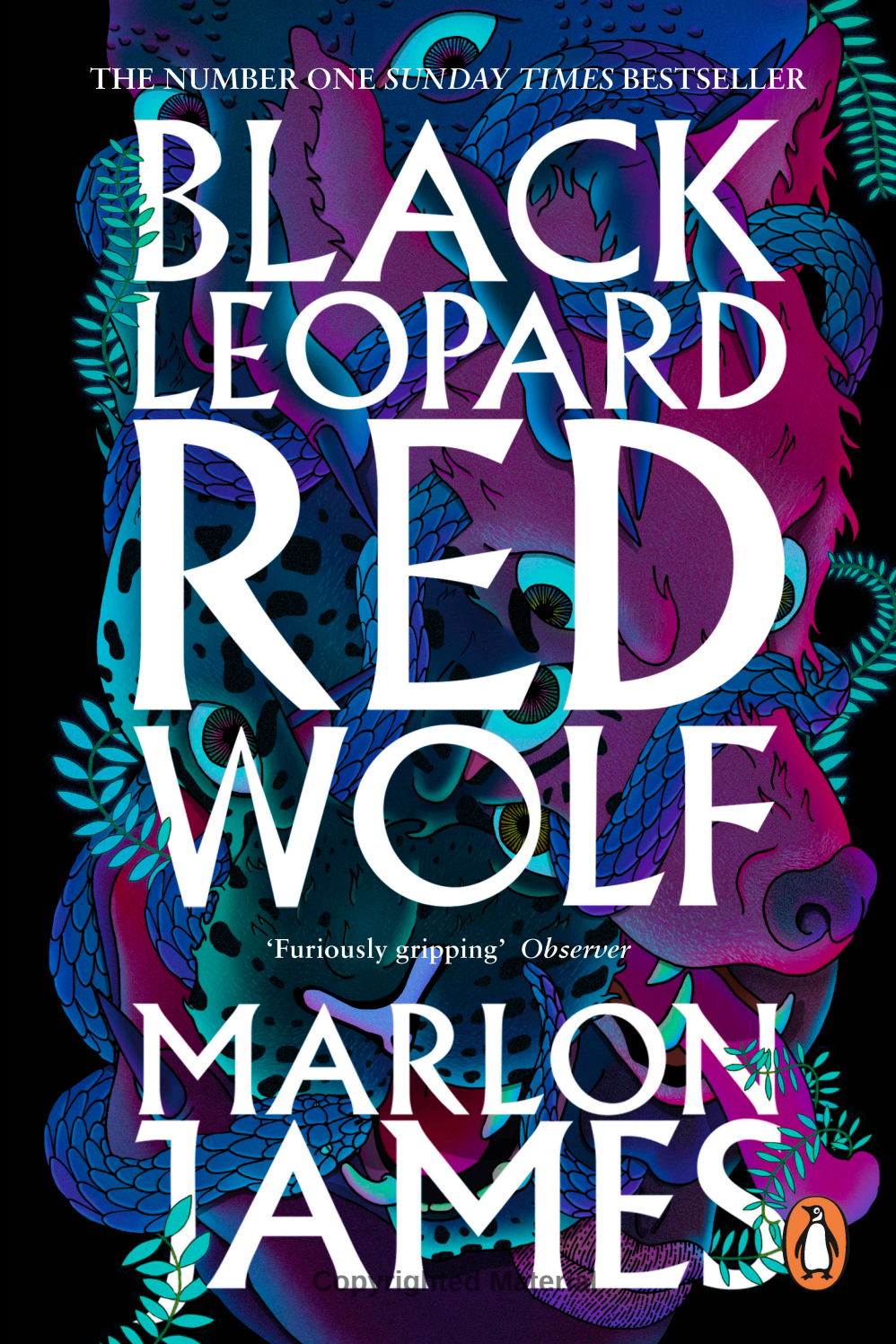


Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

Black Leopard, Red Wolf

'Ferociously gripping. Dazzling, extraordinary, unforgettable' *Financial Times*

'Complex, lyrical, moving and furiously gripping' *Observer*

'Extraordinary' *Spectator*

'Gripping, startling' *The New York Times*

'Absolutely brilliant' *LA Times*

'Extraordinary. Earthy, ribald and very funny. I can honestly say I cannot wait for the next instalment' John Burnside, *Spectator*

'Extravagantly weird and unflinchingly brutal. A whirlwind of a novel' *SFX*

'A great thick bubbling Feijoada of African myth and folklore' *Daily Telegraph*

'The imagery is breathtaking and the dialogue whip-smart' *Sunday Times*

'A unique, unforgettable, pulsating epic' *Standpoint*

'Daring. James has expanded the scope of the contemporary novel' *Literary Review*

'This is a relentlessly kinetic, hallucinatory myth mash-up that revels in generating thrills. Many readers will jump on it with glee' *Daily Mail*

'*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* affirms James's place as one of our most talented living authors' *Literary Hub*

'*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is a fabulous cascade of storytelling. Sink right in. I guarantee you will be swept downstream' Louise Erdrich

'Perhaps no other contemporary fiction writer takes such risks and uses such provocative, sensual descriptions as James' *Interview Magazine*

'Fantasy fiction gets a shot of adrenaline' *Newsday*

Copyrighted Material

'*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* heralds the arrival of fantasy's next great saga and reaffirms James as one of the greatest storytellers of his generation' *BookPage*

'The literary equivalent of a Marvel Comics universe – filled with dizzying, magpie references to old movies and recent TV, ancient myths and classic comic books, and fused into something new and startling' Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

'The first volume of a promised trilogy, a fabulist reimagining of Africa, with inevitable echoes of Tolkien, George R. R. Martin and Black Panther, but highly original . . . Marlon is a writer who must be read' Salman Rushdie, *Time*

'James is clear-cutting space for a whole new kingdom. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, the first spectacular volume of a planned trilogy, rises up from the mists of time, glistening like viscera. James has spun an African fantasy as vibrant, complex and haunting as any Western mythology, and nobody who survives reading this book will ever forget it. That thunder you hear is the jealous rage of Olympian gods. *Ocean's Eleven* has got nothing on this ensemble' *Washington Post*

'James's visions don't jettison you from reality so much as they trap you in his mad-genius, mercurial mind. Drenched in African myth and folklore, and set in an astonishingly realized pre-colonized sub-Saharan region, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* crawls with creatures and erects kingdoms unlike any I've read. This is a revolutionary book' *Entertainment Weekly*

'Marlon James is one of those novelists who aren't afraid to give a performance, to change the states of language from viscous to gushing to grand, to get all the way inside the people he's created. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* looks like another great, big tale of death, murder and mystery but more mystically fantastical. Not only does this book come with a hefty cast of characters (like *A Brief History of Seven Killings*), there are also shape-shifters, fairies, trolls and, apparently, a map. The map might be handy. But it might be the opposite of why you come to James – to get lost in him' *The New York Times*

'James is a professed fantasy nerd, so *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* will certainly appeal to fans of all the well-acknowledged authors with at least two initials – George R. R. Martin, J. R. R. Tolkien, J. K. Rowling, etc. But if you've read James's 2014 novel, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (decidedly not a sci-fi or fantasy book but a 700-page world-building epic about the attempted assassination of Bob Marley), you'll drag yourself to the midnight queue to buy *Black Leopard* regardless of the whole *Game of Thrones* selling point' *Huffington Post*

'Marlon James possesses almost frightening levels of talent. His work is wholly original while paying homage to all the important literary ancestors. An archetypal epic for the twenty-first century' *Forbes*

Copyrighted Material

'The novel teems with nightmares: devils, witches, giants, shape-shifters, haunted woods, magic portals. It's terrifying, sensual, hard to follow – but somehow indelible, too' *Vogue*

