



TRAZER

KIDS OF STOLEN TOMORROW

JOSEPH O. ADEGBOYEGA-EDUN

TRAZER

Kids of Stolen Tomorrow

Joseph O. Adegboyega-Edun

YORUBA BOY BOOKS, MARYLAND

Copyright © 2017 Joseph O. Adegboyega-Edun

All Rights Reserved. This book may not be reproduced, transmitted by any means, photocopied or stored in a retrieval system without the express written consent of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

YORUBA BOY BOOKS, MARYLAND

www.YorubaBoy.com

www.TrazerSeries.com

ISBN 978-0-69-299503-7

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*Olaiya, for Ma and her wealth of knowledge.
For Pops, the original storyteller.*

CONTENTS

64 O.O.....	1
DARA.....	2
KRIS.....	24
TRIAL RUN.....	49
69 O.O.....	61
THE PLACE	62
ALÁRÀBARÀ	90
HER.....	96
EAVES	115
80 O.O.....	141
OJUJU	142
84 O.O.....	171
ORI BURUKU	172
REZA	197
OLA IYA.....	234
TJ	279
IGBO OLUWA	301
THE ILLUMINATED HALLWAY.....	325

DARA

“I’M GUESSING YOU DON’T AGREE, Miss Adeleye.”

Dara stared out a window into a sea of lifeless permafrost. It was early May in the year 93 O.O. (*La ti Odun Oluwa* or Years Since the Miracle). In generations past, the warm weather this time of year would’ve likely inspired countless students to disappear from within the confining walls of Ron Ed Instructional for the remainder of the day. Grateful to be indoors, she turned up the heat setting on her thermer and played with the small blue crystals on her lanyard, thinking of the next moment she’d be able to paint.

Instructor Bivins was droning on about the “Wonder” of verus, and how it saved the population from the igioyin virus. He held its creation and distribution up as a fine example of the Ministry’s efficiency, implying it was successful because the union’s constituents allowed it to be. “Some want to get in the way of the process,” he pivoted, turning the lecture in her direction. “Too busy complaining instead of trusting in what’s kept us safe.”

Dara didn’t mind finding new ways to challenge the indoctrination which took place daily in Bivins’ classroom. Often it meant being able to—at least briefly—avoid thinking of the frigid gray mess outside that served as an appropriate backdrop to her life. His persistence with this particular topic *did* however, anger and annoy her as she thought of all the ways her closest friend Nicole’s condition refuted his statements. *He’s nothing more than an instrument of propaganda. Just like the others. Don’t let him get to you.* She caught herself squeezing her lanyard a bit too tight and relaxed her grip.

“You know me so well,” she said, without moving her gaze from the winter wasteland burying the once carefully maintained artificial grass that marked the campus’ borders, and wondered why they bothered. Surely whoever mapped out the curriculum had to know it was being squandered on

the already defeated, the apathetic. Ron Ed, like all instructionals, functioned as low budget daycare for the dispirited.

A few of her classmates groaned, some snickered. The remainder continued sleeping, uninterrupted.

“Dah-Rah, you ‘bout to get another detention today,” said a short but menacing kid who sat next to her. He probably had a name, other than “Shut-the-hell-up.” Today a frosty glare would suffice. She turned away from the kid to look at Bivins, making eye contact for the first time since class began.

The instructor’s eyes lit up, his trademark disdain for her reappearing in his smile. “Oh? And what argument could *you* have against the Ministry saving millions of lives? Tell me, child. I’ve grown quite fond of your comedic genius.”

Dara thought it insulting of him to claim efficiency on the part of the Ministry, but maybe it was easy for Bivins to see it that way; he lived in the cloud of a blue vane. “I may be a child but I’m old enough to remember the Ministry’s wastefulness causing countless Todirb deaths long after relief should’ve arrived. Maybe efficiency means something else to you. Instructor Bivins, are you *aware* most of us who live outside the clouds can’t afford the weekly inoculation? We still walk around in fear *every day* not knowing if...” She hesitated and looked around. “Yeah, you call it a ‘Wonder’ and hail it as some miracle but you love omitting key facts whenever you lecture us. Pretty hard to push the lies when the truth is always hovering in the background, isn’t it?” Dara said this, barely making it through before sarcasm could give way to palpable irritation.

“Ahhh, Dara ... are *you* the truth that’s hovering in the background?” Instructor Bivins laughed exaggeratedly and shook his head, locks flying as if ridding himself of an infestation. “For one so potentially intelligent, it’s surprising you insist on lazy conspiracy theories over easily accessible facts. It’s common knowledge the Ministry has made available alternative options for those in the predicament you’ve mentioned. It’s been well documented verus need not

be administered weekly to be effective. Sure, potency varies due to a multitude of factors, but socioeconomic status is *not* one of them. If you paid any attention during your science courses, you'd be aware of this, no doubt!" He sighed. "Perhaps your thoughts will one day escape the fantasy land in which they reside and you can return to focusing on appropriate things, like the latest Miren dress or float-shoe. You're not unattractive. Properly groomed, you could make a decent wife to a blue marlsonne willing to step down a few rungs—perhaps even one from New Stuyvesant! Feel free to dream."

His grin was especially wide on the last suggestion. Dara smiled in kind, her irritation now gone. Despite his unbothered act, he'd added a deeply personal insult. She'd managed to rile him up a bit and his grin was a poor cover for taking the bait. Dara wasn't naïve. She knew the Ministry wasn't entirely to blame; a lot of things could be traced to the terror the Nth had inflicted on all of them. Igioyin *wouldn't even exist* if it weren't for the Nth. Still, it was worth it to see Bivins like this.

She felt the urge to turn her gaze back towards the window and regain her aura of disinterest but realized such a move could be mistaken to suggest the opposite. With Bivins, these little battles were often won and lost on body language alone. She maintained her gaze and chose instead to see if she could bait him further.

"Insult me all you want Instructor Bivins, but I promise you I *will* be Minister one day. And I won't turn my back on my roots and leave the poor suffering, as Minister Corlmond has done. And, sir, on that day if you're lucky, I may choose to help *you* ... because, it almost seemed like there was a note of reverence in your tone when you said 'marlsonne.' Or maybe it was embarrassment." She'd heard the rumors of his failed career as one of the nobility's fabled singers.

"Unlikely." The detachment which Instructor Bivins had nearly abandoned moments earlier returned in full force.

Dara backed off. There would be no detention for her today.

She returned her attention to the window, the instructor's words fading further into the background as her gaze caught and focused on a group of animated kids—laughing, chasing each other, throwing things—in the distance. They were from Ron Ed Preparatory which had let out twenty minutes earlier. A smile crossed her face as she thought back to a few years ago. *That was me and Nic. Playing around, saying we'd become things everyone told us we were silly to imagine.* She allowed her smile to linger as she watched, knowing that with her successes each passing day she was becoming greater proof that *everyone* knew squat. Suddenly, one of the boys began convulsing. The other kids ran to hold him and one ran off, presumably to get help. Within seconds his convulsions had stopped, and he lay still. Two adults in medic suits arrived at the scene and picked up the body.

Some of the kids tried to follow, but Dara saw them being waved off. With their heads down, they plodded across the landscape until they were out of sight. She touched her forehead as if massaging a headache and quickly moved her hand down her face, removing a few droplets of water from her eyes. *Wimp.* Whenever she saw another fall, she questioned if her tears were from genuine sadness or the reminder her moment could be as random. She'd recently tested negative for igioyin, but it seemed like it would be only a matter of time before it chose her too.

