were his new people and here, with them, he had found his home.

THE END

EKARI MBVUNDULA
CHIROMBO

MOMBERA KINGDOM



CONCEPTUALISED WITH
MUTHI NHLEMA

It had only been a few weeks since the Event happened and yet, besides the slanted *miombo* trees at the woodlands edge, everything below looked calm, undisturbed.

It was a hot December day in 2115 when Benjamin Orwell stepped out of the hovercraft and onto the grassy runway in the Mombera Kingdom. He pulled his hat low, prepared for billowing dust, but, surprisingly, there was none. Instead, there was a breeze that carried the damp scent of rain on its way, though the sky appeared clear and blue.

The sky! Benjamin had never seen such a wide expanse of open sky before, stretching from horizon to horizon. It made him feel like a speck in a giant's bowl. Honestly, he quite liked the feeling. He was entering a whole new world, like Frodo in the *Lord of The Rings*. Mombera Kingdom was the world's first Socialist Eco-state and Benjamin could see why.

As Benjamin made his way down the steps of the craft, it was clear that he was much taller than the fictional hobbit character in his favourite old fantasy digi-book series, though he was going for a look that was almost as hairy, with a brown mane which fell to his ears. It was the kind of hair growth that would make his mother frown, but he learned to ignore it. He had left Neo-London and was out in the world making a difference now; he had earned the right to choose his own hairstyle.

He walked the rest of the way down the runway together with the other travellers, pulling his hand luggage behind him, and headed to the immigration office. There was a mountain in the distance, which he assumed was Hora Mountain, an important landmark for the locals, the capital of the Kingdom. He could make out irrigation drones in the distance spraying water over the tilled fields that were visibly due for harvest.

Security personnel were lined up on the path to the immigration building, dressed in traditional Ngoni warrior garb, synthetic leopard skin as a representation of their previous hunting culture, short sticks, and bells on their ankles. *How delightful!* Benjamin thought, resisting the temptation to take a photo with the implant on his ear. He decided it would be too obvious, since the camera function worked by automatically extending from his ear across half his face and his right eye. So instead, he flashed a smile in their direction, but they had permanently suspicious scowls on their faces. It was oddly familiar, like the Royal Guard at Buckingham Palace, complete with their own distinctive uniform.

Benjamin entered the building, whose design had more curves than lines, filled with tribal imagery he recognised from the digi-books back home. As he searched up and down the queue, effortlessly seeing over most of their heads, a mild discomfort came over him when he noticed there were mostly African travellers and he, the only white person in the queue. *That's strange*, he pondered. He expected to see more non-Africans hovering in after the devastating Event a few weeks ago. Was he the

first to arrive? Did he beat those other big-shot humanitarians to the punch? Had he beat them to *Mordor*? Benjamin smiled gleefully, forgetting his mild discomfort of being the only white person on a queue of Africans who largely ignored him. The line moved quickly, but almost ground to a halt when he got to the front, as they began to go through his paperwork.

There was a beautiful customs official at the counter, with voluminous afro-textured hair pinned up in an intricate style with a carved wooden clip. As she examined his passport, he leaned in closer to catch a flash of her pearly whites, but instead the ring on her left-hand caught the sunlight through the window. Benjamin leaned away from her in mild disappointment. She looked up at him and asked with a local accent, “What is your business in Mombera Kingdom, Mr Oh-will?”

He smiled at her endearing pronunciation and nodded, “Ah yes, hello. This is a fact-finding mission for the NGO I represent, called the Save Uplift Rescue Africa Foundation. Since you are facing the brunt of the climate catastrophe – what with climate refugees and all – I was hoping to meet the *En-kho-say-kay-zay* to discuss... well... you know.”

Benjamin shrugged, as if what he was about to say was so obvious it did not require mention.

“I know what, Mr...” She scrutinised his paperwork with administrative irritation “Oh-will?”

“Orwell,” he corrected.

“I know what, Mr Oh-will?”

“Well. After the Event a few weeks ago, I wanted to meet her to see what help we could provide. Humanitarian aid I mean.”

The lady stared at him for a while then burst out laughing. “Ok, Mr Owill. Firstly, Her Royal Highness would not be pleased if you pronounced her title like that. She must be addressed as *Inkosikazi Khanyisile II*” she said, too fast for Benjamin to catch the inflections.

“*En-ko-si-kay-zay*. Is that right?”

“No. It’s...” and so they went back and forth a few times until Benjamin gave up on the correct pronunciation, and just settled for not butchering it too badly.

She stamped his passport and handed it back to him, saying “Welcome to Mombera Kingdom.” While she was perfectly polite, there was something about the way she said it, like she was trying to suppress a smile. As Benjamin walked to the exit door, the customs official said with perfect diction:

“May *Umvelo* keep you from fire, Mr Orwell.”

Benjamin had a comfortable eco-ride to his lodge called The Shaka Zulu, and he settled in quickly. He tapped the implant on his ear and a hologram was projected

into the centre of the room, messages. He swiped through them briefly; some were from his mother, triple checking if he had his inoculations before he travelled. Other messages, to Benjamin's delight, were crypto-donations toward his climate refugee work in Mombera Kingdom; they were almost at their threshold target. *Splendid*, he thought, slapping his hands together in triumphant excitement. *The Queen will see that I'm serious about helping her people*. Another message notification came through; another donation. This called for a celebration.

Room service!