'*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* aims to be an event, and to counter the dominant impression of the genre it inhabits. *Black Leopard* delivers some genre-specific satisfactions: the fight scenes are choreographed with comic-book wit. But it deliberately upends others. When I first saw the news that James was writing a fantasy trilogy, I had assumed that, after reaching the pinnacle of critical acclaim, with the Booker, he was pivoting to the land of the straightforward bestseller. Instead, he'd written not just an African fantasy novel but an African fantasy novel that is literary and labyrinthine to an almost combative degree' *New Yorker*

'He's produced a sprawling fantasy novel set in a dark-age Africa of witches, spirits, dazzling imperial citadels and impenetrable forests. In a genre dominated by imagery derived from the European middle ages, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* feels new and exciting' *Wall Street Journal*

'A miracle. If Charles R. Saunders's 'Imaro' series opened the door to new ways of telling epic fantasy, and N. K. Jemisin's 'Inheritance' trilogy leapt over the threshold, then Marlon James's *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* just ripped the whole damn door off its hinges' *Tor*

'James not only brings a fresh multicultural perspective to a grand fantasy subgenre, but also broadens the genre's psychological and metaphysical possibilities. If this first volume is any indication, James's trilogy could become one of the most talked-about and influential adventure epics since George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* was transformed into *Game of Thrones*' *Kirkus*

Copyrighted Material

ALSO BY MARLON JAMES

A Brief History of Seven Killings

The Book of Night Women

John Crow's Devil

Copyrighted Material

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marlon James was born in Jamaica in 1970. He was the first Jamaican to win the Man Booker Prize, for his bestselling novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. This novel also won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and the Minnesota Book Award and has been translated into twenty-one languages. Marlon James is also the author of *John Crow's Devil* and *The Book of Night Women*. *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is the first instalment in his Dark Star trilogy, followed by *Moon Witch, Spider King*.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

MARLON JAMES

BLACK LEOPARD RED WOLF



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the United States of America by Riverhead Books 2019
First published in Great Britain by Hamish Hamilton 2019
Published in Penguin Books 2020
001

Copyright © Marlon James, 2019

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Maps by Marlon James

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental

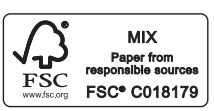
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–98185–6

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

To Jeff, for quartermoon and a million other things

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

CONTENTS

THOSE WHO APPEAR IN THIS ACCOUNT xiii

1. A DOG, A CAT, A WOLF, AND A FOX 1

2. MALAKIN 95

3. ONE CHILD MORE THAN SIX 243

4. WHITE SCIENCE AND BLACK MATH 393

5. HERE IS ONE ORIKI 521

6. DEATH WOLF 533

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material



Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

THOSE WHO APPEAR IN THIS ACCOUNT

IN JUBA, KU, GANGATOM

KWASH DARA, son of Kwash Netu; King of the North Kingdom,
aka the Spider King
TRACKER, hunter known by no other name
HIS FATHER
HIS MOTHER
BELOVED UNCLE, a great chief of the Ku
KU, a river tribe and territory
GANGATOM, a river tribe, territory, and enemy of the Ku
LUALA LUALA, a river tribe and territory north of the Ku
ABOYAMI, a father
AYODELE, his son
WITCHMAN, necromancer of the Ku
ITAKI, a river witch
KAVA/ASANI, boy of the Ku
LEOPARD, shape-shifting hunter known by a few other names
YUMBOES, bush fairies and guardians of children
THE SANGOMA, an antiwitch
THE MINGI, who are:
Giraffe Boy
Smoke Girl
Albino

Copyrighted Material

Ball Boy

The joined twins

ASANBOSAM, monstrous eater of human flesh

THE GANGATOM CHIEF

IN MALAKAL

THE AESI, chancellor of Kwash Dara

BUNSHI/POPELE, river jengu, mermaid, shape-shifter

SOGOLON, the Moon Witch

SADOGO, of the Ogos, tall, mighty men who are not giants

AMADU KASAWURA, a slaver

BIBI, his manservant

NSAKA NE VAMPI, a mercenary

NYKA, a mercenary

FUMELI, the Leopard's bowman

BELEKUN THE BIG, a fat elder

ADAGAGI THE WISE, a wise elder

AMAKI THE SLIPPERY, an elder nobody knows

NOOYA, a woman possessed by the lightning bird

THE BULTUNGI, avengers

ZOGBANU, trolls originally from the Blood Swamp

VENIN, a girl raised to be food for the Zogbanu

CHIPFALAMBULA, a great fish

GHOMMIDS, sometimes-nice forest creatures

EWELE, a vicious ghommid

EGBERE, his cousin, vicious when hungry

ANJONU, spirit of the Darklands who reads hearts

THE MAD MONKEY, a deranged primate

Copyrighted Material

IN KONGOR

BASU FUMANGURU, elder of the North Kingdom, murdered
HIS WIFE, murdered
HIS SONS, murdered
THE SEVEN WINGS, mercenaries
KAFUTA, lord of a house
MISS WADADA, owner of a brothel
EKOIYE, a whore who loves civet musk
THE BUFFALO, a very smart buffalo
KONGORI CHIEFTAIN ARMY, local constables
MOSSI OF AZAR, third prefect of the Kongori chieftain army
MAZAMBEZI, a prefect
RED OGO, another Ogo
BLUE OGO, another Ogo
THE MASTER OF ENTERTAINMENTS, the Ogo fight master
LALA, his slave
THE MAWANA WITCHES, dirt mermaids, aka mud jengu
TOKOLOSHE, a small gremlin who makes himself invisible

IN DOLINGO AND THE MWERU

OLD MAN, lord of a hut and southern griot
THE QUEEN OF DOLINGO, as it says
HER CHANCELLOR
DOLINGON SLAVE BOY
THE WHITE SCIENTISTS, darkest of the necromancers and alchemists
BAD IBEJI, a malformed twin
JAKWU, white guard for King Batuta
IPUNDULU, vampire lightning bird
SASABONSAM, winged brother of Asanbosam
ADZE, vampire and bug swarm
ELOKO, grass troll and cannibal

Copyrighted Material

LISSISOLO OF AKUM, sister of Kwash Dara, nun of the divine sisterhood
SHADOWINGS, night demons who serve the Aesi

IN MITU

IKEDE, a southern griot
KAMANGU, a son
NIGULI, a son
KOSU, a son
LOEMBE, a son
NKANGA, a son
KHAMSEEN, a daughter

IN THE MALANGIKA AND THE SOUTH KINGDOM

A YOUNG WITCH
A MERCHANT
HIS WIFE
HIS SON
KAMIKWAYO, a white scientist turned monster

Copyrighted Material

1

A DOG, A CAT, A WOLF, AND A FOX

Bi oju ri enu a pamo.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

ONE

The child is dead. There is nothing left to know.

I hear there is a queen in the south who kills the man who brings her bad news. So when I give word of the boy's death, do I write my own death with it? Truth eats lies just as the crocodile eats the moon, and yet my witness is the same today as it will be tomorrow. No, I did not kill him. Though I may have wanted him dead. Craved for it the way a glutton craves goat flesh. Oh, to draw a bow and fire it through his black heart and watch it explode black blood, and to watch his eyes for when they stop blinking, when they look but stop seeing, and to listen for his voice croaking and hear his chest heave in a death rattle saying, Look, my wretched spirit leaves this most wretched of bodies, and to smile at such tidings and dance at such a loss. Yes, I glut at the conceit of it. But no, I did not kill him.

Bi oju ri enu a pamo.

Not everything the eye sees should be spoken by the mouth.

