

ONYEKA

AND THE RISE  
OF THE REBELS

PRAISE FOR  
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AND THE ACADEMY  
OF THE SUN

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TOLÁ OKOGWU

MASOBE

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*To God, to whom all the glory belongs.*

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# CHAPTER ONE

*I'm in a room. It's hot, dirty and cramped. There are no windows, and the only source of light is a naked bulb hanging from the centre of the ceiling. A red, black and green flag with half a yellow sun in the middle of it is attached to a wall. It looks similar to the flags that decorate the campus at the Academy of the Sun. On the floor near my feet is a single mattress where a small girl no older than six sleeps. Her dark coils rest against a stained sheet that used to be white, and the tattered blanket covering her rises gently as she breathes. She looks ill.*

*I'm waiting for someone, but I don't know who. I drop down to the mattress, my eyes drawn to the girl. A sheen of sweat covers her skin, but her face is relaxed as she sleeps. I reach out, running a light hand across her forehead. She's hot. Suddenly, her eyes open.*

*'I'm hungry,' she moans softly.*

*'I know, Chidinma,' I reply gently. I don't understand how I know this, or how I even know her name. I also know I have no food to give her and that we're running out of time.*

*Then a loud banging on the door shatters the silence and Chidinma stiffens.*

*'Stay here,' I whisper to her.*

*Chidinma nods and I head to the door. I take a deep breath and open it to reveal a teenage girl with hollow cheekbones – one of our neighbours from downstairs. My stomach tightens at the fear stamped across her face.*

*'The war is lost,' she says in an urgent voice. 'You should leave the village while you still can. There's a bus departing soon to take people to safety.'*

*I look back at Chidinma's weak body lying on the makeshift bed. There's no way she'd be able to walk.*

*'I need help,' I murmur quietly. 'My sister's sick.'*

*'We're all sick and hungry and tired,' the girl replies harshly. 'That's war.'*

*I grab her arm, desperate to make her listen. 'Please, I can't do this alone.'*

*Indecision crosses the girl's face, then she shrugs me off and marches back out.*

*Chidinma whimpers as I pull her into my arms. Her head lifts in a slow, painful movement. 'Is the war over? Did we win?' she asks.*

*I cradle her and begin to rock her in my arms. 'Yes. Everything will be fine.'*



*We both know I'm lying.*

*Suddenly, the dirty room and Chidinma melt away like smoke, and I'm alone in an empty place that feels lost to time. Where am I? Who am I? Then a gentle hand touches my shoulder and I turn to find Dr Dòyìnbó beside me, his grey-flecked hair haloing his smiling face. I flinch, immediately reaching for Ike, but my power doesn't surface.*

*Next to Dr Dòyìnbó, I notice a boy wearing an academy uniform. His face is turned slightly to the side, but I can see his expression is blank, almost as though he's not quite here. Something about him feels familiar though.*

*'Be calm. You're safe,' Dr Dòyìnbó whispers. 'But you must continue to serve Nigeria.'*

*His voice comes at me as if from a distance and I struggle to focus on it.*

*'What was that?' I gasp. 'Who's Chidinma?' The image of the girl is still fresh in my mind.*

*Dr Dòyìnbó blinks at me then glances at the boy, who says nothing. His eyes return to my face, examining me from head to toe like he's trying to figure out a puzzle.*

*'Well, this is unexpected,' he finally says. 'Who she is doesn't matter, Onyeka. It's what she represents that's important – an example of just one of the many different futures I've seen.'*

*'I don't understand.'*

*The smile he gives me is kind. 'I know you don't, but you needed to see what the future could have looked like so you can better*

*understand why I've done all of this. Why I've been shaping this country and have used Solari to help me keep control of it.'*

*I turn away. 'I will never understand. You're a monster.'*

*Dr Dòyìnbó places a hand on my shoulder. 'I'm Nigeria's only hope. I've spent too many years creating the future you know, and I won't fail now.'*

*I spin back round. 'Yes, you will! Because I'm going to do everything I can to stop you.'*

*Dr Dòyìnbó sighs like I've disappointed him. 'See how the young speak. So certain, yet with barely any experience or knowledge to back up their words.' The hand on my shoulder tightens. 'Though you're right about one thing ... We're sure to meet again soon.'*

*Dr Dòyìnbó's eyes drill into mine. Pitch-black pools of determination stare back at me and a strangled scream crawls up the back of my throat—*

I wake up suddenly, my stomach heaving as shallow breaths leave me in short, painful gasps. I feel like I'm going to throw up.