This was life in the world after the gods descended to earth in a vision: “The Miracle of Elegua (sometimes derisively referred to as “The Mirage of Elegua”),” disabled weapons of mass destruction and promised to save mankind from itself. In the ninety-three years since, there had been The Nightfall War—a twenty-six-year worldwide attritional nightmare ending with the tattered remains of civilization crawling multilaterally towards peace and agreeing to a global alliance in order to survive as a species; the rise of the Nth, self-proclaimed freedom fighters who brought destruction

and chaos in the name of the gods; and igioyin: the tachy-degenerative disease that was a ticking time bomb for anyone born of low stock. “Miracle of Elegua,” “Wonder of Verus,” it didn’t matter; adults put names to things and then chose whatever meanings justified their atrocities.

The lights in the classroom changed from white to red to signify the end of the school day.

“And now back to the gray,” Dara whispered to herself.

Her classmates got up and showed their first collective signs of life all day. Dara remained in her seat for a second longer, allowing the crowd to clear. She gathered her things and trudged along behind the rest of her class, barely acknowledging Instructor Bivins’ self-satisfied “Till Monday, Miss Adeleye!”

“Actually, Miss Adeleye, I need to see you for a moment. Miss Adeleye!”

Startled, she jumped slightly and turned to Bivins. “Yes?”

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about that work of yours for Monday. I can’t wait for us all to be underwhelmed and disappointed. I will *personally* put the finishing touch on your file. Then we can lay your foolish ambitions to rest and you can aim appropriately for your true lot in life.” He snickered. “Minister eh? And *I’d* love to teach the bright children of the nobility in the wondrous Lyteche-sponsored academies of the clouds instead of wasting my talents here in instructionals with you lot, but we *all* must be realistic.”

“Oh, Bivins, you always say the sweetest things to me,” she replied dismissively, walking away.

Dara had a lot riding on Monday. Yearly, three exceptional students, juniors, from each red vane were picked to be recipients of the Carbo Scholarship, allowing them to attend one blue vane university of their choosing. It was a lottery ticket of sorts, sponsored by popular TV faith healer Darcen Carbo, and in most cases, the only way to a better life for its recipients. Any other path likely condemned them to a life of low wages and no chance of upward mobility. The difference between the Carbo and the *actual* lotteries was,

with this, the contestants had some semblance of control over their destiny, and there were people who won. Dara had done everything in her power thus far to be a frontrunner for a selection, with the exception of her provocations with Bivins—which had threatened to unravel her entire candidacy on more than one occasion. Her work Monday would make her a lock as a rep for the class of 94 O.O. and Instructor (and unfortunately, also Vice Chancellor) Bivins practically powerless in her march to a better future, and eventual rise to Minister of the North Emerian Union. The only problem was she hadn't finished her submission yet.

As she shuffled past the weapons detectors and through the school's switched-off doors, Dara inhaled deeply, reacquainting herself with a world she'd have little respite from for the next three days. Burning icicles formed in her nose. The gelid air in Todirb Wall was no different than in any other red vane: sooty and reeked of sulfur—quite different than the green or blue vanes. She envied those who lived their entire lives under the protected atmosphere of the clouds, and envisioned herself as a beaming student at Stuyvesant University, imbibing the celestial New Stuy mist.

Weekends were the worst in “The Wall” because they passed excruciatingly slowly. One could link up with friends for some outdoor mischief, but unless they had money and an approved pass for a trip to the blue vanes, reds were better off staying indoors, or within the immediate proximity of their residences. It didn't take much to start street fights, and the medics weren't exactly clamoring to make their way to the chaos of such events. With this, plus the number of students who died from igioyin, local instructionals were permanently short a few attendees each Monday.

Dara's living circumstances barely made staying indoors a better option. Although it meant she'd only briefly get to see Nicole, she decided right then as she stood outside it was best she grab her project from home and spend the majority of the weekend at school working on it.

KIDS OF STOLEN TOMORROW

She descended the steps. It hadn't snowed for weeks now, but the sidewalk and street were perpetually carpeted in a crunchy gray crust. It often seemed the ground was a reflection of the sky, or vice versa and the vagrant crowd milling about outside the school hoping for leftover lunches or unwanted snacks was a daily reminder of what the future held for many of her classmates. She sighed.

The place where we dwell.

Still, things could be worse, though thinking of those possibilities was of no real comfort. As she deftly avoided any contact with the crowd and headed up the block on Kane Street, Dara pushed such thoughts out of her mind. Instead, she played the game that always brought her comfort on the walk home. She would count how many already snow-imprinted footsteps she'd stepped in before she had to make her own. Once done, she'd start again. In this manner she often got home without incident, save for the cursed she'd occasionally pass as they were convulsing before death. Stragglers and goons could obstruct only if they were given an opening.

As she passed the cages of Pratt Correctional Facility and neared her home on Lee Way, the routine that helped many times before proved useless. Red vanes such as Todirb Wall, much like their blue and green counterparts, were secured by way of shiny, dark obelisks (tinted slightly with the color of their vane), known as *towers*. Draped in molten black pearl, they rose ambitiously from the vision of a landscape that wasn't; against the archaic red vane architecture, their beauty made them an eyesore. These immovable, impenetrable structures monitored criminal as well as potential terrorist activity allowing the state to send Pro-Ts to bring swift and decisive justice to those caught in the act. Their scope covered a wide radius and due to their phallic shape, they acquired a variety of unsurprising nicknames—none similar to the official names given by the Ministry. Utterance of the phrase “Rick’s watching,” was enough to jettison an illicit deal

of any kind. No one knew quite how they worked, only that they did—with chilling efficiency.

There were, however, places even the prying eyes of the Ministry couldn't reach, as well as activities to which it turned a blind one. Left were a variety of vices for willing and dedicated career criminals to make a comfortable living from without drawing the attention of the Pro-Ts. They took full advantage, turning other red vane inhabitants into unwitting victims and unwilling participants at a rate that should have been alarming. In Wall slang, these professionals were called *lawyers*. Such was their ability to avoid the inside of the cages.

That was why Dara could make little sense of the scene emerging less than a block from her home. Ahead, there was a large crowd, but it was different from the homeless zombified masses usually collecting around a block. They were surrounding something (or someone) with a unifying frenzied energy. As she attempted to make her way around the horde, a brilliant white streak leapt from its center, reaching towards the sky. Falling woefully short, its descent and the accompanying boom managed to splinter the gathering enough for Dara to see what had caused the swarm.

Impossible.

Her disbelief carried her through the crowd and she found herself in front of a downed tower; Brouder Tower, the *central eye* of Todirb—made somehow more menacing as it watched her from the ground, its power to intimidate unaffected by its damaged state. Nonetheless, she stared. It was smooth, seamless; gorgeous. There was no mark from the lightning, no visible fissure or crack from which it could have escaped. The crowd struck a strange equilibrium; desperate to leave, yet drawn by the unknown, they froze, waiting.

Dara—who suffered no such paralysis, backed away, wondering who or what could have caused such a thing to occur. The lawyers' domain was far away from the watchful eyes of the towers. Such a brazen act of vandalism would only bring attention to Todirb leading to unwanted Pro-T

scrutiny to their dealings. While criminal, they were businessmen, not idiots. Swarms of Pro-Ts drove down profit margins. Was this some sort of attack by the Nth? But that would be stupid—wasteful. *They'd never do anything like that here. We're nobody—*

From out of nowhere, swarms of tall, broad-shouldered, masked officers clad in all-black form-fitting garb appeared and began dispersing the crowd. Dara's curiosity gave way to terror. These weren't officers; they weren't dressed like Pro-Ts. These were the Nth! Every news panel story she'd ever heard or seen, every nightmare she'd had of them was laughable in comparison to this, the real thing. They moved like gods, vengeful ones; each step towards the crowd rung out with the finality of fate. They held fleers—beautiful, slender, skipping stone shaped silver weapons—and opened them, emitting radiant glows searing the flesh of those unlucky enough to be transfixed by the sight.