This cell is larger than the one before. I smell the dried blood of executed men; I hear their ghosts still screaming. Your bread carries weevils, and your water carries the piss of ten and two guards and the goat they fuck for sport. Shall I give you a story?

I am just a man who some have called a wolf. The child is dead. I know the old woman brings you different news. Call him murderer, she says. Even though my only sorrow is that I did not kill her. The redheaded one said the child's head was infested with devils. If you believe in devils. I believe in bad

Copyrighted Material

blood. You look like a man who has never shed blood. And yet blood sticks between your fingers. A boy you circumcised, a young girl too small for your big . . . Look how that thrills you. Look at you.

I will give you a story.

It begins with a Leopard.

And a witch.

Grand Inquisitor.

Fetish priest.

No, you will not call for the guards.

My mouth might say too much before they club it shut.

Regard yourself. A man with two hundred cows who delights in a patch of boy skin and the koo of a girl who should be no man's woman. Because that is what you seek, is it not? A dark little thing that cannot be found in thirty sacks of gold or two hundred cows or two hundred wives. Something that you have lost—no, it was taken from you. That light, you see it and you want it—not light from the sun, or from the thunder god in the night sky, but light with no blemish, light in a boy who has no knowledge of women, a girl you bought for marriage, not because you need a wife, for you have two hundred cows, but a wife you can tear open, because you search for it in holes, black holes, wet holes, undergrown holes for the light that vampires look for, and you will have it, you will dress it up in ceremony, circumcision for the boy, consummation for the girl, and when they shed blood, and spit, and sperm and piss you leave it all on your skin, to go to the iroko tree and use any hole you find.

The child is dead, and so is everyone.

I walked for days, through swarms of flies in the Blood Swamp and skin-slicing rocks in salt plains, through day and night. I walked as far south as Omororo and did not know or care. Men detained me as a beggar, took me for a thief, tortured me as a traitor, and when news of the dead child reached your kingdom, arrested me as a murderer. Did you know there were five men in my cell? Four nights ago. The scarf around my neck belongs to the only man who left on two feet. He might even see from his right eye again one day.

Copyrighted Material

The other four. Make record as I have said it.

Old men say night is a fool. It will not judge, but whatever comes it will not warn. The first came for my bed. I woke up to my own death rattle, and it was a man, crushing my throat. Shorter than an Ogo, but taller than a horse. Smelled like he butchered a goat. Grabbed me by the neck and hoisted me up in the air while the other men kept quiet. I tried to pull his fingers but a devil was in his grip. Kicking his chest was kicking stone. He held me up as if admiring a precious jewel. I kneed him in the jaw so hard his teeth sliced his tongue. He dropped me, and I charged for his balls like a bull. He fell, I grabbed his knife, razor sharp, and cut his throat. The second grabbed for my arms, but I was naked and slippery. The knife—my knife—I rammed it between his ribs and heard his heart pop. The third man danced with his feet and fists, like a night fly, whistling like a mosquito. Made a fist I did, then stuck two fingers out, like rabbit ears. Jabbed his left eye in the quick and pulled the whole thing out. He screamed. Watching him bawl on the floor, searching for his eye, I forgot the other two men. The fat one behind me, he swung, I ducked, he tripped, he fell, I jumped, I grabbed the rock that was my pillow and bashed his head until his face smelled fleshy.

The last man was a boy. He cried. He was too shaken to beg for his life. I told him to be a man in his next life, for he is less than a worm in this one, and flung the knife right into his neck. His blood hit the floor before his knees. I let the half-blind man live because we need stories in order to live, don't we, priest? Inquisitor. I don't know what to call you.

But these are not your men. Good. Then you have no death song to sing to their widows.

You have come for a story and I am moved to talk, so the gods have smiled on both of us.

There was a merchant in the Purple City, who said he lost his wife. She went missing with five gold rings, ten and two pairs of earrings, twenty and two bracelets, and ten and nine anklets. *It is said you have a nose for finding what would rather stay lost,* he said. I was near twenty in years, and long banished from my father's house. The man thought I was some kind of hound,

Copyrighted Material

but I said yes, it has been said that I have a nose. He threw me his wife's undergarment. Her trail was so faint it was almost dead. Maybe she knew that one day men would come hunting, for she had a hut in three villages and no one could tell which one she lived in. In each house was a girl who looked exactly like her and even answered to her name. The girl in the third house invited me in and pointed to a stool for me to sit. She asked if I was thirsty and reached for a jug of masuku beer before I said yes. Let me remind you that my eyes are ordinary but it has been said that I have a nose. So when she brought over the mug of beer I had already smelled the poison she put in it, a wife's poison called cobra spit that loses taste once you mix it with water. She gave me the mug and I took it, grabbed her hand, and bent it behind her back. I put the mug to her lips and forced it between her teeth. Her tears ran down and I took away the mug.

She took me to her mistress, who lived in a hut by the river. My husband beat me so hard that my child fell out, the mistress said. I have five gold rings, ten and two pairs of earrings, twenty and two bracelets, and ten and nine anklets, which I will give you, as well as a night in my bed. I took four anklets, and I took her back to her husband because I wanted his money more than her jewelry. Then I told her to have the woman from the third hut make him masuku beer.

The second story.

My father came home one night smelling of a fisher woman. She was on him, and so was the wood of a Bawo board. And the blood of a man not my father. He played a game against a binga, a Bawo master, and lost. The binga demanded his winnings, and my father grabbed the Bawo board and smashed it on the master's forehead. He said he was at an inn far away so that he could drink, tickle women, and play Bawo. My father beat the man until he stopped moving and then left the bar. But no stink of sweat was on him, not much dust, no beer on his breath, nothing. He had not been in a bar but in the den of an opium monk.

So Father came into the house and shouted for me to come from the grain shed I was living in, for by now he had banished me from the house.

"Come, my son. Sit and play Bawo with me," he said.

Copyrighted Material

The board was on the floor, many balls missing. Too many for a good game. But my father was looking to win, not to play.

Surely you know Bawo, priest; if not I must explain it to you. Four rows of eight holes on the board, each player gets two rows. Thirty and two seeds for each player, but we had fewer than that, I cannot remember how much. Each player puts six seeds in the nyumba hole, but my father placed eight. I would have said, Father, are you playing the game southern style, eight instead of six? But my father never speaks when he can punch, and he has punched me for less. Every time I placed a seed he would say, Capture and take my seeds. But he was hungry for drink and asked for palm wine. My mother brought him water, and he pulled her by the hair, slapped her twice, and said, Your skin will forget these marks by sunset. My mother would not give him the pleasure of her tears, so she left and came back with wine. I smelled for poison, and would have let it be. But while he was beating my mother for using witchcraft to either slow her aging or hurry his, he missed the game. I sowed my seeds, two to a hole right to the end of the board, and captured his seeds. This did not please my father.

"You took the game to mtaji phase," he said.

"No, we are just beginning," I said.

"How dare you speak to me with disrespect? Call me Father when you talk to me," he said.

I said nothing and blocked him on the board.

He had no seeds left in his inner row and could not move.

"You have cheated," he said. "There are more than thirty and two seeds on your board."

I said, "Either you are blind from wine or you cannot count. You sowed seeds, and I captured them. I sowed seeds all along my row and built a wall that you have no seed to break."

He punched me in the mouth before I could say another word. I fell off the stool and he grabbed the Bawo board to hit me the way he hit the binga. But my father was drunk and slow, and I had been watching the Ngolo masters practice their fight craft by the river. He swung the board and seeds went

Copyrighted Material

scattering in the sky. I flipped backways three times like I saw them do and crouched down like a waiting cheetah. He looked around for me as if I had vanished.