*What was that?*

It felt so real, almost as if it had actually happened. Then I remember Dr Dòyìnbó's words and understanding dawns. That wasn't just a dream I'd experienced; it was one of Dr Dòyìnbó's visions. It had felt stretched and faded, like an old shoe that Dr Dòyìnbó had worn too many times before. Only this time, he'd forced me to wear it. *But why?*

I rub my face. Even though I just woke up, I'm still tired. I'm always tired these days. My eyes move to the digital clock on the bedside table. It's almost eight in the morning and Adanna shifts in the bed opposite mine. We're roommates again, just like we were at the Academy of the Sun – the special school for genetically enhanced kids like us called Solari. Niyi and Hassan are Solari too. They're my friends, and along with Adanna, they make up the members of Nchebe. It means 'shield' in Igbo, and it's the collective name given to the most deserving JSS1 students at the Academy of the Sun who are tasked with defending the school. Although I don't even know if they can still call themselves Nchebe now.

Now that we've left the academy, there's no one to shield the remaining Solari from Dr Dòyìnbó and his terrible plan to take over Nigeria by using Solari as his soldiers. I shake my head quickly, trying to rid myself of thoughts of our old head teacher.

Adanna stirs again and I freeze until she goes still. I can barely make her out in the dim light of the room, but the steady rise and fall of her lumpy form reassures me and my body relaxes. The soft buzzing of a stray mosquito near my ear pulls me out of my thoughts and I slip out of bed. They were never a problem at the academy because of the repellent tech embedded across the campus. Here at the farmhouse, they're a total menace, but at least malaria is no longer a worry.

My feet move soundlessly as I make my way to the door, passing Adanna on the way. Her locs fan across her pillow, a dark contrast

against the stark white fabric ... *just like Chidinma*, the child in my dream. Adanna's face is creased into a tight grimace. A reminder that even in sleep, none of us can find any kind of peace. Not from the degenerative disease that kills Solari if they continue to use their powers, nor from the constant worry that Dr Dòyìnbó will find us now we know his true plans. With a final glance at Adanna, I quietly leave the room and head to the kitchen.

The open-plan living area of Aunt Naomi's farmhouse is simple. There aren't even any pictures on the walls, just like our house back in London ... when Mum and I were in hiding. The housebot blinks at me as I pass its charging station. The automated robot does all the cleaning and small chores. Another light flickers – this time it's the motion sensor. There are several of them mounted around the house. Another reminder that we're not really safe.

A tiny wall gecko scurries past, its green speckled body clashing with the reddish-brown walls beneath its feet. I pass the orange sofa that Hassan likes to sink into when he's watching movies on the flat-screen TV that hangs above a stone mantel. Behind the sofa, a long, wooden bench marks the beginning of a surprisingly low-tech kitchen with mahogany cabinets. That's where you can usually find my aunt Naomi. She's my father's twin and a scientist too, although I only recently found out she existed. She's also always trying to feed somebody.

If Aunt Naomi's not in the kitchen, then you can usually find her in the lab in the basement. It's a replica of the one in

Lagos, where we first discovered how deadly the disease is and found out my father had created a serum to cure it. Up until then, we'd thought using Ike, the power all Solari have, caused mild sickness.

*A power that will kill me soon . . .*

The thought flashes through my mind and I quickly push it away. It's been two weeks since we escaped from the Ogbunike Caves and Aunt Naomi brought us to the compound where her farmhouse sits, somewhere deep in the Rivers Province. It's one of the many places she used to hide from the Councils all those years ago after my father went missing, and it's where we're now hiding from Dr Dòyìnbó – the man who betrayed us. The man who knowingly exposed the citizens of Nigeria to tritium, an element he discovered, knowing it would cause mutations to their DNA.