He ordered a delicious 3D printed steak and potatoes that a waiter brought to his door 10 minutes after he keyed his option into the touch screen console. After room service, he left his room for a stroll. Everyone he met, the receptionist in the lobby, the waiter streaming up and down the corridors, had been friendly and professional, whilst every other guest just went about their business, all ignoring him, like he was just any other person. He was never sure how his presence would be taken in a new place. He had visited countries where the locals were constantly fascinated with him and his gadgets, curious children trailing behind him, asking questions until, eventually, asking for crypto. But in other places, very rarely though, foreigners were not regarded as anything particularly unusual, like in Mombera Kingdom it seemed. While he didn't feel one way or another about it, he did feel a tinge of sadness at the silence trailing behind him.

As he walked through the lobby at the reception area, he looked around at the clientele checking in. Still, no humanitarians in sight. You could always tell them by their branded outfits, sprightly gait, and loudness. My goodness! Their loudness, mouths flapping away, like their words were the only ones that deserved attention. Benjamin made sure that he was nothing like them. Having seen enough for the day, walked on, back to his room.

Benjamin wanted to sleep early. He was exhausted from the long day of non-stop travelling straight from Neo-London. He would sleep, but not before he checked his messages. Just this last time. He was welcomed with an avalanche of notifications when he checked his implant. More donations. A good way to end the day. As he switched off the hologram projection, he could have sworn he heard another notification, cut in mid-bing.

The next morning Benjamin called his contact named Patrick Chilinda, who according to his intel was an administrator in the Mhlahlo Administrative Council, the developmental arm overseeing the situation with the climate refugees.

His slow deliberate tone on the phone was jovial, "Good morning, Baba Benjamin Orwell, Welcome to Mombera Kingdom! How did you travel?"

“Good morning, Mr Chilinda, I had a lovely trip thank you. Mombera Kingdom is even more beautiful in person. And how are you?”

“Fantastic. So, tell me, how would you like to proceed?”

“Well. You will be more than happy to hear that we almost beat our target. We will have enough crypto to help you with your climate refugee situation,” Benjamin said, pausing like a performer waiting for an applause.

“Oh?” Mr Chilinda said, his slow tone thickened with puzzlement.

“Ah yes, I was hoping for a chance to meet the...” he continued carefully, “The *En-ko-*” He paused to reconsider – “The Queen monarch to discuss the support that my organisation is offering.” There was silence for a while, which extended so long that Benjamin thought the line had gone dead. “Er... Hello?”

“Mr Orwell, it isn’t so simple. Nkosikazi is very busy. But don’t worry, I will arrange to meet you, then you can explain everything to me. From there... well... we shall see.”

Benjamin’s shoulders dropped. He had hoped he would get a chance to meet the Nkosikazi, perhaps even get a photo with her, while he rattled off the things he could help her Kingdom with. He had memorised his pitch so well he did not need notes, just his *mental note*. It was rumoured that she did not take too kindly to foreign humanitarians which was why so few, if any, had operations here. But this time was different, especially with the stream of climate refugees heading their way from Malawi and the region, seeking shelter. This had never happened before, not at this scale. Her kingdom was going to need all the help she could get, and Benjamin would be the one to give it to them. He squared his shoulders, a renewed sense of purpose returning to his frame, and agreed on a time and place to meet Mr Chilinda.

They met at the village council building in the centre of the kingdom, a long rectangular structure with professionally thatched roof. Peter Chilinda was a middle-aged man who was almost the same height as Benjamin. He had a slightly rounded belly, and wore a regular two-piece suit, but topped it with a traditional Ngoni headdress made of synthetic animal hide. Benjamin made a mental note to ask him for a closer look at the headdress after they got to know each other better.

They shook hands and Peter led him through the building. There was a long corridor with multiple doors to the left and right, some empty, others with active meetings involving important looking people. “There’s a meeting with the Mainkosana today. They are under the chiefs, but above the village level, if you can get what I am saying. Directly under the Mhlahlo Administrative Council – the one that I am a member of. Let me see if I can disturb them...”

He opened one of the doors on the left, where a circle of men in various forms of attire, from casual clothes to formal wear, sat in a circle. They all had traditional

headaddresses on. “Baba Jele, Sawubona!” said Mr Chilinda. “How is everyone here?” He addressed the gentleman closest to the door.

“Everyone is well, thank you,” Baba Jele responded, though he was looking at Benjamin the whole time.

“Thank you. I am speaking English for the benefit of our visitor, Baba Benjamin Orwell from Neo-London.” They all nodded with an air of detached formality, not like the eruptions of enthusiasm that Benjamin had grown used to on other missions he had been. Benjamin waved awkwardly and said a brief hello with a nod to them, aiming to make eye contact briefly with them all.

The English didn’t last too long as Peter Chilinda subsequently switched to Ngoni, speaking at top speed to Baba Jele about what seemed to be another matter. Benjamin couldn’t pick up a single word even if he tried. He was astounded, since up until now he had the impression that the man was simply a slow speaker, but apparently, he only spoke slowly in English. The comparison was like the difference between a gentle stream and raging rapids. Something else astounded him, for a Kingdom dealing with a climate catastrophe, they all seemed... calm. Business as usual, almost. *Typical bureaucrats*, Benjamin thought. *Sitting and talking in meetings while the world falls apart outside.*

Once Mr Chilinda was done with the conversation, he said goodbye to them in Ngoni, “*Sala ou Salani Kahle*” and they responded with, “*Hambani kahle*”. He closed the door and strutted down the corridor at a faster pace, with Benjamin following in stride. Mr Chilinda stopped at a door on the right and unlocked it with a device on his wrist. The room was different from the previous one. Where the first had had basic wooden furniture, this one had lines of desks with computers, set up like a training room. There was a large table at the front, glowing ports for wireless electricity and internet connections. Benjamin looked closely at the holographic computers, noticing their unique design and unrecognisable logo. He had never seen these models before.