Fortunately, Dara's earlier movement away from the crowd had given her a head start. She now found herself running side by side with a little girl who couldn't have been older than six. They were being pursued by an Nthn who'd noticed them break away from the larger throng. Dara saw him reach for his fleer and ran faster, nearly slipping on slick patches, ducking into an alley alongside the little girl and a few other escapees to avoid the fatal beam that would surely follow. Coming to a stop at a wall after weaving through a maze-like series of side streets and alleys during which the others fell away, she was surprised and relieved to see the child still next to her, perhaps even a half step ahead. She was crestfallen to see they hadn't managed to shake their pursuer. The Nthn stood facing them less than twenty feet away, fleer aimed. The Nth emblem of Ogun, the Yoruba God of War, was visible on his breastplate. Dara stepped in front and shielded the little girl, laughing, wondering which smile Bivins would choose upon getting word of her death. As she laughed, she felt herself being lifted by tiny hands and

casually thrown against a wall. Her back struck the wall. She fell.

The Nthn who she'd thought only moments ago was pursuing her paid no attention to her jumbled form and remained in his menacing stance, fleer trained on the child. Dara, conscious but woozy, was confused by what occurred next.

Dara had heard the horror stories about the Nth growing up. She'd heard the urban legends of mystery Nthns seizing red vane youngsters, disappearing them into the darkness, but she'd never had the good fortune of personally seeing one in action. She watched in dismay as the Nthn fired his weapon at the girl. She was astonished when the incandescent beam bent around the girl and destroyed the wall behind her. The girl, seemingly out of nowhere, produced an object resembling a *glowing!*? sprezen—a dispenser often used for graffiti—and she responded with a similar beam of her own. This beam made contact with the Nthn and he was replaced with a pile of dust. As the scene went in and out of focus, Dara saw the girl, glowing sprezen in hand, turn towards her with an expression she couldn't decipher. As the girl pointed the sprezen at her, Dara felt her helplessness and fear return.

Eshu if these are my final moments please protect my soul and give me safe passage through the crossroads.

A bright pink light engulfed her. She was conscious in that moment of whatever force held her together because she felt its pull weakening. Her eyes remained open, but they were rendered visionless and she soon lost consciousness.

She came to in a large, soft bed in a windowless room dimly lit with blue hue. Across from the foot of the bed, to the side, was an empty wooden chair pushed under a matching desk. On the desk, she could make out a thick stack of old-style reads. Directly across from her and the bed was what had to be the door, a light green rectangular slab with an over-sized golden marble fixed near the center on the edge. It looked overweight and inefficient. Dara had seen its like in history panels from time to time. To the other side of the

door was what appeared to be a small translucent statue with black and red engravings, but she couldn't make out its features. It hid in a corner created by the doorframe and the end of a couch. The bed was a cream island atop a calm sea of dark blue carpeting. As she surveyed the room, not daring to move from this foreign bed where she felt strangely safe, she wondered if she'd somehow awoken in the distant past, was still asleep, or in the alley, littering the frost with her disintegrated carcass.

She heard a slow creak as the primitive, cumbersome door opened, laboring on its hinges, loudly threatening her feeling of safety. In a panic, she gasped with the absurd and desperate hope that somehow the act of taking in all the air in the room would make her invisible as the air itself. A glance at her hand showed she'd failed and she slowly exhaled. In stepped the little girl from moments, hours or *days ago*? It was impossible to tell how much time had passed in this room.

"Relax," the child said. She hesitated as if struggling with what to say next. "You're safe," followed. She held out a small light-yellow flask. "Drink." Dara, not moving or saying anything, stared. The girl had dark brown wavy hair, platted into a single braid, which ran down her back. Her olive eyes were kind but looked aged and weary, out of place against the vitality of her soft, honey skin. Dara had seen those tired eyes before—in the mirror and on the faces of her peers—but they had at least twice the years of suffering under their belts. Glancing at the flask in the tiny hands, Dara was reluctant to obey.

She knew she had the girl to thank for her safety, but was that enough to trust her? She did not know the motives of this child. As she thought it over, pain shot through her body. A shriek of agony too grotesque to manifest audibly welled up inside her, emerging in her look instead. The little girl stepped forward quickly, while opening the flask and forced a bittersweet syrupy substance from it down Dara's throat. Within seconds, Dara felt a gentle warming sensation

throughout her body. The pain ceased. Words tumbled out of her mouth.

“Thanks so much.”

The little girl nodded.

“Why was that Nthn after us?”

“Not Nthn. IPU” the little girl replied.

“IPU? Huh? No, that wasn’t IPU ... they were wearing Nth—”

“IPU. Not. Nthn.”

“Then why? Who *are you?*” What would the Institute for Preservation of Unity be doing in Todirb? They were the royal force of the (ceremonial) emperor, dealing primarily with international peacekeeping affairs. Dara was confused. She set a foot off the edge of the bed and tried to stand up, but wobbled, lost her balance and fell back.

“Soon, every ...”

As Dara faded into the cocoon of a dream, the girl’s words dissipated and all at once she was aware of a flood of colors. Colors leaned their heads back and belched other brighter colors. Colors held hands and jumped over landscapes, leaving trails on the horizon. Colors she knew. Colors for which no words existed. Colors that took the drab reality in which she resided and made *that* the dream, a woeful, slapdash attempt at replication falling far short of this new realm she wanted to stay in forever.

She was moving—no—she was being moved. Was this only in the dream? Was her physical body in motion? There were shapes. Some colors would die and leave odd, unfamiliar outlines in their wake before newer ones sprang to life. Each outline moved towards her, enveloping her for a split second before disappearing behind her, a parade of disfigured doorways. The shapes appeared with increasing frequency and speed, moving towards, around and eventually past her and Dara was abruptly airborne through a rainbow tunnel. She reconnected with her physical body—it traveled in sync with her visions, seemingly unveiling them as more than a mere dream. She couldn’t open her eyes to confirm this, as

she had no control whatsoever; she could only trust her intuition. She sensed, but didn't feel wind, was aware of, but couldn't see clouds, and felt, but did not hear sound. She was free: from responsibility, from worry, from fear. It was exhilarating. Was this death? If so, she was grateful to Olorun to have discovered it early.

She felt herself being angled downward, mind and body resisting the inevitable pull of gravity, dragged off the ether like trees failing to remain on the hillside during an avalanche. There was momentary acceleration followed by a decline in speed so sharp she felt she'd come to a full stop. She soon realized she was still descending, albeit slowly. When she finally stopped moving, Dara opened her eyes. She was surprised and disappointed to find herself in the same bed and the little girl in the same spot, standing there, static—save for the flask in her hand which was now closed. It dawned on Dara that time and space hadn't revealed any intimate secrets, she hadn't traveled to undiscovered worlds, and she was not capable of flight. Whatever it was this child had given her to drink simply put her in a hallucinatory state. She did, however, feel the strength return to her body as she stood and stretched. Naturally, she followed with a flood of questions ranging from the child's identity and origins to what she'd been given to drink. The child watched, unmoved.

Dara, overwhelmed and out of breath, took a moment, and then came the statements of her importance (threats), followed by demands to return home. "Please! You don't understand I need to finish. I'm gonna be the first kid from Todirb to become Minister and this is my shot at the scholarship—this is how! This is my chance to change things; I'll miss it if I don't make it back home in time. You *have* to take me home now or I won't make it! I'll be like everyone else—I can't let Bivins be right—I won't!" Dara, teary and unable to control her gesticulations or the volume of her increasingly cracking voice during this torrent, was uneasy about the way the girl stood calmly, letting her vent, not

saying a word, not changing her expression. It was enough to stop her barrage. She studied the little girl's face once more.

Well?

The girl, returning Dara's curious stare, pointed to herself and said, "Vida. Seven." She took a deep breath. "Safe here." Another breath. "Please, stay. Urgent. Much to discu—"

Dara, not calmed by the kid's seeming inability to form complete sentences, ran over to the door, fought with it a bit before it gave, and in flooded bright light from the hallway. She stepped into it and as her eyes adjusted, looked for an exit. Finding a stairwell ahead, she rushed to descend it. She reached the bottom of the steps and found herself in a living room, furnished like ones of eons ago with shelves of old-style reads, pictures hung up on the walls and floral pattern seats and couches. Directly ahead of her was another primitive door—windowed, leading outside. She turned back, expecting to see the child in full pursuit.