"Come out, you coward. Coward like your mother," he said. "This is why it brings me joy to disgrace her. First I will beat you, then I will beat her for raising you, then I will leave a mark so that both of you remember that she raised a boy to be a mistress of men," he said.

Fury is a cloud that leaves my mind empty and my heart black. I jumped and kicked my legs out in the air, each time higher.

"Now he hops like an animal," he said.

He charged at me but I was no longer a boy. I charged at him in the small house, dived to the ground with my hands, turned my hands to feet, and flipped up, spun my whole body like a wheel with my legs in the air, spun towards him and locked him with my two feet around his neck and brought him down hard. His head smacked the ground so loud that my mother outside heard the crack. She ran inside and screamed.

"Get away from him, child. You have ruined both of us."

I looked at her and spat. Then I left.

There are two endings to this story. In the first, my legs locked around his neck and broke it when I brought him down to the ground. He died right there on the floor and my mother gave me five cowries and sorghum wrapped in palm leaf and sent me away. I told her that I would leave with nothing he owned, not even clothes.

In the second ending, I do not break his neck, but he still lands on his head, which cracks and bleeds. He wakes up an imbecile. My mother gives me five cowries and a sorghum wrapped in banana leaf and says, Leave this place, your uncles are all worse than he.

My name was my father's possession, so I left it by his gate. He dressed in nice robes, silks from lands he had never seen, sandals from men who owed him money, anything to make him forget that he came from a tribe in the river valley. I left my father's house wanting nothing that reminded me of him. The old ways called out to me before I even left and I wanted to take every piece of garment off. To smell like a man, with funk and stink, not the

Copyrighted Material

perfume of city women and eunuchs. People would look at me with the scorn they save for swamp folk. I would step into the city, or the bedchamber, headfirst like a prized beast. The lion needs no robe and neither does the cobra. I would go to Ku, where my father came from, even if I did not know the way.

My name is Tracker. Once I had a name, but have long forgotten it.

The third story.

A queen of a kingdom in the West said she would pay me well to find her King. Her court thought she was mad, for the King was dead, drowned five years now, but I had no problem with finding the dead. I took her down payment and left for where those dead by drowning lived.

I kept walking until I came to an old woman by a river with a tall stick sitting at the banks. Her hair white at the sides, her head bald at the top. Her face had lines like paths in the forest and her yellow teeth meant her breath was foul. The stories say she rises each morning youthful and beautiful, blooms full and comely by midday, ages to a crone by nightfall, and dies at midnight to be born again the next hour. The hump in her back was higher than her head, but her eyes twinkled, so her mind was sharp. Fish swam right up to the point of the stick but never went beyond.

"Why have you come to this place?" she asked.

"This is the way to Monono," I said.

"Why have you come to this place? A living man?"

"Life is love and I have no love left. Love has drained itself from me, and run to a river like this one."

"It's not love you have lost, but blood. I will let you pass. But when I lay with a man I live without dying for seventy moons."

So I fucked the crone. She lay on her back by the bank, her feet in the river. She was nothing but bones and leather, but I was hard for her and full with vigor. Something was swimming between my legs that felt like fishes. Her hand touched my chest and my white clay stripes turned into waves around my heart. I thrust in and out of her, unnerved by her silence. In the dark I felt she was getting younger even though she was getting older. Flame spread inside me, spread to the tips of my fingers and the tip of me inside her.

Copyrighted Material

Air gathered around water, water gathered around air and I yelled, and pulled out, and rained on her belly, her arms, and her breasts. A shudder ran through me five times. She was still a crone, but I was not angry. She scooped my rain off her chest and flicked it off in the river. At once fish leapt up and dived in, leapt up again. This was a night when dark ate the moon, but the fishes had a light within them. The fishes had the head, arms, and breasts of women.

"Follow them," she said.

I followed them through day and night, and day again. Sometimes the river was as low as my ankle. Sometimes the river was as high as my neck. Water washed all the white from my body, leaving just my face. The fish-women, womenfish, took me down the river for days and days and days until we came to a place I cannot describe. It was either a wall of river, which stood firm even though I could push my hand through it, or the river had bent itself downward and I could still walk, my feet touching the ground, my body standing without falling.

Sometimes the only way forward is through. So I walked through. I was not afraid.

I cannot tell you if I stopped breathing or if I was breathing underwater. But I kept walking. River fish surrounded me as if asking me my business. I kept walking, the water around me waving my hairs loose, rinsing under my arms. Then I came upon something I have never seen in all the kingdoms. A castle in a clear field of grass made of stone, two, three, four, five, six floors high. At each corner, a tower with a dome roof, also in stone. On each floor, windows cut out of the stone, and below the windows, a floor with gold railings called a terrace. And from the building was a hall that connected it to another building and another hall that connected it to another building so that there were four joined castles in a square.

None of the castles were as huge as the first, and the last was a ruin. When the water disappeared and left stone, grass, and sky I cannot tell you. There were trees in a straight line as far as I could see, gardens in squares, and flowers in circles. Not even the gods had a garden like this. It was after the noon and the kingdom was empty. In the evening, which came quick, breezes

Copyrighted Material

shifted up and down, and winds went rough past me, like fat men in a hurry. By sunset men and women and beasts were moving in and out of sight, appearing in the shadows, disappearing in the last sunrays, appearing again. I sat on the steps of the largest castle and watched them as sun fled the dark. Men, walking beside women, and children who looked like men, and women who looked like children. And men who were blue, and women who were green, and children who were yellow, with red eyes and gills in the neck. And creatures with grass hair, and horses with six legs, and packs of abadas with zebra legs, a donkey's back, and a rhinoceros's horn on the forehead running with more children.

A yellow child walked up to me and said, "How did you get here?"

"I came through the river."

"And the Itaki let you?"

"I don't know of Itaki, only an old woman who smelled like moss."

The yellow child turned red and his eyes went white. His parents came and fetched him. I got up and climbed the steps twenty feet into the castle, where more men, women, children, and beasts laughed, and talked, and chatted, and gossiped. At the end of the hallway was a wall with panels of wars and warriors cast in bronze, one I recognized as the battle of the midlands where four thousand men were killed, and another from the battle of the half-blind Prince, who led his entire army over a cliff he mistook for a hill. At the bottom of the wall was a bronze throne that made the man in it look as small as a baby.

"Those are not the eyes of a God-fearing man," he said. I knew it was the King, for who else would it be?

"I have come to take you back to the living," I said.

"Even the dead lands have heard of you, Tracker. But you have wasted your time and risked your life for nothing. I see no reason to return, no reason for me, and no reason for you."

"I have no reason for anything. I find what people have lost and your Queen has lost you."

The King laughed.

"Here we are in Monono, you the only living soul, and yet the most dead man in this court," he said.

Copyrighted Material

Inquisitor, I wish people would understand that I have no time for this argument. There is nothing I fight for and nothing I will fight over, so waste none of my time starting fights. Raise your fist and I will break it. Raise your tongue and I will cut it out of your mouth.

The King had no guards in the throne room, so I stepped towards him, watching the crowd watching me. He was neither excited nor afraid, but had the blankness of face that said, These are the things that must happen to you. Four steps led up to the platform where his throne sat. Two lions by his feet, so still I couldn't tell if they were flesh, spirit, or stone. He had a round face with a chin peeking below the chin, big black eyes, a flat nose with two rings, and a thin mouth, as if he had eastern blood. He wore a gold crown over a white scarf that hid his hair, a white coat with silver birds, and a purple bib over the coat trimmed also in gold. I could have picked him up with my finger.

I walked right up to his throne. The lions did not stir. I touched the brass arm, cut like an upturned lion's paw, and thunder rumbled above me, heavy, slow, sounding black and leaving a rotten smell on the wind. Up in the ceiling, nothing. I was still looking up when the King jammed a dagger into my palm so hard that it dug into the chair arm and stuck.