Mr Chilinda went to a large table at the front of the room, sat down and invited Benjamin to take the chair opposite him. “Mr Chilinda, I must ask, where are these computers from?” asked Benjamin.

“They were designed and built by the local university,” said Mr Chilinda.

“*Really?!*”

Peter smiled and pulled out a notepad and pen from a set of desk drawers behind him. “You sound so surprised.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to, it’s just, I mean...” he floundered, desperate not to offend.

“Don’t worry,” Mr Chilinda responded with a chuckle. “We like to keep that as a bit of a secret. Myself though, I value the ancient art of longhand writing.” He

opened his notebook on a blank page, then clasped his hands together. “Now, what would you like to do in Mombera Kingdom?”

Benjamin activated his mental note as he began rattling off the goals and objectives of the Save Uplift Rescue Africa Foundation in breathless recitations. He grew in confidence the more he spoke, feeling like he was in his element for the first time since he had landed. Mr Chilinda took notes diligently, nodding and asking for clarity a couple of times. Benjamin obliged with clearly phrased responses, using every opportunity to mention the crypto-donations, hoping to get a nod of appreciation from Mr Chilinda. He got none. He concluded, “...and so, the goal of my trip is to identify where our support will be of better use for your Kingdom. We have the funds!”

Mr Chilinda stood, tucked the notepad in his jacket pocket and smacked his hands together when Benjamin finished. “Alright, thank you, Mr Orwell! Now that I know where you are coming from, allow me to take you on a tour of the kingdom.”

Benjamin’s face lit up, startled by this sudden burst of energy. “Brilliant! I would love to. Will we get to see the camps as well?”

Mr Chilinda only smirked as he got up from his chair and led Benjamin out of the room, without a response.

They travelled mostly on foot, taking public transport on one long stretch. Benjamin took it all in, the bustling citizens in brightly coloured fabrics getting in and out of minibuses, the markets with fruits, vegetables, and medicinal herbs from the bush, seedlings of trees of various species being bought and sold. Most had earpiece smartphones just like his, some brands he recognised, some he didn’t. There were enclosures called kraals where large herds of cattle were kept; Benjamin learnt that cows were an integral part of Ngoni society, used in events like marriages, indicating status, and even important for the coronation of the next monarch.

Most structures were built around and amongst trees, a truly natural city, with gardens on terraces grown for both aesthetic beauty and cultivating food. Every so often, Mr Chilinda would give him some commentary on the kingdom and its history. “Mombera Kingdom was originally called Mzimba before we finally transitioned from being mostly governed by, to working in collaboration with the Malawian government. Then the name changed to Momberaland, and finally Mombera Kingdom.

“Since we began to manage our own environment, we have been able to rehabilitate it, using our traditional beliefs about nature, as well as technology.” Benjamin nodded solemnly. They passed a construction yard with the neon sign “Restricted Entry” flashing in bright red as they approached the shimmering forcefield. They watched as a team of engineers were servicing what Mr Chilinda described as a

carrier hovercraft for endangered species. “These were designed to carry endangered species from as far off as the Anatolian region. But we retrofitted it to carry refugees to the safe zone in the woodlands. See!”. Benjamin squinted his eyes to see past the blue shimmer of the forcefield to the man-sized rails, strapped with harnesses, that dotted the carrier’s surface.

“It should be leaving tomorrow for another collection at the border,” Mr Chilinda added.

Though dismantled, metallic panels and wiring laying everywhere, it looked like it could carry three hundred, five hundred people, at a time, perhaps.

“Impressive,” Benjamin said, as he removed ‘transportation support’ from his mental note.

They finally arrived at a large circular house with bright colours and patterns painted around it. There was a small group of women tilling a garden outside, but mostly there were children running and playing. Mr Chilinda got the attention of the oldest lady there, who rushed to him then curtsied with respect. He spoke to her in Ngoni, and at one point gestured towards Benjamin, saying his name. While the lady turned her head towards Benjamin, she kept her eyes lowered, not looking straight at him. She nodded after Mr Chilinda had given instructions, then turned around and spoke to the women in the garden who took one glance in the men’s direction before beginning to rush around, gathering the children.

In no time at all, the well-dressed children lined up with their shoulders up, and their hands clasped together. Mr Chilinda greeted them in Ngoni, and they responded back to him in unison in varying intonations. Then he said something which included Benjamin’s name again, before saying, “And now in English. Good morning, children!”

“Good morning, Baba Chilinda, good morning, Mr Or-o-well!”

Benjamin beamed in delighted surprise and greeted them back. “Good morning, children!”

Mr Chilinda indicated that Benjamin should follow as they walked past the line of children. He leaned in and talked in a low voice so that only Benjamin could hear, and said, “Most of these kids lost their parents in the Event. Most of them are not from here.”

He approached the line of children and placed his hand on one of the boys as he talked. The boy was hardly 10 years old, but his eyes told a different story, a story beyond his years. “This is Thabo, he was one of the few children we found walking alone in the woodlands. He was lucky we found him.” Benjamin walked toward the boy, squatted and stretched out his hand in greeting. The boy scampered away, hiding behind the group of women for protection.

“Sorry I didn’t mean to...” Benjamin stammered as he rose to his feet.

“He still needs some time to get used to visitors.”

“Where did he come from?”

“Somewhere within the region. He has a strange tongue. We are yet to place it.”