Dara threw the door open and a brighter light than that of the hallway upstairs invited itself in. It was unusually brilliant, a light so rare as to be unfamiliar. It soaked her, catching her off guard, making her aware of little else. Déjà vu washed over her before she connected the warmth of the rays to the feeling she had after consuming Vida's concoction.

The Sun?

Praise Olorun!

As her eyes adjusted, she was now certain she'd never left the alley, and was enjoying some pleasant afterlife, for what she saw was surreal.

Spread out beyond the edges of the wildest reaches of her imagination was green. Beautiful fields reclined effortlessly on top of the land, open as the possibilities in a starlit sky, dotted with trees whose forms swayed in reverence. On the horizon were hills—mountains, rivals in ascent, each a jealous shade as they kissed the unblemished belly of the crystal blue heavens. And the air ... her lungs ballooned and decided against limits. If she ended up floating away, so be it.

“Beautiful?”

Startled, Dara turned to look over her shoulder, and there was Vida, as if she'd been beside her, staring the whole time.

“Yeah. But it's not real.”

The little girl said nothing and smiled.

Dara turned back to look at the house, a yellow two-story cottage. The door was a spotless ivory. There were flowers in all manners of color, most of them presumed extinct, obviously socializing with one another on both sides of the door. She had to be in another universe, world; *another life*.

Sure, blue vanes she'd been to on occasional field trips had vegetation, better air quality, warmth, and were cleaner than the slums of the red vane she hailed from, but they were nothing like this. She turned back around and sat on the pillowy earth, her legs outstretched in the grass, looking into the distance of what had to be a wondrous lie, and let Vida explain. A tranquil breeze accompanied by the lightest of drizzle, gently touched her face as it wafted between them. This small, subtle gesture from the elements was life affirming. She couldn't shake the feeling she'd somehow come to this place before. Wherever they were, maybe it *was* real.

Vida spread her arms wide, as if preparing to hug the air. She looked around and said simply, “Hidden.”

“I don't follow.” Dara questioned how this much land and open space could fit such a description. The house was one thing. She had figured it had to have been somehow concealed to be “safe,” as Vida put it. But the suggestion its hiding place was also hidden ... Dara thought of a cosmic nesting doll and gave a quiet laugh.

Vida stood and put two fingers from each hand on the back of her head and brought them forward simultaneously, flicking them at the moment they reached her temples. A panel then appeared in front of them with an image of other people, considerably older than Vida, performing the same movement. Dara failed to understand. Vida motioned her to keep watching.

From the temple of each person shown, a holographic image of a beautiful land with green hills, trees and a cottage became more vivid. The image did not, however, show them sitting in front of the cottage.

Vida then said, "Together." Motioning to everything around them, "This. *Igbo Olunwa*." She pointed to the people in the panel and pointed to herself: "Us."

Dara after a lengthy pause said, "But ... out of nothing?" Her limits of belief had already been stretched quite a bit already. She wasn't sure how much more she could take.

Vida replied, "Found. Not made."

Dara relaxed her shoulders, her brow unfurrowed. "This place already existed."

Vida smiled. "You. Here before."

Dara was unnerved by the certainty in Vida's tone. "What? No ... no. I don't know what you mean."

"Yes. You do. Re. mem. ber. Soon."

"Why did you bring me here?"

"You have. Great. Path. *Olori-iré*."

"I know. To get out of Todorib. To be Minister, I told you already. Thanks for saving me, I'm thankful, but I have to get back."

"No. Much. Greater. Ogun. Walks. With you."

"Greater than Minister of the NEU? I don't think so. This has been fun but please, I don't know what time it is and my friend needs me."

Vida smiled and again said nothing.

Dara groaned.

"Soon, clear. You, too. This." said Vida. After pausing again, she added, "Soon, home. Trust."

With that, Vida closed the panel, stood and went back into the house.

As Dara dragged her feet, following a girl who could've been her baby sister, she had the silliest thought of *how wonderful it would be to live in a place like this*. She dismissed it and stepped through the cottage doorway. She lost consciousness once again.

* * *

Dara found herself at Nicole's doorstep, backpack in tow, filled with a bag of food she'd pilfered from the cafeteria and the meds she'd picked up in the morning before school. Her lungs burned and her nostrils were raw, having had no time to readjust from the strange dreamland she'd just been unceremoniously booted out of by Vida.

When Nicole opened the door, she smiled saying, "What took you so long? I thought school let out like a couple hours ago, I got worried." Before Dara could answer, Nicole's eyes lit up and her face grew wide as if she'd stumbled on some well-hidden secret. "You finally have a boyfriend, don't you? How was the kiss? Tell me he's a marlsonne and you have a forbidden love! Spill it, bisa!"

Dara smiled and said unenthusiastically, "Yeah, you got me there." She'd decided she didn't have the strength to explain the madness that had occurred in the (*two hours!???* *Impossible!!!*) between leaving school and seeing Nicole. Going along with the imaginary boyfriend was easier; once she'd thrilled her friend with the inside scoop on the day's events, she handed her the meds.

"Verus: Take once weekly to neutralize igioyin." Nicole tossed the package on the couch. "Fantastic if you're a New Stuy siren with Daddy's easy money. Or you can be me and get a handful every few months, hoping you don't die before then."

Dara wasn't going to let her go down this road again. Nicole was prone to spells of deep depression, leaving Dara fearful she might beat the illness to the punch and punch out. *No, not with me around.* It made Dara feel guilty each time she tested negative. "Hey Nic, what about Jess? He said he could get some extras from work, right?"

"Nuh, that's not gonna work, Dara. I know he thinks it would change my life—that I'd get off this couch and go out and go be something but who knows? I can't let him risk it."

“He’s right though, you can’t keep missing school and staying home all the time; I think getting out will help with your mood.” Nicole laughed at this suggestion. “Oh yeah? Like how you usually look super happy when I see you after school? No point wasting whatever time I have *there*.”

“I’m serious. I don’t want you hurting yourself.”

“I have a disease where the first symptom is death. If I hurt myself it’ll be to feel alive.”

Nicole’s brother, Jess—a sanitation analyst at Macon Medicine in New Stuyvesant, had told her scores of verus were stored in the facility, but Nicole explained how she could never bring herself to let him take anything. If he got caught and lost his job, they’d have nothing. No place to live, no food, and they wouldn’t have been able to get even the small number of pills she did now. It was best she get by in her current state until they could find a better solution. Dara, frustrated but understanding, was reminded again of her multiple failed attempts to land a part-time job at Macon.

Nicole laughed. “I know that look, Dara Adeleye. It’s okay! Forget about it, I won’t hurt myself, I promise. I’ll be fine! let’s talk some more about your life. How’s the mural coming along? You done yet!!? I can’t wait for my best friend to get into Stuy U!!! You know I’m gonna visit you like every weekend, right?”

Dara laughed. She jumped on the futon and wrapped Nicole in a headlock, and upon releasing, kissed her on the cheek. “Of course, you can be my roomie. As long as you don’t mind sleeping and watching movies while I spend every waking hour studying.”

Nicole stopped laughing, but kept smiling. “Booooooo! How’s that different from now?! Wait, you’re serious? You’re too much lose!” She threw a pillow at Dara.

Dara, knocking the pillow away and still chuckling, got up and stepped into the kitchen. “Nope. Win forever. Grabbing a drink, you want anything?”

“Nuh.”

Dara filled a pitcher with water while continuing their conversation. “Nic, how’s Auntie Modupe?”

