

LOST

ARK

PROPERTY OF MISOSBE BOOKS

DREAMING

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OKUNGBOWA

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MASOBE

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PRELUDE

What are we but water and skin?

My dearest All-Infinite—

You must understand
that this is the way
the world always ends:

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS
in
worthy questions
left unanswered
lonely
hearts and empty eyes;

lapping warnings
nightly silence
ripples
in the undersea.

PROPERTY OF MASOBE BOOKS



YEKINI

Yekini had one dream, and the ark was always in it.

She had never been religious—not in the old ways before the deluge, not in the new way of the Master Clerics, and not in the way of those who secretly tended to bygone spiritualities. Yekini should never have even known the tale of the ark and the flood. But between tower-wide broadcasts regaling denizens with sermons about the fulfilment of the Second Deluge and her Maame—who *was* intensely spiritual and knew too many tales from above and under the sea—learning of the story was inevitable.

The dream was always the same. The ark's keeper stood at the bow in a flowing robe, reaching out, asking Yekini to hand over the basket. Sometimes, it was Olókun who stood there, stretching forth a tentacle rather than an arm. Sometimes it was Noah, with a bushy beard and a tight squint, crow's feet at the edge of his eyes. Other times it was Sekhmet in her lioness head, or Utnapishtim looking like immortality personified, or Deucalion or Waynaboozhoo or

Manu. Sometimes, the ark was a boat or a ship or a raft.

Regardless of who stood there or on what, Yekini always looked down, into the face of the baby in the basket.

The baby was her—or at least had her face. Sometimes, the face was that of her foster grandfather, Maame's husband—an approximation, since he died before she was three. Sometimes, it was what she imagined her own parents would've looked like if they'd survived long enough for her infant brain to retain their features. Sometimes it was a friend, a colleague, an acquaintance. Always someone she could choose to save.

The real problem was that she always chose not to.

The ark's keeper would try to retrieve the basket from her, but she would hold on, fingers locked in a vice grip, knuckles taut. Halfway through this tug-of-war, her awareness would return, and she would see that they were not standing on the deck of the ark or boat or raft, but on the roof of the Pinnacle, overlooking the other four towers of the Fingers—back when they were still beacons of radiant hope, before they fell and became derelict. Except, it wasn't the Fingers, but Old Lagos from the time before the waters, how she'd seen the city portrayed in image and video feeds.

And just when she thought of that, the waters would come.

The wind always arrived first, tickling her eyebrows, and when she looked down, the waters would rise, rise, without warning, as the reports had said they did. One moment, yellow automobiles littered the streets far below; next moment, they floated on their sides alongside everything else: trees, buildings, people. She would look up and realise the ark was not the ark at all, but a rescue helicopter, taking off with the ark's keeper staring out the window, shaking their head as they left her standing there with the basket. The basket, when she looked down, was now empty, lacking answers yet filled with questions.

Then she would wake up in a sweat and realise she was late for work.



Today, for instance.

0730, Day 262, Year 059, the glowing numbers on her nightstand read, which meant she was on the morning rota, which meant she was due at 0800, which meant she was already half an hour behind schedule, which meant she had slept through her alarm—which meant her dreams were becoming more intense.

Yekini scrambled out of bed, slammed her knee into the built-in nightstand and cursed. She crawled to the kitchen, put a dish cloth under the spigot, squeezed, and wiped her armpits and privates. Next: a breath mint. Between cleaning her teeth and dressing up, there was only time for one.

When the pain in her knee subsided, she slid the wardrobe open, moisturised her locs and palm-rolled those closest to her face while picking out a clean suit. Middlers' dress code for work was pastels, and she went for a quick and efficient grey and white. She was halfway through stepping into her shoes when she heard Maame's raspy breathing from the living room.

Shit.

Yekini hopped to the kitchen and programmed a breakfast sequence for her grandmother. As the pot confirmed the prep settings for corn pap, Yekini popped her head around the doorway to see if the woman was awake. Light from the screen Maame had been watching the night before washed over her, but her chair was still reclined to its sleep position, her eyes still shut.

Yekini whispered the remaining instructions to the unit's assistant: *shut off screen, set timed lights, set alarms for Maame's medication, set alarms for Maame's programs.* The assistant whispered back its confirmation. Satisfied, Yekini slipped out the door and set her final instructions for a timed lock.

The hallway outside was wide and curved, as most of the corridors in the Pinnacle. Yekini ran for the elevators, often not seeing oncoming pedestrians until she'd almost bumped into them. It took a while for her to realise she was on the southbound track, which was on the inside curve. She crossed quickly to the outer northbound track, to the dismay of a tram driver who almost careened into her. No time to apologise. She had to make the elevators.

She arrived just in time to catch the last one, slipping in before the doors closed, breathing heavily, sweat lining her neck. The car advanced upward, packed full of Middlers like her who worked so high up the tower that their shoulders almost brushed the Uppers. Most were dressed in the same way as she—essential, minimalist—making it clear they also worked in some arm of government.

Yet they shot her glances anyway. Perhaps today it was the sweat and her slightly rumpled clothes. But it could just as easily have been the blotch of yellow dye in the corner of her hair, or the fancy pin on her suit. She enjoyed a dash of colour every now and then. Her co-workers and superiors, like most Middlers, did not.