Mr Chilinda turned to the other children on the line. “Some of the children are going to be adopted soon by families who can manage to take care of them, but those who remain here are still going to be looked after.” He pointed at one of the women standing on the side, who curtsied in response. Mr Chilinda turned to Benjamin. “The women who look after them are mainly old widows. They look after our children while our men and women can work for the Kingdom. But now they look after these orphans. They make sure they all eat, make sure they study and all of that. The widows regularly go with the *Impi*, the Ngoni warriors, into the bush to look for more lost children and bring them here.”

Mr Chilinda pointed to the surrounding trees. “Can you see closely there...” Benjamin turned to where he pointed and his eyes widened as he saw one of the *Impi*, standing in the shadows of a tree, perfectly still, staring at *him*.

The warrior held the same short stick which he had seen at the border port, except this time it had doubled in length, and a dangerous looking luminous spear - a spear flame - extended out of the shaft.

Mr Chilinda smiled with satisfaction at Benjamin’s shocked expression. “We have several compounds like this. They were built as re-education quarters for returning Ngonis from the diaspora, but we are using them to host refugees. This one is for orphan children, there are others for adults. These compounds are always protected, and there are more *Impi* who patrol at night.”

“That’s great!” said Benjamin, nodding while scratching off ‘shelter’ and ‘child support’ from his mental note.

“Indeed. Ok, now we keep going, there’s more for you to see.” Mr Chilinda turned back to the women and children, gave them the cultural goodbye salutation, then marched away from the compound with Benjamin.

Next, they went to the outskirts of the city, where gradually the buildings disappeared to be completely replaced by vegetation. It was open grassland, interspersed with short trees with outstretched branches like they were holding up the sky. There were a few technicians wearing overalls who were inspecting some ceramic looking rings attached to the barks of the trees. “Those are our carbon counters,” Mr Chilinda explained. Benjamin vaguely remembered that the counters were designed to calculate how much carbon dioxide had been extracted from the atmosphere. “We are just doing a complete sweep of the network to quantify how many trees were damaged during the Event. The outer edges of the woodlands were the worst hit by

the Event, but nothing we could not repair ourselves. We can't afford to shut down the network even for a day. It generates crypto for the Kingdom through the offset stock market."

Mr Chilinda paused, a modest chuckle accompanied the smirk that creased across his face.

"What's funny?" Benjamin quizzed.

"The unit price for one carbon offset has shot up threefold since the Event. Ironic isn't it? That we profit from such a disaster?"

Benjamin was not sure if Mr Chilinda wanted a response. Either way, they continued further into the bush.

There was the buzzing of insect life interspersed with a different buzz of camouflaged drones, most of them hovering a metre or two above the tallest trees. They stopped in a slightly more open grassy area, where the sunlight shone generously through the large gaps in between the trees, and Benjamin turned to Mr Chilinda, eager to learn what he had to say.

"So, this area is what you call a 'savanna' in English." He pointed upwards. "We have surveillance drones constantly monitoring the wildlife population levels, temperature, humidity, and many other metrics. That way we can make sure the ecosystem remains in balance. We are using drones to identify areas affected by the Event and distribute seedlings. Several decades ago, this was bare soil, degraded so much that it couldn't be used to plant crops or graze livestock. But, now we have returned it to the *miombo* woodlands as it was in the time of our ancestors. As well as restoring habitat, it has also improved our water quality, so we are completely self-sufficient with the rainwater that we also harvest on our roofs in town and we use air-to-water generators."

"Amazing... What about wildlife?"

"There are lions, leopards, giraffes, antelope..."

"Wait a minute, lions?" echoed Benjamin with a nervous laugh.

"Yes, and leopards!" Mr Chilinda said with a wide grin.

Benjamin glanced around at the now-too-quiet woodlands, trying to see if that movement in the grass was caused by the wind... or something else.

"Don't worry. We plant special herbs around the area, which they don't like. They won't come near us unless provoked."

"Still, perhaps we should come back later in a safari Jeep or something..."

"Wait one moment..." Mr Chilinda took out his communication device and clicked on an application. He put it into hologram mode. A replica of a map, with brightly coloured red, green and yellow dots, was projected in the space above his

hand, so that Benjamin could see it. “There. Red dots are the predators. As you can see, the closest one is several kilometres away from us in the forbidden areas.”

“Forbidden? Because they’re dangerous?” asked Benjamin, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

“Some of them can be. Some people say there is a spirit that walks in those forbidden parts of the woodlands.”

“Brilliant. I love a good ghost story.”

Mr Chilinda looked at Benjamin for a moment. *There he goes again*, Benjamin thought. *That cheeky smile like he’s hiding something.*

“Just stories to keep children out of the woodlands,” Mr Chilinda started, “The main reason that area is forbidden is so that the natural cycles can be allowed to recover and correct themselves. We believe some parts of the environment must remain untouched by humans.” Mr Chilinda paused as if in brief contemplation, then he pointed at the screen again to the different coloured dots. “So here, green are the large herbivores - elephants, rhinos, and the like. They don’t eat humans, but they can attack if they feel threatened. Yellow are the gentler herbivores... hmm.” He stopped mid-sentence and frowned.

“Mr Chilinda? Is something, uh, wrong?”