“She’s fine! You know how things are. She tries to help, send spends and stuff but their part of Lagos is a difficult place and she has her own children to worry about too. Daniel tested negative last we spoke but she’s terrified especially for the little ones.”

“You guys ever thought about moving out there?”

“What? Halfway across the world to be a burden to her in person? No. A red vane in Lagos is still a red vane.” Nicole went quiet and Dara wondered if her visits did more harm than good.

“Hey there, lover,” Nicole appeared in the kitchen seemingly out of nowhere. Dara jumped. “Geez Nic! Soooo creepy.”

“You were taking forever. I thought you were playing me, seducing some woman of ill repute behind my back.”

“Never, you siren tramp, float-shoe Goddess. You’re the only one for me ...”

“That’s laughably dishonest,” Nicole interrupted, grinning, spinning rhythmically. “*And* it was better in the song anyway. But I’ll take it.”

They returned to the futon and watched part of a documentary on the scarlet macaw, a beautiful endangered South Emerian bird that was best known for its starring role as a green vane delicacy. They were enthralled until they heard the series of grating honks it used to communicate. Nicole (bless her heart) was still sympathetic. They played some games on the netlines together while Nicole caught Dara up on all the celebrity drama and gossip which was forgotten once Nicole wasn’t around, and as she listened Dara wondered if she and Nicole had always been this drastically different, and realized they had. They never shared any of the same interests, didn’t enjoy much of the same music and Dara couldn’t be bothered about anything outside of important community affairs, art and education. It was as if Nicole possessed all the frivolity Dara lacked, but perhaps

this was why they loved each other. Being next-door neighbors for much of their childhood hadn't hurt but Dara wasn't willing to give all the credit to Ministry Zoning. As she listened to Nicole, she could feel herself getting sleepy. It had been a long day; it was getting late and she had work to do. She got up and gave Nicole a generous hug. "I've gotta go."

"Aww, so soon? You never come by."

"Maybe if you'd stop lying like that I'd be by more."

Nicole, chuckling in reply as Dara switched off the door to exit, stopped as a thought popped into her head. "Dara! Remember to tell me when you finish the mural! I demand to see it first!"

"Yes, Mother!" Dara replied, smiling as Nic switched on the door to close it behind her.

* * *

"I don't understand. How by Ogun's blade is this possible?"

Institute for Preservation of Unity Captain Eaves Darcela stared into the open panel screen in disbelief as footage of a ghost ducking into an alleyway in Todirb Wall with one of her emises in hot pursuit played on loop. She kissed a scarification of Ogun, the Yoruba God-of-War on her wrist.

"We're not sure, Captain. Initial footage from Brouder Tower earlier in the day was a positive match. This loop was all we could get from the remaining tower in the area. Emis Portland's audio confirmed the match as well."

"What do you *mean* 'Emis Portland's audio'? What about his blacker?" she asked, referencing the emises' impermeable all-black bodysuits. "His entire blacker is a cam."

"That's the thing Captain, we're not sure. No emis cams at the scene were operational. We're unsure if ... well we think maybe—"

"Maybe *what*?"

"The girl may have done something to them."

“Like what? What in *Ogun’s name* could she have done?” The captain lifted a rather large mouse out of a tank containing a few others, pet it, and began feeding it from her hand. “Don’t answer that.”

“Y-yes captain.” The emis quaked.

“Aw, he’s so cute! Don’t be so fearful of me—it’s rude, you’re just giving a report. So, *Brouder?*”

“Yes captain.” The emis struggled to steady himself as the mouse sat in the captain’s exposed palm while nibbling away at the treats in her gloved hand.

“How many red-vaners were killed?”

“By us, captain? Thirteen. None by the girl—”

“But all our emises at scene were displaying Nth logos prominently, I take it.”

“Yes—”

“Good. As far as the reds know it was Nthn business as usual and we were never there. So, destroying a tower. Quite the entrance ... yet you let her escape.” The mouse jumped from her palm into her gloved hand for the last of the treats. “I *love it* when they do that,” She delighted.

“Um, we don't have all the details captain but it sounds like Emis Portland nearly apprehended her in an alley before she vaporized him and disappeared. The rest of the feed was lost and we arrived seconds too late. It’s as if she wanted to be seen ... and then didn’t. Chose the perfect alley to duck into—the remaining tower’s range cuts off at the entrance. All we know for certain is she was there and now she's gone.”

Captain Darcela froze the screen for a moment and zoomed in. “Who are those people, the ones running near her; what can you make out?”

“Very little, captain. We’re seeing the same as you; that’s all the footage we have. We didn’t think to ID the others. They appeared to be vagrants fleeing to safety. As you can imagine, our priority and all resources were on the girl.”

The black-gloved hand of the captain closed viciously without warning. The emis flinched at the resulting blood spray. Captain Darcela opened the hand, letting the squashed

mouse plop to the ground. She laughed softly, motioning the emis to clean it up. “I really should calibrate that pressure-glove, shouldn’t I? ID the others! Take the footage to Toley for full analysis. I don’t care how long it takes, we need to know who else was near her. Find them all; question them. We need to know what they saw. Don’t look so revolted. I believe mouse is a red vane delicacy.”

KRIS

“**LIFE IS DUMB.** Everyone’s sitting around and waiting for the end. No one tells you that, nuh. Especially not the rich ones, the ‘royals,’ the ‘nobility’—the ones who got infinite spends. The ones we see on the panels selling us lies. The ones sharing their big plans, bragging about their latest conquests—gassing us up—riling us up for their causes, for their ‘values,’ like we the same. And they try to sell that to you like they know everything—like they got it figured out and we can too if we follow them. Like we can live *their* life; sheeit ... *they* can barely live their lives. Just look at them ... full of false hope. Full of fake energy. People who daily sing the praises of Olorun, Shango, Eshu, Orunmila—have you believing in being blessed—they want so badly for you to believe they are—that they suck you in and infect you with their intoxication. It’s disgusting. It’s sad. It’s even funny. They done such a good job of lying to themselves, their new truth has you convinced. They’re never far away from the real truth though; when they’re pushing their lies on us. It seeps out through that bullshit. Their silly catchphrases give ‘em away. They tell you ‘tomorrow’s not promised; live everyday like it’s your last.’ And ‘carpe diem,’ ‘Yolo,’ and all their dumb, stupid little variations like it matters.

That’s cuz they know, briz; they know we’re all toy huvs being pulled along that invisible field. And yeah ... they accelerating hard and to us it looks like they’re going faster, but they—we all moving to the same place, the same destination. They could be gone tomorrow, like any of us. Verus may have saved them but it ain’t make ‘em invincible. Who cares about their titles? Who cares about their spends and houses and huvs and phrincars? Who cares that they got five Lyteche panels in every room? They gotta give it up

eventually when they go into that nothingness and then they'll be just like us, and they'll be kicking and screaming. They no better cuz they can afford things and we can't. They don't know any more than we do. How many of ya'll carry igioyin? Yeah. Yeah exactly, that's all of us. They're the same people that want to blame *us*, call it a curse—say the gods turned their backs on us. I say what gods? Hell, we got the advantage cuz we don't got nothing to give up and we *know* it could be over any minute. Nothing to lose. No fear, briz.

It's May, 93 O.O.—and ain't nothin' changed! I know those who died *today*, yesterday, last week, last month. I know you all do too. And the Nth is everywhere, briz. They strike whenever and ain't nobody stopping them last I checked. Ain't nobody really in control. And it *frightens* those fake go getters, briz—those clowns in the clouds. It scares them more than it scares us: the ones who got up in the afternoon instead of the morning because we know it don't matter. So when ya'll ask me wh—”

“Is that why your lazy ass always tryna get *everyone else* to do stuff, Kill? Cuz it don't matter?”

The instant silence of tension.