Once the car eased into Level 66 and the doors opened, Yekini shot down the corridor, glancing at her wearable every few seconds. 0756, 0758, 0759. At 0800, she crossed the sign that said *Commission for the Protection of the Fingers*.

A grid of workstations, laid out over the large floor, welcomed her into the agency. She scurried through them to the work zone in the rear that read *Analysts*, one eye on the clock. Her station, all the way in the back row where junior analysts sat, was within reach. She raced to her desk and pressed her finger onto the station scanner, clocking in. The desk pinged its acceptance and began to process. Yekini crossed her fingers, counting the seconds, wishing for a miracle.

The desk pinged. *You Have Arrived*, it congratulated her. *0801 hours*.

“Fuck me,” said Yekini, slumping into the chair. She jerked her head back over the headrest. There was another ping coming now, for sure. The one that was *definitely* going to be bad news. Sure enough, before her thought was complete, the desk pinged one more time. Yekini sighed, tapped the screen, read the message, then frowned.

This was a mistake, surely. She’d only been a minute late this time—that did not warrant this kind of response. And yes, her punctuality strikes had racked up but . . . something was wrong. Something had to be.

Because why on Saviour’s given waters would they send her *undersea*?



YEKINI

“Undersea?” a voice said from behind Yekini. “Well, look at that!”

Monsignor was an analyst with square shoulders and droopy lips who sat opposite Yekini’s station. He was clapping, whistling, yelling, “Undersea! Undersea!”

Others in the work zone joined in. It wasn’t every day someone got sent below surface—once or twice a year, in fact. Privilege or punishment—it could be either. This was a task that had to be earned, either by racking up good deeds, making terrible gaffes, or both.

Monsignor goaded his co-workers on, turning to Yekini to do the honours. Typically, the agent in question would show good comradeship by offering a mock bow, indulging everyone.

Yekini was not a good comrade.

“Sit down,” she hissed. Monsignor complied grudgingly. The applause petered out in his wake.

“You *did* ask for a solo field assignment,” he said, leaning over his seat.

“Yeah, but *undersea* for my first?” She shook her head, staring at the message. “That’s not . . .”

“Routine? Coincidence?” Monsignor turned the seat around and straddled it, arms folded across the backrest. “Yeah, no. You must’ve pissed somebody off with those constant requests. Makes sense if they decided your first solo be down in the Lowers. Teach you a bit of a lesson.”

Yekini glared at Monsignor, but she knew he was right. Even senior analysts with proper butt-in-chair and hands-on-station time didn’t go out into the field much, and fewer even went below surface. She might have progressed quickly enough to be considered for six field assignments since joining the commission three years ago, but she’d been rejected for them all. Besides, those had all been Midder assignments. This was a whole new level. Literally.

“I didn’t piss anyone off,” Yekini said, more to herself than Monsignor, who was now taking a sugar mint from the bowl on her desk. She shot him a hard side-eye and he put it back reluctantly, but pushed her screen aside to get a clearer view of her.

“Congratulations either way. They they say those who go below surface are the hardboiled ones? Maybe being elevated from desk junkie to *hardboiled* field agent is more blessing than curse. Girl, be happy.”

Yekini pulled her screen back to its former

position. Monsignor, finally sensing her irritation, swivelled his chair away. She returned to her screen, swiping the message to and fro, bringing it in and out of view, as if she could glean more meaning each time she looked at it anew.

“Better stop swiping and go prep,” Monsignor said without turning. “If you have any query, talk to Timipre before you go.”

Yekini stared some more before taking Monsignor’s advice. She strode down the hallway, to the office door that said *Director: Merit Timipre*. The door was shut and there was no light at the bottom, which meant the woman was yet to arrive.

~~Well, then.~~ Talking to the director would have to wait. One hour left before mobilisation, and she knew what she’d rather spend it on. She needed to gather as much information as possible about the Lowers, as well as get the resources she required for the trip from Storage.

Luckily for her, there was one person who could guide her through both.

“Undersea,” Nabata said, and whistled.

“You people are overdoing the melodrama at this rate.”

“What can I say? I’m not sure if to congratulate you or tell you sorry.”

“Just process my order and let me know what’s up.”

Nabata, small, lively and always in one form of

headdress or another—today it was a turban—swung the half-door that said *Equipment Storage Staff Only* and angled her head for Yekini to follow.

They went together into the massive warehouse. Metal shelves ran screeed to ceiling in the multi-floor area. Drones zipped about on errands, scanning, grabbing, offloading, restocking. The two women headed for the nearest request station, accessible via a metal gangway. Nabata thumbed it, and Yekini punched in her assignment code. The required protective equipment for her assignment came onscreen: *helmet, lightweight capped boots with suction grip, body armour with inflatable lining, firearm.*

“Saviour above,” Yekini said. “A *firearm?*”

“It’s the Lowers, madam,” Nabata said. “You know what they say: prepare for anything.”

Yekini snickered. “*They*. As if you weren’t one of them.”

Nabata held her hands up in mock denial. “I can neither confirm nor deny that I ever used such words back then.”

They double-checked the list to be sure they had everything.

“I haven’t even held a firearm since boot camp,” Yekini said. “And I know my oga at the top has been very particular about ammunition being limited.”

“They must really need you to go down there, huh.”

“Apparently. But *why?*”