“Oh, nothing dangerous at all... I don’t think. I just need to take a closer look at what is happening with this one,” he pointed at a yellow dot which was blinking incessantly. He waved his hand at the hologram and a small screen with biometric data – a bio-screen – appeared where the dot used to be. “An impala. Female. Impalas move in herds, but this one’s alone. It shouldn’t be on its own. Why isn’t it moving?” Mr Chilinda said, more to himself than Benjamin who looked on with a tourist’s curiosity. He swiped the bio-screen away, tapped the yellow dot, and a menu came up. He clicked the menu option ‘Send Drone’, and Benjamin saw one of the drones break away from the swarm above them and hover away at breakneck speed into the woodlands. Once Mr Chilinda lost sight of the drone, he switched back to his device, and accessed the drone’s camera footage. Aerial footage of grass, trees and small streams zipped past the screen as the drone rushed to the location. In a few seconds, it had travelled what must have been 15 kilometres, before it ground to a halt. A little notification popped up, ‘Drone At Location’, which Mr Chilinda immediately swiped away, then zoomed into the footage, increasing the image resolution.

A slender baby impala filled the hologram image, laying down in an awkward position, struggling to stand. “Oh poor thing,” said Benjamin with a concerned frown knitting his brow.

Mr Chilinda glanced at Benjamin then back to the screen. He pointed at the screen. “You see that? The back left leg. It has been caught in a poacher’s trap.”

“Where?” asked Benjamin, squinting at the holographic screen. “I don’t see anything.” It appeared there was nothing holding the young impala, though its movement was certainly restricted.

“The trap is electromagnetic. If you look closely, you can see a spark when it moves.” Benjamin leaned in closer and then he saw them, faint blue sparks gripping half of its long hind legs at the ankles. “They are getting clever...” Mr Chilinda continued. “How did they override the trigger systems? It was supposed to alert –”

The drone footage of the trapped baby impala abruptly dissolved into a snowy array of black and white pixels. Static. The feed was cut.

“Oh *Umvelo!*” Mr Chilinda exclaimed.

“What is it?” Benjamin said.

Mr Chilinda swiped the drone footage away and searched for the yellow dot. It was gone.

“They have disabled the animal’s tracker. They must have destroyed the drone as well. We don’t have much time!” Mr Chilinda swiped to a keypad and requested for a search and rescue team: “...potential conflict with unknown, possibly armed aggressors” were the only English words Benjamin was able to make out.

Benjamin’s heart pumped in his chest, barely believing what he was witnessing. *Finally*, he thought. *A problem in utopia I can help with.*

In minutes, four warriors arrived in a safari hover car, and stopped by Mr Chilinda, who leapt into the vehicle leaving Benjamin behind. “I will arrange a transport to collect you back to your hotel,” Mr Chilinda instructed.

“Wait, I’d like to come and see if I can help.” After some debate in Ngoni between Mr Chilinda and the *Impi* leader, he reached his arm to pull Benjamin in.

The long grass beneath their transport rippled in all directions as the hover car sped past. Yet the *Impi*’s headdress held firmly in place, even against the strong wind which stung Benjamin’s eyes red. Within 10 minutes they arrived by the trapped animal, which began squealing in panic, convinced they were going to harm it. The drone, letting off electronic whines and crackles of damage, was down on the ground next to the animal. There were no poachers in sight. The drone might have scared them off. The men promptly dismounted, leaving Benjamin in the hover car. Mr Chilinda and one of the *Impi* knelt by the creature, one attended to the drone whilst the other two *Impi* split up the woodlands between them and set up patrol, spear flames in hand. Benjamin fumbled out of the vehicle and went to observe the two men by the baby impala.

The *Impi* with Mr Chilinda got up, shoving Benjamin out of the way, and got a tool from the vehicle that looked like a large set of electronic tongs. The *Impi* walked back, Benjamin stepping out of his way, switched on the tool, then brought it close to the base of the animal’s hind leg. It crackled violently one or two times, sparks flying, sending the wide-eyed animal kicking frantically. One of the *Impi* pointed and

shouted instructions to Mr Chilinda, who carefully, but firmly grabbed the animal's other legs. Benjamin quickly knelt and asked where he could help, then pressed his hands gently but firmly on its neck against the ground and tried to sooth it with a shushing sound. It was quite strong for its size. While they worked, Benjamin noticed a small black button-shaped device attached to the animal's temple, which he guessed was the tracker that had been tampered with somehow.

The man working on disabling the electromagnetic trap finished at last, the trap fizzled out and went dead. Benjamin and Mr Chilinda released the creature on the *Impi's* instruction, and it stood up awkwardly then ran with a limp away from them. The *Impi* warrior who helped free it followed it, shouting and loudly clapping his hands in arrhythmic repetitions to stir the animal in a specific direction.

"He has to make sure it gets back to the herd," Mr Chilinda explained. "Otherwise it may meet the poachers or run into predators. Damn poachers! This has gotten worse since the Event."

"How so?" Benjamin quizzed.

"Some poachers take advantage of the situation and pretend to be climate refugees. It's hard to tell who is a refugee and who is just pretending. Now, the poachers are disrupting the delicate balance between predators and prey. They are destabilising the complex inter-relationships between all our savanna species."

The remaining three *Impi* approached Mr Chilinda, with intense breathing and on high alert. They spoke even more rapidly between each other, glancing at Benjamin every now and then, and he had no doubt that they were talking about him. The word "*uMlungu*" came up, which he suspected was a term used to describe foreigners.

Finally, Mr Chilinda came to address Benjamin. "Mr Orwell, the *Impi* warriors want to track these poachers down before it gets dark. We don't know how they figured out how to disable the GPS trackers. So... it's an internal matter."

Benjamin nodded at this information, not knowing what to say in response. He read between the lines and understood what they meant by 'internal matter'.

Mr Chilinda continued, "They want to get started immediately, but I told them we cannot be out here after dark, especially not with you. So, they are letting us take the vehicle back to town without them."

