

ONYEKA

AND THE ACADEMY
OF THE SUN

PRAISE FOR
ONYEKA
AND THE ACADEMY
OF THE SUN

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MASOBE

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To Goziam . . . I will forever choose you.

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CHAPTER ONE

‘Onyeka!’

I flinch, a prickle spreading across my scalp as Cheyenne’s impatient voice cuts through the panic rising in me.

‘Come *on*, fam! While it’s still 2025.’

The already stuffy heat of the changing room grows hotter and the sharp smell of chlorine stings my nose. I feel like throwing up.

‘I’m not coming out,’ I mutter at the thick, wooden door separating us.

A quick shuffle of feet, followed by a sharp knock. ‘The pool’s gonna close at this rate,’ Cheyenne replies without any sympathy. ‘Have you got it on?’

I stare at the swimming cap Mum insisted I wear, resting on the floor where I threw it. I knew it was going to cause me problems.

‘It won’t fit,’ I say. ‘I tried already. My hair’s too big.’

Cheyenne makes a noise that sounds both like a sigh and grunt ... a *srunt*. ‘Can’t you just ditch it?’

I snort back. ‘You know what Mum will do if my hair gets loose or wet.’

‘She won’t find out,’ Cheyenne replies. But we both hear the lie in her voice. Mum always finds out. It’s her superpower.

‘I’m not coming out,’ I repeat, but there’s a wobble in my voice that gives me away. I’m no match for Cheyenne.

She knows it too and pounces immediately, like a cheetah from one of the wildlife documentaries Mum loves. We watch them together the rare times she isn’t working.

‘Open up,’ Cheyenne hollers, and the whole changing room grows silent around us.

My belly tightens. I hate it when Cheyenne does that. Just because she loves attention, doesn’t mean I do too. The already tiny space of the cubicle closes in around me and my chest tightens, making it difficult to breathe. Energy surges across my skin, but I force it back down. I can’t get upset. I am absolutely not allowed to lose control. It’s Mum’s number one rule.

I remember the first time I felt like this. Mum and I were waiting hand in hand at a bus stop and a group of kids started making fun of my hair. Mum ignored them, then bent down to me, as if she knew I was about to lose it. Her smile was

gentle as she told me that I needed to control my emotions because bad things would happen if I ever set them free.

This was before she taught me the Fibonacci numbers that help keep my emotions in check. Apparently, it's some mathematical sequence from ancient India, but someone decided to name it after an Italian guy. It works though. It's hard to lose your temper when you're trying to remember what the next number is.

I close my eyes now and start counting, running through the numbers as I try to calm down.

Zero . . .

One . . .

With each number, I trace the shape in my mind, giving it a colour, texture and taste.

Zero is a rough-edged blue and tastes like waffles, no syrup.

One I give a shiny orange with the sharp tang of vinegar.

Bit by bit, the prickle under my skin goes away, but I continue to count, just to be safe.

I'm back to number *one* again. This time it's brown and squishy, but with the rich flavour of the doughnuts Mum never lets me have.

Two is a hazy, dull grey. Completely boring and *normal*.

I stop counting as number *two* does the trick and my racing heart begins to slow. The door handle rattles and I jump. I'd forgotten about Cheyenne. I unlock the heavy door and she slips in wearing a blue swimsuit. Her face is shiny,

and I can smell the coconut oil wafting from it. She always uses too much. Even in her hair. Today, she's pulled it into a short Afro puff, held in place by a red, stretchy headband.

It's weird seeing her without the furry cosplay fox ears that usually rest on her head. Cheyenne is obsessed with Katsuki, her favourite anime character, and she likes to dress up as her. I'm used to it, but I always catch people giving her funny looks. Not that Cheyenne cares what anyone thinks. Sometimes I think she likes standing out because it makes everyone pay attention, as if she's daring them to say something about her fashion sense. I prefer going unnoticed.

Cheyenne's got Turner's syndrome, and she has to take special hormones to help her grow properly. Her mouth is plenty big enough. I once watched her shut down a Year Eleven girl with just one sentence. The girl was chatting about my hair, so I guess she deserved it.

'Okay, where is it then?' Cheyenne's dark eyes scan the small room until she spots the swimming cap. 'Well, of course it won't fit,' she says. 'It's on the floor, you doughnut.'

Cheyenne is older than me, but she likes to act as if it's by years not months. She picks up the cap and her eyes widen in understanding. 'Rah, is your mum having a laugh?'

'I wish,' I reply. 'She thinks it's cute.' I flatten the *u* into an *oo* sound in imitation of Mum's strong Nigerian accent. Cheyenne smiles in instant recognition, her downturned eyes sparkling with glee.

I don't smile back. My eyes are fixed on the shiny swimming cap dangling from Cheyenne's middle finger. The bright white latex is covered in fire-engine-red spots.

Cheyenne's face is twitching, like she's trying to keep it straight. 'You know what you're gonna look like with all your hair crammed into that, don't ya?'

'Shut up,' I groan. Of course I know. It's all I've been thinking about today. I'm going to look like Toad from that classic Super Mario Bros game.

Her eyes shift to my head and the tangle of curls, coils and kinks sitting on top. It springs straight out of my head in an impressive riot that Mum finds overwhelming, so I rarely leave it loose. My hair has broken more combs, trashed more hairdryers and made more hairstylists cry than I can count . . . so maybe Mum has a point.