I screamed; he laughed and eased back into his throne.

"You may think the underworld honors its promise, to be the land free from pain and suffering, but that's a promise made to the dead," he said.

Nobody else laughed with him, but they watched.

He watched me with a suspicious eye and stroked his chin, as I grabbed the dagger and pulled it out, the pull making me yell. The King jumped when I grabbed him, but I cut into the tail of his coat and ripped a piece off. He laughed while I wrapped my hand. I punched him full in the face, and only then did the crowd murmur. I heard deathly footsteps coming towards me and turned around. The crowd stopped. No, they were held back. Nothing on their faces, neither anger nor fear. And then the crowd jumped back as one, looking past me to the King, standing, the bloody lion's paw in his hand. The King threw the paw in the air, right up to the ceiling, and the crowd oohed. The paw never came down. Some at the back started to

Copyrighted Material

run. Some in the crowd shouted, some screamed. Man trampled woman who trampled child. The King kept laughing. Then a creak, then a rip, then a break, as if gods of the sky were ripping the roof open. Omoluzu, somebody said.

Omoluzu. Roof walkers, night demons from an age before this age.

"They have tasted your blood, Tracker. Omoluzu will never stop following you."

I grabbed his hand and sliced it. He bawled like a river girl while the ceiling started to shift, sounding as if it was cracking and breaking and hissing, but staying still. I held his hand over mine and collected his blood while he slapped and punched like a little boy, trying to pull away. The first shape rose out of the ceiling when I threw the King's blood in the air.

"Now both of our fates are mixed," I said.

His smile vanished, his jaw dropped, and his eyes popped. I dragged him down the steps as the ceiling rumbled and cracked. Men black in body, black in face, black where eyes should be, pulled themselves out of the ceiling like men climbing out of holes. And when they rose they stood on the ceiling the way we stand on the ground. From the Omoluzu came blades of light, sharp like swords and smoking like burning coal. The King ran off screaming, leaving his sword.

They charged. I ran, hearing them bounce off the ceiling. One would hop and not fall to the floor but land back on the ceiling, as if I was the one upside down. I ran for the outer court but two ran ahead of me. They hopped down and swung swords. My spear blocked both blows but the force knocked me over. One came at me with sword craft. I dodged left, missed his blade, and ran my spear right into his chest. The spear moved in slow as if piercing tar. He jumped away, taking my spear with him. I grabbed the King's sword. Two from behind grabbed my ankles and swooped me up to the ceiling, where blackness swirled like the night sea. I sliced the sword through the black, cut their limbs off, and landed on the floor like a cat. Another tried to grab my hand but I grabbed him and pulled him to the ground, where he vanished like smoke. One came at me sideways and I dodged but his blade caught my ear and it burned. I turned and charged at

Copyrighted Material

his blade with my own, and sparks popped in the dark. He flinched. My hands and feet moved like a Ngolo master's. I rolled and tumbled, hand over feet over hand, until I found my spear, near the outer chambers. Many torches were lit. I ran to the first and dipped my spear in the oil and flame. Two Omoluzu were right above me. I heard them ready their blades to cut me in two. But I leapt with the burning spear and ran right through them both. Both burst into flames, which spread to the ceiling. The Omoluzu scattered.

I ran through the outer chamber, down the hallway, and out the door. Outside the moon shone faint, like light through cloudy glass. The little fat King did not even run.

"Omoluzu appear where there is a roof. They cannot walk on open sky," he said.

"How your wife will love this tale."

"What do you know of love anyone had for anyone?"

"We go."

I pulled him along, but there was another passage, about fifty paces long. Five steps in, the ceiling began ripping apart. Ten steps in and they were running across the ceiling as fast as we ran on the ground, and the little fat King was falling behind me. Ten and five steps and I ducked to miss a blade swinging for my head that knocked off the King's crown. I lost count after ten and five. Halfway along the passage, I grabbed a torch and threw it up at the ceiling. One of the Omoluzu burst into flame and fell, but vanished into smoke before hitting the ground. We dashed outside again. Far off was the gate, with a stone arch that could not have been wide enough for the Omoluzu to appear. But as we ran under two jumped out of the ceiling and one sliced across my back. Somewhere between running to the river and coming through the wall of water, I lost both the wounds and the memory of where they were. I searched, but my skin bore no mark.

Mark this: The journey to his kingdom was much longer than the journey to his dead lands. Days passed before we met the Itaki at the riverbank, but she was no old woman, only a little girl, skipping in the water, who looked at

Copyrighted Material

me in the sly way of women four times her age. When the Queen met her King, she quarreled and cussed and beat him so hard, I knew that it would be mere days before he drowned himself again.

I know the thought that just ran through you. And all stories are true.

Above us is a roof.

Copyrighted Material

TWO

When I left my father's house, some voice, maybe a devil, told me to run. Past houses and inns and hostels for tired travelers, behind mud and stone walls as high as three men. Street led to lane and lane led to music, drinking, and fighting, which led to fighting, drinking, and music. Seller women were closing shops and packing away stalls. Men walked by in the arms of men, women walked by with baskets on their heads, old people sat in doorways, passing night as they did day. I walked right into another man and he did not curse, but smiled wide with gold teeth. You are as pretty as a girl, he said. I fled along the aqueduct, trying to find the east gate, the way to the forest.

Day riders with spears, in flowing red robes, black armour, and gold crowns topped with feathers, mount horses dressed in the same red. At the gate, seven riders were approaching, and the wind was a wolf. Quarrels done for the day, their horses galloped past me, leaving a cloud of dust. Then the sentries started closing the gate and I ran out, down the Bridge That Has a Name Not Even the Old Know. Nobody noticed.

I walked through open lands that stretched on like the sand sea. That night I walked past a dead town with walls crumbling. The empty hall I slept in had no door and one window. Behind was a hill made from the rubble of many houses. No food, and the water in the jars tasted rank. Sleep came to me on the floor to the sound of mud walls crumbling around the town.

And my eye? What of it?

Oh but it were a mouth, the tales it would tell you, inquisitor. Your lips

Copyrighted Material

broke open the first time you saw it blink. Write what you see; be it witchcraft, be it white science, my eye is whatever you think it is. I have no guise. I have no look. My face is a forehead wide and round, like the rest of my head. Brows that hang so far over my eyes they give them shade. A nose sloped like a mountain. Lips that feel as thick as my finger when I rub them with red or yellow dust. One eye that is mine and one that is not. I pierced my ears myself, thinking of how my father wore a turban to hide his. But I have no look. That is what people see.

Ten days after I left my father's house I came to a valley, still wet from rain that fell a moon before. Trees with leaves darker than my skin. Ground that held you for ten paces only to swallow you on your next step. Dens of the slitherers, cobra and viper. I was a fool. I thought you learned the old ways by forgetting the new. Walking through the bush I told myself that though every sound was new, none was frightening. That the tree was not betraying where I tried to hide. The heat under my neck was not fever. The vines were not trying to jump my neck and strangle me until I died. And hunger and what passed for hunger. Pain hitting against my belly from the inside until it was tired of hitting. Looking for berries, looking for young tree bark, looking for monkeys, looking for what monkeys eat. More madness. I tried to eat dirt. I tried to follow snakes following rats through the brush. I felt something big following me. I climbed over a rock and wet leaves hit my face.

I woke up in a hut, cool like the river. Fire burning inside, but the heat was in me.

"The hippopotamus is invisible in water," a voice said.

Either the hut was dark or I was blind; I did not know.

"*Ye waren wupsi yeng ve.* Why did you not heed the warning?" he said.