"Alright. Please tell them thank you. And good luck!" He nodded towards them, placing his hands together in a show of respect, while Mr Chilinda relayed his words in Ngoni. They reciprocated before briskly marching off in different directions in search of the poachers.

The ride back was shorter than Benjamin expected, as he spent it asking in-depth questions about how interconnected their tracking systems were. Mr Chilinda was somewhat less obliging with his information this time, choosing instead to avoid

specifics, or changing the subject altogether. *He's on edge*, Benjamin recognised. After a while, Benjamin changed the subject to polygamy to pass the time.

"So, Mr Chilinda, how do women feel about sharing a husband?" Benjamin asked as Mr Chilinda weaved the hovercar through the grass, manoeuvring around the short, dispersed trees, their shadows longer and thinner than before as the sun dipped towards the horizon.

Mr Chilinda shrugged. "Women are not forced. In fact, the husband cannot take on a second wife unless his first wife approves. Sometimes if she says no, he will ask the aunties to try and persuade her. But most of the time, the request for a second wife comes from the first wife. Often she needs help around the compound."

Benjamin smiled. "Sounds like a great deal for the men, no?"

Mr Chilinda glanced at him and chuckled. "It's hard work to look after a wife, and even harder to look after many wives. But there are obvious benefits for women as well as men."

"Benefits for women?" Benjamin probed, smelling another opportunity to save his list of priorities from complete irrelevance.

"Yes. Every woman will have a man," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "It is our culture. Some things in your culture also seem strange to us."

"Oh really? Like what?" Benjamin probed him with journalistic curiosity.

A contemplative pause came over Mr Chilinda. "How can your culture wilfully destroy nature and expect anything good to come of it?" Mr Chilinda said with a formal delivery. "Is that not a strange culture?"

"Well..." Benjamin started, regretting having started the conversation. "We didn't know. There was no way of knowing we would cause so much damage." A hint of defensiveness crept into his voice.

"Mh! Yes. There was no way of knowing," Mr Chilinda agreed. "But now you know and yet you still don't change."

Benjamin opened his mouth and hoped a clever retort would springboard off the tip of his tongue. Nothing came. Mr Chilinda gave that cheeky smile, shook his head and continued the journey back in silence.

Mr Chilinda took Benjamin straight back to The Shaka Zulu lodge, and they sat down in the common lounge area near the reception, to review the day. Still no humanitarians in sight. An intricately carved wooden statue of Shaka himself was set on the podium in the centre of the lounge, and they sat on lush sofas close to it. Benjamin offered to buy Mr Chilinda a meal, but he settled for a drink, saying "I will find a meal waiting for me at home. My wife will be angry if my stomach is full." Then gave him a meaningful look. "Like I said, it is not easy having a wife!"

They shared a laugh for what felt like the first time that day. Mr Chilinda, after sipping his freshly squeezed fruit juice, shifted the discussion in a formal direction. “So, you have seen Mombera Kingdom for yourself. Thoughts?”

Benjamin leant back in the chair with a heavy sigh. “Thank you for today. It’s been absolutely amazing. There is a lot for me to process, but Mombera Kingdom is pretty impressive. I can see why you have the reputation you hold now.”

“Yes,” replied Mr Chilinda. “Our Inkosikazi sets the direction and she is very firm on it. There are those who want to disrupt what we have here. We have our own ways of dealing with things.” Benjamin knew he was referring to the poachers and nodded.

“Is there still a chance I can meet her – the Inkosikazi?”

Mr Chilinda shook his head with sympathy. “I am afraid not, Mr Orwell. The Inkosikazi is preoccupied, which is why she delegated me. Everything you are saying will be reported to her.”

Benjamin was visibly disappointed. “Oh well.”

Mr Chilinda took another sip of his freshly squeezed juice then inquired, “What do you want to do from here? Regarding your organisation?”

“Oh that.” Benjamin leaned forward. “That I have to figure out. The Save Uplift Rescue Africa Foundation works in areas where the response systems are overwhelmed. So, after what I have seen, I will have to determine what is feasible and get back to you. Is that alright?”

Mr Chilinda nodded, downed the rest of his drink, and let off a loud sigh before he spoke: “I will wait to hear from you. I expect it will be a good report.”

Benjamin laughed, alone. “Perhaps.”

Mr Chilinda stood up from his chair to leave, “A question if you will allow me...” said Mr Chilinda.

“Yes?”

“Why such a long name for your NGO? Save, Rescue... and what?”

“Ah yes, ahem, Save Uplift Rescue Africa. Well between you and me, all the other names were taken.”

Mr Chilinda chuckled, “May *Umvelo* keep you from fire, Mr Benjamin.” He offered his hand. “It was a pleasure meeting you. I hope we will meet again.”

“It was great!” replied Benjamin, taking his hand and shaking it with sincerity. “May I take a photo with you? You’re completely allowed to refuse.”

“Oh, yes. Please do,” Mr Chilinda nodded.

Benjamin tried to hide his excitement since he always wanted to take a photo with someone wearing a traditional Ngoni headdress, with smooth brown fur around its rim, and a sharp peak of white fur in the centre; all synthetic materials, in the spirit of conservatism. He enthusiastically pressed the communication implant attached to his ear, commanding it to go into *selfie mode*. The camera function

detached and hovered as a mini drone in front of them, taking 4 or 5 snaps of the two of them, with Shaka Zulu statue in the background, before hovering back and reattaching itself to Benjamin's ear.

"There we go! Thank you," said Benjamin. "I will definitely return for a holiday. Perhaps I will train to be an *Impi* and catch poachers."