Straightening it doesn't work, braids won't stay in for long and the only time Mum cut it, the strands grew back bigger and thicker. Now the longest bits that don't stick straight up or out, hang down my back almost to my bum. It always feels dry, no matter what I put in it, which doesn't help. The colour is cool though. A black so deep that when the light hits my hair just right, you can see bolts of blue fire shooting through it.

Cheyenne is proper laughing now. 'It's a-me, Mario!' she hollers with glee.

I wish I could laugh back, but I'm too stressed. It was

hard enough getting permission to even come swimming in the first place. Now that it's the school holidays, I'm either at Cheyenne's house or I have to stay at the salon so Mum can keep an eye on me. I left it until the last possible minute and waited until she was distracted with one of her clients before asking.

'Mum, can I leave early today please?' I asked.

Her hands stilled and silence descended on the salon. All conversation stopped as eager ears waited to hear Mum's reply.

'Why?' she finally said.

'Chey's having a pool party for her birthday,' I replied, not bothering to mention it was a party of two. At the sound of Cheyenne's name, Mum smiled, and I tried not to get my hopes up. 'Please, Mum,' I begged in a loud voice. 'You never let me go anywhere.'

'There you go again, always exaggerating,' Mum replied. 'Don't you go to school? Am I imagining your presence beside me at church on Sundays?'

I've learned not to answer questions like that. There *is* no right answer, so I remained silent.

'Why do you two want to go swimming anyway when Cheyenne gets all those ear infections?' she continued. 'You can't even swim very well.'

I ignored the bit about my rubbish swimming skills because she was right and I'd already told Cheyenne as much.

Mum was also right about the ear infections. Cheyenne gets them a lot because of the Turner's syndrome.

'It's been ages since Chey had one,' I replied instead. 'Besides, her mum said it was okay.'

Mum kissed her teeth at me. 'I do not want you out and about with so many strangers. You're not like everyone else.'

Not this again!

'Doesn't seem to bother you when I'm at the salon,' I muttered under my breath. 'There are always random people here!'

'What was that, Onyekachi?'

I plastered an innocent smile on my face. Mum is the only person who uses my full name and it's usually when I'm in trouble.

'Come on, Tópé, let the child have some fun,' Mrs Mataka said as she passed us on her way to the sink.

Hushed whispers spread across the salon and an annoyed look settled on Mum's face. She hates standing out almost as much as she hates me standing out. Then her face evened out suddenly, just before she gave in to the peer pressure she's always warning me about.

'Fine,' Mum finally said, and stunned relief filled me. I was fully ready for her to say no.

'But you must wear a swimming cap,' she added, and the relief melted away. 'I don't have time to wash and blow dry your hair today.'

Then Mum fully pulled out a swimming cap from one of her styling drawers. *Who has a swimming cap just hanging around?*

So here I am, trying to fit the ugly thing over my hair, and all Cheyenne can do is laugh. She finally stops spluttering long enough for me to get a word in.

‘What am I going to do?’ I ask.

‘Sorry, fam, but you’re gonna have to pack it up . . . ’

My mouth twists and her voice trails off. Cheyenne meets my gaze again, but there’s no curiosity or pity. Not like I get from others. To Cheyenne, my hair is just another part of me, like the gap between my front teeth and my massive size-eight feet. The same way I see her love of furry fox ears and marmite. It’s the way I wish the world would see both of us, instead of only focusing on the things that make us different. It’s what drew Cheyenne and me together in the first place.

That, and the fact she’s the only other Nigerian I know. Mum never talks about Nigeria or why we left, so the little I know about how it became so rich and powerful comes from history class. It’s been this way for as long as I can remember.

Before she found work in the salon, Mum cleaned toilets in one of the local primary schools. She was so thin then, her second-hand clothes hanging off her. She doesn’t think I remember, but I do. I also remember how long it took for

her to find a salon willing to ignore the fact she doesn't have a British passport and also willing to pay in cash.

'Everyone is going to be looking at me,' I tell Cheyenne with a sigh.

Cheyenne shrugs. 'Does it matter?'

She's right, it shouldn't. But it does to me.

I grab the swimming cap from her roughly and scrunch it up into a ball.

'Yes,' I reply.

Cheyenne hesitates for a moment, then pulls it from my clenched fist. 'I don't know why you let what other people think bother you so much,' she says, smoothing it out. She reaches towards me, the cap resting between her small fingers. 'We don't need to fit in.'

But I do, I want to scream. I need to feel like I belong somewhere.

I don't though. Instead, I push the frustration back down to join all the other feelings I'm not allowed to have, like curiosity about my father and happiness at school. And the scariest one of all . . . hope that things will be different.

'Look,' says Cheyenne after a short pause. 'It's my birthday and your mum finally let you do something other than go to church. I'm not letting you waste it by acting moist in here.'

My eyebrows lift at her tone, but she's right, and I don't want to mess up her special day. I snatch the ugly cap from her.

‘You’re the one who’s moist,’ I reply with a small smile.

‘Sorry,’ Cheyenne shoots right back. ‘I can’t hear you past your mushroom head.’

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