The first few days were proper rough because we were so scared that we'd be found at any moment. But as the days went by and no one came looking for us, we settled into a strange sort of routine. Aunt Naomi even baked me a cake for my birthday last week. We all know it can't last, and that we need to go back to the Academy of the Sun eventually and face Dr Dòyìnbó, but so far no one's been able to come up with a plan we can all agree on. Aunt Naomi wants to go to the Councils that run Nigeria. She's sure they'll help us bring Dr Dòyìnbó to justice. Hassan thinks we should just storm AOS, which is what we call the academy. Adanna is adamant we need to

find the Rogues, who are a group of Solari also trying to bring down Dr Dòyìnbó. And Niyì barely says anything at all, not since he lost his Ike.

It turns out my father's serum has a nasty side effect. It takes away our Ike. Niyì knew this when he stepped in front of a vacuum syringe full of the serum . . . a syringe that was meant for me. Aunt Naomi has spent the last two weeks trying to get Niyì's Ike back, while also fixing the serum so we can cure our disease without removing Ike. She finally figured out the serum a few days ago, but we're waiting for her to be able to return Niyì's powers before we take it.

I heat up some Milo in the microwave and add three teaspoons of sugar. I need something sweet to take away the bitter taste of that vision. The cup has barely reached my lips when the door to my right swings open, revealing a tall boy. Niyì stands in the doorway, a haunted look on his face. It's the same look he's had since he lost his Ike. Niyì's skin is dull under the bright lights, and he rubs his face impatiently. He looks washed out, like a faded version of himself.

I give him a small welcoming smile. 'Couldn't sleep?'

'Something like that,' Niyì replies. It's still strange seeing him without Second Sight, the augmented reality glasses we all used to wear at the academy. That was another thing we had to get rid of so Dr Dòyìnbó couldn't track us.

I extend my mug to him, and Niyì reaches for it gratefully before taking a big gulp.

‘Ergh ...’ Niyì’s mouth stretches into a disgusted grimace. ‘How much sugar did you put in this?’

I frown back. ‘Sorry. I had a bad dream.’

Niyì’s face twitches. ‘A dream?’

‘Actually, it was more like a vision. It felt so weird.’ I shake my head, trying to dislodge the memory of the child on the bed. I grab back my mug of hot chocolate and reach for a new one to make Niyì his own.

‘Weird how?’ Niyì’s looking at me strangely now. His eyes are focused on me with a bright intensity.

The hairs on the back of my neck tingle. ‘It had something to do with a war,’ I reply slowly. ‘Then there was a boy in an AOS uniform and ...’ I look down, unable to continue. Unwilling to say his name.

‘Dr Dòyìnbó was there too,’ Niyì finishes, taking the new mug from me.

It feels odd hearing the name out loud. We’ve all been avoiding saying it for weeks. *Hold on ...* I lift startled eyes to Niyì’s and an answering fear greets me.

‘How did you know?’ I whisper.

Niyì’s hand tightens round his mug. ‘I had the same dream too.’



## CHAPTER TWO

‘That’s impossible,’ I gasp and my hand drifts to the cowrie shell hanging from my neck. It’s the key that unlocked my father’s lab in Lagos and revealed the secret of the disease. It’s also how I found out where he’d hidden the serum in Ogbunike Caves. My father always meant for me to have the shell, and my Aunt Naomi has a matching one.

‘Wetin dey impossible?’

The question, spoken in Pidgin English, startles me and Niyì, and we both turn towards the new voice. Hassan shuffles sleepily into the kitchen. The lighter patch of skin round his right eye goes invisible for a moment as he rubs it tiredly. Aunt Naomi is always on at him for using Ike, but I don’t think Hassan can help it. Just like he can’t help slipping in and out of Pidgin.

‘Na Milo be that?’ Hassan says eagerly, spying the mug in Niyì’s hand.