"You want to be an *Impi*?" Mr Chilinda grinned as if imagining the vision. "You'll be the only red *Impi* in the kingdom!"

Benjamin crossed his arms in mock-offence, though he realised, after a long day in the scorch of the sun, he must look redder than usual. He had forgotten to wear sunscreen and a hat, and after the afternoon on the savanna, he was beginning to feel the impending sunburn. "Well, I'm sure that would make me fiercer, don't you think?" He grinned but saw that his joke was met with confusion. "Never mind."

Benjamin walked Mr Chilinda to the car park and waved him off. "We'll be in touch! Please let me know if they find those poachers."

Mr Chilinda nodded then waved, driving off into the evening. Benjamin stood outside for a while longer after the car had gone and gazed thoughtfully at the evening sky. With minimal light pollution around, the stars filled the sky, many of which he had never seen before, revealed in all their twinkling glory in the clear atmosphere. Benjamin could not remember the last time he saw the stars, not as bright as this anyway.

He headed back to the room, threw himself on the bed in the room and let out a loud sigh followed by a raspberry. His mind wandered to something he said to Mr Chilinda, *That I have to figure out. I will have to determine what is feasible.* What a joke! What even was there to figure out, really? He slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand in embarrassment. *Idiot!* As he recounted the happenings of the day, it dawned on him that this was the first time in his life he felt so – useless, like a spare wheel on the wrong model car. The truth was he was not needed here. *Perhaps, that's why I kept getting those smirks,* he realised.

Perhaps, they don't need me.

There was nothing more for him to do, but push his flight to the next morning, then sleep.

His mental note was empty.

"When should I be expecting your report?"

Benjamin walked up to the hovercraft on the grassy runway, pretending he did not hear the question. He turned around, close enough to the deafening hum of the hover engines, and waved at Mr Chilinda who had volunteered to escort him that morning. The drive from the Shaka Zulu was mostly quiet with sputters of conversation. Mostly anything to distract them from having the conversation Benjamin was

too embarrassed to have. Mr Chilinda, his lips curving into a cheeky smile, waved back to Benjamin from the edge of the runway.

“*Oom-vay-low* keep you from fire,” Benjamin shouted, not caring if the pronunciation was wrong, as he climbed up the steps and disappeared into the body of the hovercraft.

It was a full flight, no humanitarians in sight. *Well, except me*, he realised. Benjamin got to his window seat, strapped in and endured the discomfort of the brisk vertical hover into the cloudless sky. Outside of the window, in the far-off distance, he saw the carrier lifting out of the cover of the woodlands and away towards the westerly horizon. Another collection for the day. He looked down at the open grasslands rapidly falling away from him, the tall blades of grass leisurely swaying in the wind, and wondered, *did they ever catch those poachers?* He gently thumped his forehead against the windowpane, realising he had forgotten to find out or even ask. *Perhaps*, another thought came to him, *it's not my place to know*.

As he watched Mombera Kingdom disappear out of view, he scoffed at the thought he had when he arrived the day before. That feeling of entering a new world. The exhilaration of going on a new adventure. And just like *Frodo* at the end of his favourite digi-book series, he felt different, changed, and he did not know what to do with that feeling. He had come to a world he wanted to save and discovered that world – that *Mordor* – did not want to be saved. *Goodness*, comparing Mombera Kingdom to Mordor made him cringe a little inside.

To distract himself, Benjamin tapped the implant on his ear to check his messages. Mother. Mother. More mother! Spam. Office! An office message with a congratulatory subject title in capital letters: WE BEAT OUR TARGET!

Benjamin's stomach sank as the cascading chimes of donation notifications kept ringing in his ear.

THE END

About the Team

MUTHI NHLEMA



Muthi Nhlema is a short story writer who accidentally stumbled into the world of African Speculative Fiction and hasn't figured out where the exit door is yet.

Spotlighted as [one of the 100 African Writers of Speculative Fiction and Fantasy](#) by Geoff Ryman, Muthi's first foray into speculative fiction was his novella, '*Ta O'Reva*', about the return of Nelson Mandela to a post-apocalyptic South Africa. The novella won third prize at the 2015 International Freeditorial Long-Short Story Competition and was also shortlisted for Best Novella at the inaugural 2017 Nommo Award for African Speculative Fiction, alongside internationally acclaimed writers such as Nnedi Okorafor. An excerpt of the novella, 'Legacy' was long-listed for the 2015 Writivism Short Story Prize and was runner-up for the 2015 Dede Kamkondo Short Story Award.

Muthi's second speculative fiction piece, '*One Wit' This Place*', about a broken family trying to survive a world ravaged by climate change, opened the 2016 Imagine Africa 500 anthology, and was later re-published by the Manchester Review in 2017. The story received positive reviews, including a mention by the Nigerian writer and editor Wole Talabi, who called it [one of the top 10 African Science Fiction and Fantasy Short Fiction pieces of 2016](#). Muthi's other non-speculative fiction piece, '*Free Seating*', a first-person account of an unpleasant bus-ride with a twist, won the 2015 First Merchant Bank-Malawi Writers' Union Short Story Prize.

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In late 2021, Muthi was selected to participate in the prestigious [International Writers Programme at the University of Iowa](#) in the United States, making him the fifth Malawian writer to participate in the residency since its founding in 1967. Since the residency, Muthi has been nursing a stubborn interest in using speculative fiction to reimagine alternate histories and indigenous futures liberated from colonial or western paradigms of progress and modernity (something easier said than done!). This anthology, in its own way, gave Muthi a chance to get off his backside, stop living in his head and take a stab at penning such histories and futures on the taunting wastelands of the blank page.