Kris Arvelo looked over the crowd of his fellow teens to the back of the dimly lit space in the Quarters clubhouse, his scowl a missile, eyes seeking the bold suicide who dared address him like an old pal, using his nickname: Kill. Upon finding its intended target, all tension melted and gave way to a smile generous enough to belong to a different face. “Envy! What's love, briz?! Come up here you loser!”

A short, rail thin kid covered in tattoos up to his neck strode to the front of the room. His gait projected an assuredness distinct from the tall, chiseled Kris' confident, rhythmic stride. It was the bop of one with nothing to lose. As Kris stepped forward to meet him in the middle of the room, their embrace could have easily been mistaken for rivals attempting to strangle one another.

“*Man* ... the great Tommy B. Thought you was dead or something, briz. You disappeared forever. What you been up to?” Kris spoke to Envy as if they were the only two in the room.

“Chill briz, no need to drop the government name, but yeah ... gone a couple years ... but I had to lay low. You know after I dropped out Grammy was trying to force me to go back to Ron Ed. I grabbed my shit one night and vimmed out. Went where none a ya’ll could find me. Last I needed was somebody tracing my move back to you or Donzi or whoever. You know, getting *you* in some trouble.”

Kris nodded, gnawing on a toothpick that hadn’t left his mouth since he began his speech. “True, true.”

Envy spoke again, something catching his eye. “Chewing on them toothies huh? Expensive ass habit—your spends must be crazy ... *and* I see you still got that chain, briz, ha ... some things never change.”

Kris instinctively touched his necklace—links of shiny dark metal peppered with light clear blue stones. “Ha! Stop it, briz. Spends is the same they’ve always been.”

He turned to address the gathering.

“This is Envy; he’s family. Don’t let his frame fool you; he’s the toughest briz I know.”

Envy smiled, knocking his tattooed knuckles together and nodded to the small crowd. With a brief scan he saw it was mostly gangly, scraggly dressed boys. A handful of them bore the look of the confident intense, the hungry. Most of the others possessed the hallmarks of the eager to please, the desperate to fit in; the types of kids to look around and see if everyone else was laughing at a joke before they did. All were attentive, hanging onto Kris’ every word, trying hard to look like they belonged.

He recalled feeling that way once—wanting, hoping to belong. By the end of preparatory, the last bit of this foolishness left him, and he entered Ron Ed Instructional a live wire and true menace. His first day of instructional, he

was suspended for fighting a senior who had about five inches and fifty pounds, mostly muscle, on him. The senior was not the victor.

No one could recall what started the fight, but that wasn't the important thing anyway, at least not to Envy. He instantly became someone only the most unbalanced kids would dare mess with; everyone else knew better. He wouldn't fit in, but he'd be left alone. In a school like Ron Ed, which sometimes resembled the cages of Rikesland or Pratt Correctional, it was a necessary start.

Kris' smile faded as his face regained the intensity of the moments before Envy's entrance.

"Chaos is the only thing that truly matters. They put all this order in place to control us. They tell us to be like so and so who studies, become scholars, and eventually we too can move into the green or blue vanes and live a better life under the protection of the clouds. Or we can keep our heads down too and get to be servants who spend the days slaving away in the clouds, seeing how great things are over there only to come back here to garbage. That's weak, briz. They tell us if we have a talent to get up early, focus, develop it, one day we'll wow them enough to join their ranks. Or join their Pro-Ts and hurt our own daily. Or join their IPU and be bottom-feeders, risking our lives to get their little, charity nobility titles. Nuh. It's all lies, briz. How many of you know *anyone*, *ANYONE!* Who's ever gone from this level, this un-existence, this non-existence, to the clouds? To the betters?"

He scanned the room, daring anyone to claim they did.

"Exactly! We born alone. We die alone and we could drop dead at any minute. So while we're here, it only makes sense we get together and tell them nuh, they don't control our lives. They can't tell us where we headed. This our path. Chaos is our way; bedlam is our way. I'm tired of being told what to do. I know *you're* tired of being told what to do! You're tired of being picked on by Pro-Ts, lawyers, and loser parents who take their sadness out on us! Let's do whatever

we want, when and however we want, cuz when we pass through to that other side, ain't nobody else coming with us anyway! Not *one* of them!”

Envy smiled. The room was restless and electric. Every single set of eyes followed Kris intently, ears perked for an order, forms poised for the next move.

Kris, now silent, made eye contact with those in the front row.

“I’m walking into the room behind that door over there. After I close the door, I want ya’ll to line up outside it,” he said, pointing to a brown rectangular slab cut into the wall, unlike anything most of the kids had seen. “The rest of ya’ll put yourselves in rows like the front. Anytime the light above the door glows, the next man in line enters. When the last man from the row in front of you enters the door, the next row moves up and so on, until we down to the last one. You got it?”

They nodded in unison.

Kris walked into the room and closed the door behind him. The first row lined up by the door as ordered.

Envy, somewhat impressed by the scene unfolding before him, looked on in admiration.

* * *

88 O.O. (*Five Years Ago*)

“What you doing briz?”

“Huh?”

“You heard me. What you looking at? What you doing?”

“I don’t know what you’re asking me.”

Thomas Barrington Jr. took a couple of steps towards a lanky dark-haired, pimple-faced kid who didn’t seem to understand breaking eye contact was in his best interest. Moments before, Tommy (Or Envy as he was better known) had taken off his boot and used it to beat another kid to a

heap of jumbled limbs. As Envy moved forward, the kid with the pimples sat there unmoving, stare picking up intensity.

“You must want to get stomped out, huh?” As he knocked together his tattooed knuckles he added: “Brizzes love making moves they’ll regret.”

“I was reading. You were loud ... don’t you gotta class to go flunk?” Next to the seated kid was a panel, hovering. Visible were the lines to “Life’s A Bitch,” by Nasir Jones.

“Oh. Poetry. Look at you, all in the classics. You sensitive, huh? Pitiful twib.” Envy chuckled. He looked at the kid’s neck. “Cute necklace though. I think I’ll take that.”

Pimples sighed the sigh of one bored with the daily parade of preparatory bullies. “Yo, you’re dumb. Nas is win, EASY. If you’re gonna do something then do something, but don’t come here talkin’ tha—”

His words were interrupted by a stout cross connecting with his jaw. Knocked to the ground from his seat, the pimply faced “pitiful twib” slowly gathered himself and stood, clearly surprised and still feeling the effects of the punch. The pitiful twib towered over his assailant and the short, wiry Envy chuckled, as this was merely a cosmetic advantage. When Pimples fell, his upper front teeth had bitten his lower lip. He wiped it with his hand and examined the blood. He remained standing, staring at Envy, saying nothing.

Envy hit him again, this time with a hook.

For a moment the kids face swung from the impact, but unlike with the first punch, he seemed unfazed. As his face returned to its starting point, bruised from the force of the punch, Pimples stared at Envy, a smile slowly spreading across his face.

“Oh, you think you’re some warrior, huh?”

The boy said nothing and this time Envy punched him in the stomach, fully expecting him to fall over and remain down. Instead, Envy found himself grabbing his own fist

from the pain of impact. “What the ... hell? You cover your stomach with concrete or something?”

As a chip-toothed grin grew wider on the pimply boy’s face, he ran his hands through his ruffled coils of hair, put them in his pockets and said, “Man, I was waiting on you to take my chain. You still got your leprechaun issues to work out you little goblin or we done now?” He turned away from Envy. Incensed, Envy grabbed the boy by the scruff of his neck, ripped off the necklace, pulled out a knife and attempted to stick it clean into his side. The boy responded by grabbing the arm holding the knife and using his free arm to wriggle out of his thermcoat to wrap it around the blade. The two of them tumbled to the floor, struggling until he was able to loosen the knife from Envy’s grip and slide it across the floor. The boy then lifted his elbow above Envy’s chest while holding him still with his other arm and bodyweight, and came down with the full force of his upper body. Envy felt all the air leave his body at once, and frantically began flailing his arms as if by doing so he could somehow grab it and return it to his lungs. As Envy struggled, his victim turned attacker sat him up and said quietly, “Don’t panic man, breathe slowly. It’ll come back. Slow breaths. C’mon now, there you go. There you go. There you go. You got it.” He got up to get his necklace which had been thrown a few feet away during the struggle. The clasp had been snapped. He was angry, but it could be fixed.