The hut still loomed dark, but my eye saw a little more.

"The viper has no quarrel with anyone, not even foolish boys. Oba Olushere, the cool and gentle snake, is the most dangerous."

My nose led me into the forest. I saw no viper. Two nights before, when he found me shivering under the crying tree, he was so sure I was near dead

Copyrighted Material

that he dug a hole. But then I coughed green juice throughout the night. And there I was lying on a mat in a hut that smelled of violet, dead bush, and burning shit.

"Answer from the heart. What are you doing in the deep bush?"

I wanted to tell him that I had come searching for myself, but those were the words of an idiot. Or like something my father would say, but back then I still thought there was a self to lose, not knowing that one never owns the self. But I've said this before. So I said nothing and hoped that my eyes could speak. Even in the dark I could tell he was staring at me. Me and my wild ideas about the bush where men ran with lions, and ate from the land, and shat by the tree, and had no art among them. He came out of the dark corner and slapped me.

"The only way to inside your head is I cut open and look, or you speak it out."

"I thought—"

"You think men of bush and river grunt and bark like dogs. That we don't wipe the ass when we shit. Maybe we rub it on our skin. I talking to you as man."

You, inquisitor, are a man who collects words. You collect mine. You have verse for a cool morning, verse for the noon of the dead, verse for war. But the setting sun does not need your verse and neither does the running cheetah.

This wise man did not live in the village, but near the river. His hair was white from ash and milk cream. The only time I witnessed my father undress, I saw dot scars like stars in a circle on his back. This man had a circle of stars on his chest. He lived alone in the hut he built with wild branches for the wall and bush for the roof. He rubbed the walls with black rock dust until they shone, then drew patterns and paintings, one of a white creature with arms and legs tall as trees. I have never seen the like.

"And a good thing that is, for you would not be alive to tell me of it," he said.

I fell asleep, woke up, fell asleep, woke up, and saw a great white python wrapping around a trunk, woke up and saw the snake fade against the wall. Sunlight came in, lit up the walls, and I saw we were in a cave. The walls

Copyrighted Material

shaped like candlewax melting on candlewax. In the dimness, parts of it looked like a screaming face, or elephant legs, or a young girl's slit.

The wall, when I rubbed my hand against it, felt like yam skin. Near the opening was soft with shrubs sticking out like loose hairs. I rose and this time did not fall. Wobble I did, like a man soaked in palm wine, but I stepped outside. I staggered and pressed against the rock for balance, but this was not rock. Nothing like stone. Tree bark. But too wide, too big. I looked as high as I could look and walked as far as I could walk. Not only was sun still behind the branches and leaves, but this trunk was without end. By the time I walked around it, I forgot where it began. Only at the top were there branches, stubby like baby fingers and sticking out in a web of twigs and leaves. Little leaves, thick like skin, and fruit as big as your head. I heard little feet scrambling up and down, a baboon and her child.

"The monkeybread tree was the fairest in the savannah," the witchman said behind me. "This was before the second dawn of the gods. But what a thing—the monkeybread tree knew she was pretty. She demanded all makers of song sing of her beauty. She and her sister prettier than the gods, even prettier than Bikili-Lilis, whose hair became the one hundred winds. This is what came to pass. The gods gave birth to fury. They went down to earth and pulled up every single monkeybread tree, and thrust them back in the ground upside down. It took five hundred ages for the roots to produce leaves and five hundred more to sprout flower and fruit."

In one moon every member of the village came to the tree. I saw how they looked at him while hiding behind branches and leaves. Once, three of the strong men of the village came. They were all tall, broad in shoulder, rippled where fat men had bellies, with legs strong as the bull. The first man dressed himself head to toe in ash, white as the moon. The second marked his body with white stripes like a zebra. The third had no colour but his dark and rich skin. They wore necklaces and chains around their waists that needed no further adornment. I did not know what they came for, but I knew to them I would give it.

"We watch you many times in the bush," the striped one said. "You climb trees and hunt. No skill, no craft, but maybe the gods are pushing you. How old are you in moons?"

Copyrighted Material

"My father never counted moons."

"This tree ate six virgins. Swallowed them whole. You can hear them scream at night but it comes out as a whisper. You think it is wind."

He stared at me for a while, then they laughed.

"You will come with us to the Zareba rite of manhood," the striped one said.

He pointed to the moonlit one.

"A snake killed his partner right before the rains. You will go with him."

I did not say that I was saved from snakebite.

"We meet at the next sun. You should know the way of warriors, not bitchmen," said the moonlit one.

I nodded a yes. He looked at me longer than the others. Somebody had carved a star on his chest. A ring in each ear that I knew he pierced himself. He was taller than the others by a head at least but I only noticed then. Also, these men won't still be boys in Juba.

"You will go with me," I heard him say, though I did not hear him say it.

In the Zareba, the rites of manhood, there are no women. But you must still know of their use to man. The Zareba is in your mind; the Zareba is out in the bush a journey from sunrise to noon. You arrive at the hall of heroes, with clay walls and a thatch roof. And sticks, and spaces for fighting. Boys enter to learn from the strongest fighters in all the villages and all the mountains. You cover yourself in ash so that at night you look as if you've come from the moon. You eat durra porridge. You kill the boy who is you, to become the man who is you, but everything must be learned. I asked the moonlight boy how to learn of women with no women to learn from.

Will you hear more, inquisitor?

One morning I caught the smell of kin following me to the river. A boy who thought I was his uncle's son. I was hunting fish. He came to the bank and hailed me like he knew me, until he saw that he did not know me. I said nothing. His mother must have told him about the Abarra, the demon that comes to you like someone you know, with everything but a tongue. He did not run, but walked away slow from the bank and sat on a rock. Watching me. He could not have been more than eight or nine in years, with a white

Copyrighted Material

clay streak from ear to ear and over his nose, and white dots like a leopard's all over his chest. I was a boy of the city and would have no luck catching fish. I dipped my hands in water and waited. Fish swam right into my hands but slipped out every time I tried to grab one. I waited, he watched. I grabbed a big one but it wriggled and frightened me and I tripped and fell into the river. The little boy laughed. I looked at him and laughed as well, but then came a smell in the forest, moving closer and closer. I smelled it—ochre, shea butter, underarm stenches, breast milk—and he smelled it too. We both knew the wind was carrying someone, but he knew who it was.

She came out of the trees as if out of the trees she sprung. A taller woman, an older woman, her face already cut sharp and gruff, her right breast not yet lanky. Her left she wrapped in a cloth slung over her shoulder. A band, red, green, and yellow around her head. Necklaces of every colour but blue piled one on top of the other, like a mountain all the way up to her earlobe. Goatskin skirt with cowries over a belly fat with child. She looked at the boy and pointed behind her. Then she looked at me, and pointed the same way.

On a morning with a lazy sun, the witchman woke me with a slap, then walked out of the hut, saying nothing. He laid beside me spear, sandals, and fabric to wrap around my hips. I rose quick and followed him. Down the river the village opened itself up with huts spread across a field. The first we passed were mounds of dry grass with a peak like a nipple. Then we passed by round huts of clay and dirt, red and brown with a roof of thatch and bush. In the center, the huts got bigger. Round and built in a cluster of five or six huts so that they looked like castles, with walls joining them together saying this is all for one man. The bigger the huts the shinier the walls, from those who could afford to rub the walls with blackstone. But most of the huts were not big. Only a man with many cows could have one hut for grain and another for cooking it.