EKARI MBVUNDULA CHIROMBO



Ekari Mbvundula Chirombo is a speculative fiction writer of over 15 short stories, and has won numerous prizes and recognition for her stories, including 2nd Prize in an African-wide, Nigerian-based short story marathon called The Writer 2016.

Her ebook *Montague's Last* (published as Ekari Mbvundula) is a short story about a 17th Century African slave in a French dungeon who spends the final moments of his life on an invention which will change the world. *Montague's Last* has been adapted into an audio podcast on *Strange Horizons*, republished in *Omenana* speculative fiction magazine, and was selected as a subject of study by a masters student at the University of Stellenbosch.

Her story *Undying Love*, also published in *Omenana*, is about a young man in Joburg who becomes possessed by an evil spirit, and pushes the love of his life away to protect her, only for her to return to try and free him. *Undying Love* was added to the long list nominations for the 2020 Nommo Awards, and was also added to the Nebula Recommended Reading List.

She is the founder of the Story Ink Africa: Storytelling Sessions, where up-and-coming writers from around Malawi would read their stories to a live audience. She now edits books under her company Story Ink Africa: Writing Services.

Find out more from her website www.ekariwrites.com

LIAM CARPENTER-URQUHART



Liam Carpenter-Urquhart is a writer and scientist based in Stockholm. He is currently pursuing a doctorate in Sustainability Science at the Stockholm Resilience Centre, where he studies visions of the future and their influence on sustainability action at multiple scales.

Liam is well-familiar with the loose boundary between science and creative writing. His previous excursions include a BA in Physics and Literary Arts from Brown University, a collaborative cycle of poems composed for the Organism for Poetic Research, and editing contributions for popular science books and literary magazines. While pursuing his MSc at the Stockholm Resilience Centre, Liam was thrilled to help facilitate the visioning workshop that inspired these stories. He didn't know then that the experience would push him headfirst into sustainability futures, which does appear to be his career now.

MAGANIZO KRUGER NYASULU



Maganizo Kruger Nyasulu is an interdisciplinary sustainability scientist and fiction literature enthusiast. He is a PhD candidate at the Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University, where he investigates how global changes driven by anthropogenic action impact water and land use for livelihood. His academic roots are in economics, system dynamics, and sustainable development from the University of Malawi and Uppsala University.

Maganizo is deeply invested in innovation and transformative actions that aim to bridge the gap between science and practice. This passion led him to participate in a future visioning workshop in Malawi, which not only inspired this anthology but also reflected his commitment to integrating his work with his ardour for knowledge co-production, art, speculative writing, and gamification.

LAURA PEREIRA



[Laura Pereira](#) is an Associate Professor in Sustainability Transformations and Futures at the Global Change Institute at Wits University and a researcher at the Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University. She is an interdisciplinary sustainability scientist, having been trained in ecology, law, zoology and human geography. Following her undergraduate at Wits, she went on to complete her DPhil in Geography at Oxford University in 2012, before undertaking post-docs in sustainability science at Harvard's Kennedy School and at the University of Cape Town. She has subsequently worked at Stellenbosch University, City University of London and Utrecht University.

Laura is interested in the interface between indigenous and local knowledges and innovation, the role of futures techniques and visioning in enabling transformative change and developing innovative methods for knowledge co-production in Global South contexts. Her work is now extending into how equity and justice can be incorporated into discussions of transformative interventions to stay within safe and just earth system boundaries. She is passionate about inter and trans-disciplinary research processes and works closely with artists and writers in her current research, specifically in operationalizing the Nature Futures Framework. As part of this, she has been able to combine her love for speculative fiction with her research, which has resulted in her editing this anthology.

SIMON BANDA II



Simon Banda II is a 29-year-old multi-award-winning graphic designer, and digital painter. He has been working in the design space for over a decade. With a keen understanding of colour harmony, his work is usually colourful, even though it mostly depicts darker themes. He spends what's left of his free time listening to rock/metal music to feed his strange essence. No surprises there. He aims to explore more African futuristic themes in his work, as it is one of his core passions. This anthology gave him a chance to indulge this long-held passion. You can find him online as [@killsimao](#)

A princess discovers a terrible secret. An elder is torn by his duty in the wake of a war. A philanthropist finds that he has room to learn. Inspired by a visioning process in dialogue with the Ngoni people, these 3 stories paint a vivid picture of a future Malawi, pushing our sense of what's possible for nature, people and society...

Through three stories, we are introduced to different visions of how societies can relate to the natural world in more harmonious ways than we are currently. Each works hard to preserve aspects of traditional culture to show that such alternative societal configurations can coexist with solid climate science. The authors are careful to present robust depictions of conservation, reclamation and reforestation within the context of the existing ecosystem. This anthology is a great place to start if you're interested in eco-fiction from the African continent.

CHINELO ONWAULU, WRITER AND EDITOR

Creating a sustainable future requires new stories. By using the Nature Futures Framework as a touchstone this anthology connects culture, society, and nature to illuminate alternative paths towards sustainable futures in Malawi. These stories can serve as a model for other collaborations between scientists and artists, and I hope that other people will be inspired to imagine new stories for their places.

GARRY PETERSON, PROFESSOR, STOCKHOLM RESILIENCE CENTRE

Storytelling is one of the most powerful ways we have of engaging with big issues, to make it personal, to make it feel real. I'm so excited by these kinds of collaborations and hope there will be many more!

LAUREN BEUKES, AUTHOR