Envy coughed a few times and spoke. He attempted his normal frenetic pace of speech but it only resulted in grunts and more coughs.

“What was that you said? I can’t hear you,” The pimply boy chuckled.

“That was weak, briz,” said Envy, with the hint of a smile. “And you’re still a pitiful twib.”

“Or,” the pimple-face boy replied, “You can call me Kill.”

* * *

93 O.O. (Present Day)

The entire first line had emptied into the mystery room. Only one kid, a tall, dark-skinned dreadlocked boy called Brink, had exited. As he stepped out, everyone in the room looked to his face for some sort of clue or sign as to what exactly went on in the room. They got nothing.

Brink walked over to a group of chairs to the far corner of the room where Kris had been speaking earlier and sat in the first one. He stared straight ahead making eye contact with no one, and the next row of boys quickly gathered and formed a line at the door.

* * *

90 O.O. (3 Years Ago)

Kris was going to be late for class again. He sped up his stride, trying to see if he could get there without exerting excessive effort or looking like he had. For a moment, he even broke into a power walk.

Shit. Not now!

He broke the toothpick in his mouth.

He felt a stabbing sensation throughout his body. It seemed like there had been an increase in these periodic waves of intense pain ever since he'd tested positive for igioyin. His symptoms and results were abnormal; Kris hadn't so much tested positive for the virus as *active*, the doctor advised. The pain and occasional bleeding were signs his body was fighting the virus, which was unheard of. When the doctor told him and his mother that Kris should have been dead long ago, Mrs. Arvelo praised it as a miracle, predictably thanking Osayin—the god of healing—and leaving tribute for continued blessing. But Kris didn't think it was a miracle, just

a slowing of the inevitable and the pain was a reminder. He tried to ignore it and kept up the pace until he got to the door.

As he coasted into instructor Bivins' classroom, interrupting the start of a lecture, all he could think about was his mother's request he make the most of his blessing and start Ron Ed on the right foot. "This is quite the note you've chosen to begin your instructional career on, child. I can see you have a bright future ahead of you. I'm thinking sanitation analyst. Or, perhaps you want to skip earning a living all together and become a caged bridesmaid." Bivins chuckled and the class followed suit. "Ah yes! I can see it ... now have a seat!"

Kris scanned the room until he saw an empty desk in the far corner of the front row of the room by the window. He made eye contact with a familiar face in the seat behind his, smiled, shook his head, and sat.

"As I was saying prior to the intrusion," Bivins glowered at Kris. "Welcome to Ron Ed Instructional. You may think it simply a continuation of your preparatory years, but I assure you it's not. Many of you got away with quite a bit at the prep level. You'll find there's no such leeway here. You are expected to be on time to class—"

He shot another glare at Kris.

"Hand in class work and homework on time, study and excel on your exams, keep illicit behavior off the school grounds, and when off school grounds, no illicit behavior as you are all representatives of Ron Ed!"

Kris didn't know what planet this instructor came from, but from what he'd heard and seen in his days on the prep level, the instructional was worse, and far graver and illicit goings on occurred all the time. Perhaps this was a new company line. Perhaps it was always the company line. He figured he could try to stay out of trouble though. It was the least he could do for his mom. He pulled out his history panel as Bivins moved on to the lecture.

“And today we discuss how the Great Sino-Persian Conflict brought about The Nightfall War, and the geopolitical consequences and fallout, 173e9 in your panels please.”

As he entered the coordinates, he felt a poke on his shoulder. Donzilana Yang, his best friend since the first grade leaned over and whispered in his ear:

“Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!”

“I swear by Obatala! Donzi, I’m trying to be good this year, become something. Shut up!” He whispered.

“You should start by getting rid of that thermcoat, Kill! Kill!” She chuckled, tapping on the graphic of a busty woman with a menacing grin, dressed in all black spandex with nails out like claws, looking ready to pounce off the back of his jacket onto foes real or imagined. “You’ve had that thing since sixth grade. It was win then but now it’s draw; let it go.”

He couldn’t see her, but he knew she was grinning like mad and twirling her hair. Donzi was always twirling her hair when she knew it would annoy him.

“Donzi, seriously chill—” he whispered again

“*My name* is Donzilana not Donzi; Kill, stop being a punk. You see my dad anywhere around here?”

“Since when? You never minded before.”

“Since now because I feel like it—like really, *Obatala*? You don’t even believe in the gods like that. Unless Carbo made you a believer over the break.”

Kris snickered. “Ha-ha, yeah ... like I’d ever pull up a panel to watch that *fake healer*. Every once in a while, I like to throw around the name of your false deities for entertainment value.”

Donzilana gasped, “Savage! You’re going to hell!”

Kris smiled. “Shango will protect me. Have you seen Shango? He wields an axe of thunder and lightning and controls FIRE. I’m good. Don’t worry about me.”

“You’re so confusing.”

Instructor Bivins hissed.

“Goodbye, Kris. Chancellor’s. NOW!”

Kris shook his head, closed his panel and cursed Donzilana every which way under his breath, “Coño!” He strode out of the room without looking back, hands playing with his necklace, the continued needle stabs overshadowed by thoughts of how he’d disappointed his mother in record time. He turned down the hall and headed for the chancellor’s office. As he entered, a familiar voice said, “What took you so long, you pitiful twib?” He shook his head and unsuccessfully tried to avoid smiling.

* * *

Present Day

Donzilana stood in the midst of the Quarters crowd with her thermcap on in a loose fitting unisuit. Her cherry wine hair was cropped short and styled plainly to avoid drawing attention. It hid well under the thermcap; she could have easily been mistaken for bald. She watched Brink take a seat. She tried not to smile at Envy. Hiding in plain sight, for once thankful her chest was easily concealed, she was one of the boys.

The next group lined up three rows in front of her, and she could feel the nervousness amongst them. She didn’t blame them. After all, no one knew what was going on in that room. She asked the kid next to her to see his flyer. He obliged. Her eyes grew wide and she became as nervous as those around her.

As she scratched the thin layer of false facial hair on her chin, she distracted herself listening to the surrounding conversations. The boys argued about the best futbol player, which one of them was a greater fighter than the legendary Boom Ba-Ye and the flashiest neck panel displays. They talked about girls and what star’s thermcoat they wanted. They spoke about everything except what was on their minds.

She found this amusing, but shifted her attention from the conversational game of keep-away to Envy, who was going through old-style reads on the bookshelf near the spot Kris had stood speaking to the boys earlier. As he held each one, studying the faded dusty covers, looking through the pages, she wondered if they truly held Envy's interest, or were mere curiosities to be satisfied as quickly as they arose. As if reading her mind, Envy stopped on a burgundy covered beauty with gold script and edges. She saw him read the wording on the back cover, open it, examine a few pages, sit with it and begin to read. Donzilana had no doubt it was the striking beauty of the read and not its content that had lured him in.

She heard a collective shuffle of feet. Amongst loud whispers, her attention was diverted back to where she stood and she noticed everyone, save for Envy, fixed upon the door. The fourth row had begun to line up as the light was now on, and they'd all noticed no one from the previous row had come out into the room to join Brink in the far corner seats. *What's happening to the others?* Her thoughts mirrored the whispers around her. Two more rows still had to go before she found out. She looked over at Envy once more. Envy was oblivious, lost in his new toy.

* * *

90 O.O. (*Three Years Ago*)

“Damnnnn, who’s that? Is that *Yang*?”

“Eh, you need to calm down. That’s baby sis right there. And nuh, it doesn't matter that we the same age.”