The man with the biggest huts had six wives and twenty children, none of them a boy. He was looking for a seventh wife to give him a son at last. He was one of the few who came out of their huts to see me. Two boys and a girl, naked with no paint, followed the witchman and me until a woman shouted

Copyrighted Material

something in a harsh tongue and they ran to a hut behind us. We were now in the middle of the village, outside this man's cluster. Two women were spreading a fresh layer of clay on the side of a grain keep. Three boys about my age came back from a hunt with a dead bushbuck. I did not see the moonlit one.

The return of the hunters woke up the town. Man and woman, girl and boy, all came out to see the fruit of the hunt, but stopped when they saw me. The witchman said a name I did not know. The man with six wives came out and walked right up to me. A tall man, with a big belly. A clay hair bun to the back of his head in gray and yellow, with five ostrich feathers on top. The bun for he was a man, each feather for a major kill. Yellow clay lined his cheekbone and victory scars covered his chest and shoulder. This man had killed many men, and lions and one elephant. Maybe even a hippopotamus. Two of his wives came out, one was the woman at the river.

The witchman said to him, "Father who speaks to the crocodile so that he does not eat us during wet season, hear me." Then he said something to the man that I did not understand.

The man looked at me from head to toe, and toe to head. He came in closer and said, "Son of Aboyami, brother of Ayodele, this path is your path, these trees are your trees, this house is your house, and I am your beloved uncle."

I did not know these names. Or maybe these were just names for people who had nothing to do with me. Family was not always family in the bush, and friend was not always friend. Even wife was not always wife.

He took me past the entrance and inside the yard, where children chased chickens. They smelled of clay and pollen and chicken shit underfoot. The house had six halls. Through the window, two wives grinding flour. Beside the grain keep the kitchen let out the sweetness of porridge; beside the kitchen, a wife washed herself under a stream of water pouring through a hole in the wall. Beside that a wall, long and dark, spotted with nipples made of clay. Then an open area under a thatch roof, with stools and rugs, and behind that the longest wall. My uncle's sleeping room, which had a huge butterfly above the sleeping rugs. He saw me looking and said the circles in

Copyrighted Material

the center were rippling pools of water, meaning renewal each wet season, or whenever he dips into the wet of his new wife's wiwi. Beside his hall was the room for storage, and for the children to sleep.

"This house is your house, these rugs are your rugs. But those wives are mine," he said, and chuckled. I smiled.

We sat in the open area, me on a rug, him on a chair set back so far that he was lying, not sitting. Cut with a curve to fit his buttocks, firm in the back with three slats carved to look like three lines of eggs. I remember my father sighing as he rubbed his own back against one like it. A headboard curved like a huge headdress of horns. The big back and chubby legs made it look like a bush buffalo. My uncle lying there changed into a powerful animal.

"Your chair. I have seen the like, beloved uncle," I said.

He sat up. He seemed disturbed that there were two.

"Did your people make this?" I asked.

"The Lobi, wood masters in the city, claimed to have made only one. But city folk lie; that is their nature."

"You know of city streets?"

"I have walked many."

"Why did you return?"

"How do you know I left village for the city and not city for the village?"

I couldn't answer.

"Where did you see this chair?" he asked.

"In my house."

He nodded and laughed. "Blood still behaves like blood even if separated by the sand," he said, and slapped me on the shoulder.

"Bring my blood palm wine and tobacco," he shouted at one of his wives.

The people called themselves and their village Ku. Once they controlled both sides of the river. Then the enemy, the Gangatom, got bigger and stronger and many more joined them, and drove the Ku to the setting-sun side. Ku men had skill with bow and arrow, leading the cattle to fresh fields, drinking milk, and sleeping. The women had skill with pulling grass for

Copyrighted Material

thatch roofs, plastering walls with clay or cow shit, building fences to keep in the goats and the children chasing after goats, fetching water, washing the milk skins, milking the cattle, feeding the children, cooking the soup, washing the calabashes, and churning the butter. The men went out in the nearby fields to sow and reap their crops. They dug in water. I nearly fell into a hole dug so deep you heard the old devils, big as trees, rustle in their sleep at the bottom. The moonlight boy told me that it was soon time to gather the durra harvest, for the women to come to the fields with baskets to take the crop away.

One day I saw nine men who came back to the village, tall and shining from new paint on some, red ochre and shea butter on others, men who looked like they were just born as warriors.

At nighttime they sang and danced and fought, and sang again, and put on Hemba masks that looked like the chimpanzee but Kava said was in the image of all the elders gone, to speak to them in the spirit trees. They sang in Hemba masks to break the curse of many moons of bad hunting. The drum beat a *kekeke*. *Bambambam*, *lakalakalakalaka* under the wind.

The village woke up to a new smell and it was everywhere. New men and new women ripe to burst. I watched them from the man who would be my uncle's house, as he watched his wives and scratched his belly.

"A boy told me he would take me to the rites of manhood," I said.

"A boy promise you the Zareba? Under whose command?"

"By his own hand," I said.

"Is that what he tell you now?" he said.

"Yes. That I will be his new partner as the old one died by snakebite. I speak your tongue now. I know your ways, beloved uncle. I am your blood. I am ready."

"Which boy is this?" my uncle said.

But I did not know where lived this boy. My uncle rubbed his chin and looked at me. "You were born when you were found, and that is not even a moon. Do not rush to die so soon," he said.

Copyrighted Material

I did not tell him that I was a man already.

"You have seen them. Boys running around, smaller than the men who came back to the village."

"What boys?"

"Boys with red tips, the female cut off from the male."

I did not know what he was talking about so he took me outside. The sky was gray and fat with waiting rain. Two boys ran past and he called at the taller one, his face red, white, and yellow, the yellow a line in the middle of his head going all the way down. Remember, my uncle is a very important man, with more cows than the chief, and even some gold. The boy came over, shining from sweat.

"I was chasing a fox," he said to my uncle.

My uncle waved him closer. He laughed, saying the boy knows he has the mark of the end of youth, and wants the village to know. The boy flinched when my uncle grabbed his balls and cock as if to weigh them. Look, he said. The paint almost hid that the skin was gone, cut away, leaving the bold blossom tip. In the beginning we are all born of two, he said. You are man and you are woman, just as girl is woman and she is man. This boy will be a man, now that the fetish priest has cut the woman away, he said.

So stiff was this boy, but he tried to stand proud. My uncle kept talking. "And the girl must have the man deep inside her cut out of her neha for her to be a woman. Just as the first beings was of two." He rubbed the boy's head, sent him away, and went back inside.

Off on a rock men gathered. Tall, strong, black, and shining with spears. I watched them stand still until the sunset made them shadow. My uncle turned to me, almost whispering as if telling me horrible news around strangers.

"Every sixty times the earth flies around the sun, we celebrate death and rebirth. The very firstborn were twins, but only when the divine male loosed his seed in the earth was there life. This is why the man who is also a woman, and the woman who is also a man, is a danger. It is too late. You have grown too old and will be both man and woman."

He watched me until his words spoke to my mind.

Copyrighted Material

"I will never be a man?"

"You will be a man. But this other is in you and will make you other. Like the men who roam the lands and teach our wives woman secrets. You will know as they know. By the gods, you might lay as they lay."

"Beloved uncle, you cause me great sadness."

I did not tell him that the woman was already raging inside me and I desired her desires, but otherwise did not feel like a woman for I wanted to hunt deer, and run and sport.

"I wish to be cut now," I said.

"Your father should have cut you. Now it is too late. Too late. You will be one always on the line between the two. You will always walk two roads at the same time. You will always feel the strength of one and the pain of the other."

That night the moon did not come, but when he appeared outside the hut, the boy still glowed.

"Come see what new men and women do," he said.

"You must tell me your name," I said.

He said nothing.