“Oh, look at you being all protective, briz; ha-ha, that’s love. Chill, Kill! I’m just a man who likes quality, admiring from afar. Still can’t believe this the first I noticed her.”

“Probably cuz you liking humans is a new thing, llama licker.” Kris ignored Envy’s protest. “I ain’t telling you stay

away from her. Do what you want, but your tries will be fun for everyone except you.” Kris flashed his wide chipped-tooth grin.

“You cold for no reason, briz. I should slap that expensive-ass toothpick out your mouth. In all honesty, I’m burning for *that*,” Envy pointed to a seemingly door-less sleek, graphite colored vehicle with neon green headlights. It was floating inches above the glaciated street in front of the school steps.

A trumpet blared twice.

“You boys gonna waste my time zizzing around there or get in?” The trumpet blared again.

“King-side!” yelled Envy. Kris laughed, pushed him, and beating him down the steps of Ron Ed, hopped in the front seat. Envy grumbled and settled into the back.

“Thanks for the ride Donzi ... lana?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Cool. People always screw it up. You can call me Donzi though.” She ignored Kris’ look of disbelief.

“I’m Envy.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Envy turned to Kris, smirking. As the vehicle began its weightless glide, he turned back towards the driver:

“How you get a huv but live in the Wall? I shouldn’t be in this; it’s gotta be stolen. All I’ve ever seen out here are wheelies.”

“A huv’s okay, but a phrincar would be the real. Thing so fast its two places at once.”

“I don’t care about no phrincar, Kill. They exaggerate the speeds anyway—”

“How would *you* know?”

“Whatever, briz. Donzi, how’d you get it?”

Donzi smiled. It was clear she enjoyed the question.

“Back in the day my dad used to traze tags on anything he could get his hands on. Trains, wheelies, choppers, whatever;

if it had any type of space, it was a wall. And if it was a wall, it was a face.”

“Face? I don’t get it,” said Envy,

“You look at a face, what you see?” Kris chimed in.

“I dunno. A face.”

“Expressions, man. Whatever the person who controls that face wants you to see.”

“Ehhhh ... okay ...” said Envy. “Whatever, go ahead.”

Donzilana rolled her eyes. “*Anyway*, when these came out, they were impossible to traze, because of all the security features; the cams, the sensors, the alarms, the notification system that went straight to the owner’s cles. Some had surfaces built to immediately wipe clean any markings. It was a nightmare for a trazer; it wasn’t happening. It’s the same thing that makes it impossible to steal.” She shot Envy a disdainful glance.

“Alright, so?” Envy impatiently asked, ignoring her expression.

“Well my dad never told me how he did it. He would always say vague things like ‘The clues are all around you, sweetie.’ But anyway, the guy whose huv he trazed ended up being some famous art collector. Dude was so impressed he gave him one on the spot, in exchange for being able to keep the one Pops trazed. Dad never really messed around with the mainstream scene like that, but it was hilarious to him that someone would give him a new huv in exchange for being able to keep his own.”

“And now it belongs to his little princess,” said Envy, playfully mocking.

“Yeup, something like that,” said Donzilana, turning to Kris. “Where to?”

“Willoughby and Myrtle. We gotta drop this clown off,” he said, motioning to Envy. “Then I gotta go see moms for a minute and we can head to your place to study.”

“You’re never moving back in, huh?”

“Nah, Donzi. it’s better for both of us that way. Moms will never admit it, but she knows. Plus, my spot is stupid nice!”

Envy laughed. “It’s def stupid, Kill, I dunno about the nice part ... it’s an abandoned buildin—”

“Yeah, and it’s *mine*, Envy. We all live in the Wall anyway, don’t act your place is any better—*plus* you got parents hovering over you. I got freedom. I don’t wanna hear you whinin’ and trying to come over when you tired of havin’ no privacy either—go stay in one of the deserted ones nearby with no furniture. Mines is now officially off limits!”

“Okay children, calm down—you’re both doing *the most* right now.” Donzi chuckled, and spent the rest of the drive casually ignoring Envy’s advances (“So pops was a trazer huh ... that’s dope. You were his best creation though. Is that a tattoo on the back of your neck? What of? I got one on my neck too”). Twice they were stopped by Pro-Ts who claimed to have heard reports of a stolen huv and were looking into the situation. Each time, Donzilana had to demand Kris restrain himself, while she handed them spends.

* * *

Present Day

Envy found *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* to be a rather strange but engrossing read. The world he found himself in the space of a few pages was a pleasant dream. The history panels in class during his preparatory days had spoken of a time when preservation of wildlife, trees and forests had been a reality. In the post-Nightfall War world, it was an afterthought as the remaining nations and their citizens had placed their focus on immediate survival by any means. The Forest, with its lush greenery, talking animals and mythical characters—presented a cozy alternative to his reality—the one where he was currently lying to his closest friend about

the reasons for his disappearance and return. The one where he abandoned the girl who understood him. *Sorry, Donzi*. He rubbed his neck, fingers skittering over a still healing tattoo. An author from a few centuries ago knew what it was he needed at this moment. It was remarkable. As feet shuffled into the room where Kris held court and the main clubhouse space dwindled down to a couple handfuls of people, he read on.

“What you doing here?” Kris’ voice was devoid of emotion. All trace of expression was absent from his face. He nibbled at his toothpick, rolled it from side to side between his lips. He sat relaxed and his surroundings were startlingly bare, the black couch from which he stared and a bookshelf nearby were its only furnishings. The room could have easily been in a different building from the one next door, as it was spotless with soft clean blue carpeting and pristine white walls. This contrasted sharply with the greater clubhouse meeting space which seemed as if someone had dropped mud walls and a roof onto a vacant lot. Kris allowed over a minute to pass without requesting an answer, and he changed nothing about his expression or stance. The combination became overwhelming for Donzilana, and she feared Kris had seen through her disguise. She began speaking to take her mind off her fear. In her voicer-modified voice, Donzilana told Kris how he’d inspired her and the other dudes out there to realize there wasn’t nobody looking out for them, and whatever this was, it was at least a chance to do something for themselves.

When she was finished, Donzilana stood there, teeth chattering slightly, drops of sweat forming, breathing irregular. *Did I give the wrong answer?* Would she be shuttered away into the unknown with the mystery masses? She wondered if she’d been careless and had left clues for Kris as to her true identity. Maybe her mannerisms had given her

away or maybe her attention to detail when creating her disguise hadn't been meticulous enough. *He knows. He did that flyer to draw me out and expose me.* The silence she met with in the aftermath only served to heighten her self-awareness. She summoned all the composure left in her being, making every effort to avoid a panic attack.

Kris sat there unmoved, silent as before. Then, to Donzilana's relief, he spoke again. "Laran, right?"

She nodded.

"Interesting name—how you spell that?" Donzi obliged, her voice sounding much steadier than she felt.

"Hmm."

What? What is it!? He was impossible to read.

"Cool. Aight. Turn and look at the wall to your right. Close your eyes. Imagine a place you'd love to be this moment—the *place* you'd love to be. There's no limits. Imagine you're there now. Imagine the sound of it. The smell. The colors. What else is there? Why this place? Who else is there? Don't tell me—but know why."

As Donzilana got lost in her imagination, she felt Kris open her right hand and place an object that felt like a sprezen in it.

"Hold this and keep your eyes closed. Imagine going to that place right now."

Donzilana did as she was told.

Seconds later, Kris yanked the sprezen from her hand. "Head out into the clubhouse and have a seat in the corner."

Donzilana still didn't know what this meant. She only knew she wouldn't be one of those no one out in the clubhouse knew what happened to. She opened the door and headed over to the corner seats to join three others. There was one last group of boys getting ready to line up at the door, staring at her. Though as far as they knew, she was one of them, Donzilana felt self-conscious, and had to remind herself the gawking was for a different reason than usual. She sat next to a mop-top fire-haired kid named Flick, and stared