We went through the bush to the place where drummers were sending messages to gods of sky, and ancestors in the ground. The moonlight boy walked fast and did not wait. I was still afraid of stepping on a viper. He vanished through a wall of thick leaves and I stopped, not knowing where to go until a white hand pushed through the thick leaves, grabbed mine, and pulled me in.

We came upon a clearing where the drummers drummed, while others beat sticks and others whistled. Two men approached to start the ceremony, and we hid in the bush.

"The bumbangi, the official and provider of food. Also stealer. See him in his mweelu mask of sprouting feathers and a giant hornbill beak. Look beside him, the makala, master of charms and spells," Kava said.

The new men lined up shoulder-to-shoulder. All wore skirts of fine cloths, which I had only seen on my uncle, and all now wore clay buns with ostrich feathers and flowers. Then they jumped, up and down, higher and higher, so high that they stayed in the air before stomping the ground. Stomping the

Copyrighted Material

ground so hard the earth shook. And they kept jumping to *bodom*, *bodom*, *bodom*, *bodom*. There were no children. Maybe they were like the moonlight boy and me, hiding in the bush. Then the new women came to the clearing. Two women walked right up to the men and started to jump with them, *bodom*, *bodom*, *bodom*. Man and woman jumping closer and closer, moving in until skin touched skin, chest touched chest, nose touched nose. The moonlight boy was still holding my hand. I let him hold it. The people joined in and the clearing was a cloud of dust from jumping and stomping and older women now doing a dance in and out of the crowd, possessed by divine smoke.

The bumbangi sang again and again:

Men with a penis
Women with a vagina
You do not know each other
So build no house yet

The boy pulled me off into thicker, colder bush. I smelled them as soon as he heard them. Sweat funk rising and spreading on wind. The woman squatted down on the man, then up, then down, up and down. I blinked until I had night eyes. Her breasts jiggled. They both made sound. In my father's room only he made sound. The man did not move. In my father's room, only he moved. I saw ten things this woman did for the one thing the man did. The woman hopped up and down, jiggled, whispered, panted, bawled, grunted, screamed, squeezed her own breast, opened and closed herself. The moonlight boy had moved his hand between my legs, pulling my skin back and forth to match her up and down. The spirit struck me, made me spurt and made me shout. The woman screamed and the man jumped up, pushing her away. We ran off.

My father said he left his place of birth because a wise man showed him that he was among backward people who never created anything, never knew how to put words down on paper, and fucked only to breed. But my beloved uncle told me different. Listen to the tree where you live now, for your blood is there. I listened to branch upon branch and leaf upon leaf, and

Copyrighted Material

heard nothing from the ancestral fathers. A night later I heard my grandfather's voice outside, mistaking me for his son. I went out and looked up in the branches and saw nothing but dark.

"When will you avenge your father's killer? Restless sleep rules me, it waits for justice," he said. He also said, "With Ayodele slayed, you are eldest son and brother. That defiles the plan of the gods and must be avenged. My heat has not gone cold, my weak son."

"I am not your son," I said.

"Your brother Ayodele, who is eldest, is here with me, also in troubled sleep. We await the sweet smell of enemy blood," Grandfather said, still mistaking who I was.

"No son of yours am I."

Did I look so much as my father? Before I had hair, his was gray, and I have never seen myself in him. Except for stubbornness.

"The quarrel runs fresh."

"I have no quarrel with crocodile, no quarrel with hippopotamus, no quarrel with man."

"The man who killed your brother also killed his goats," my grandfather said.

"My father left because killing was the old way, the way of small people with small gods."

"The man who killed your brother still lives," my grandfather said. "Oh how big the shame when that man in your house left the village. I shall not speak his name. Oh what a shameful way, more weak than the bird, more cowardly than the meerkat. It was the cows who told me first. The day he saw that I would not rest until he took revenge, he left the cows in the bush and fled. The cows took their own way back to the hut. He has forgotten his name, he has forgotten his life, his people, hunting with bow and arrow, guarding the sorghum field against birds, caring for the herds, staying away from mud left by flood for that was where the crocodile sleeps to keep cool. And you. Shall you be the only boy in a hundred moons that the crocodile hates?"

"I am not your son," I said.

"When will you avenge your brother?" he asked.

Copyrighted Material

I went around the back and found my uncle drawing snuff from an antelope horn, like rich men in the city. I wanted to know why he left for the city, like my father, and why he returned, unlike my father. He was coming back from a meeting with a fetish priest, who had just returned from reading the future at the mouth of the river. I couldn't read on his face if the priest foretold more cows, a new wife, or famine and sickness coming from a petty god. I smelled it on him, the dagga he was chewing for second sight, meaning he didn't trust the priest with his news and wanted to make sure for himself. This sounded like something my uncle would do. My father was an intelligent man, but he was never as smart as Uncle. He pointed to the white line on his forehead.

"Powder from lion's heart. The priest mix it with woman's moon blood and mahogany bark, then chew it to tell the future."

"And you wear it?"

"Which would you choose, to eat the lion's heart or to wear it?"

I did not answer.

"Grandfather's ghost is a mad spirit," I said. "He asks, over and over, when shall I kill my brother's killer. I have no brother. He also thinks I am my father."

Uncle laughed. "Your father is not your father," he said.

"What?"

"You are the son of a brave man but the grandson of a coward."

"My father was as old and frail as the elders."

"Your father is your grandfather."

He did not even see how he shook me. Silence grew so thick I could hear the breeze shake leaves.

"When you were only a few years, though we do not count in years, the Gangatom tribe across the river killed your brother. Right after he came back from the Zareba rite of manhood. On a hunt in the free lands, owned by no tribe, he came across a group of Gangatom. It was agreed by all, there should be no killing in the free lands, but they chopped him to death with sharp hatchet and ax. Your true father, my brother, was the most skilled bow and arrow man in the village. A man must know the name of the man on whom he is taking revenge, or he runs the risk of attacking a god. Your father

Copyrighted Material

listened to no man, not even his father. He said that the blood that runs in him, a lion's blood, must have come from his mother, who had always cried for revenge. Her cries for revenge drove her out of her husband's house. She stopped painting her face and never groomed her hair again. Some think it foolish to avenge the death of one son with the killing of another son, but it was the time of foolishness. He avenged the death, but they also killed him. Your father took up his bow and six arrows. He set his aim across the river and vowed to kill six living souls he saw. Before noon, he killed two women, three men, and one child, each from a different family. Now six families were against us. Six new families now meant us death. They killed your father in the free lands, when a man living there said the skins he bought from him fell apart after two moons. Your father went to see about the complaint and defend his good name. But the man had betrayed him to three Gangatom warriors two moons before. A boy took aim with his bow and struck him in the back, right through the heart. The story of the bad skins came from the Gangatom, as this man had no art in him to come up with a clever deception. That is what he told me before I cut his throat."

Also this, my uncle told me. My grandfather grew tired of killing and took my mother and me from the village. He was the one who left the cows. This is why from when I was young, my father was old, old as the elders here with humps on their backs. Running made him thin, with skin and bone. He always looked ready to flee. I wanted to run from my uncle to my father. Grandfather. The ground was right now not the ground, and the sky was not the sky, and lie was truth and truth was a shifting, slithering thing. Truth was making me sick.

I knew my uncle had more words to tell me; words that would give my head sense, because it had taken up foolishness and I could not believe my own ancestors. Or maybe I believe everything. I believe an old man who was not my father and a younger woman who was my mother. Maybe she was not my mother. They slept in the same room, in the same bed, and he climbed on top of her like husbands do; I had seen them. Maybe my house was not my house, and maybe my world was not the world.

Copyrighted Material

The spirit in the upper branches of this tree was my father talking to me. Telling me to kill for my own brother. And the village knew. They came to my uncle's house to ask. The old women sent word with the children, When will you avenge your brother? The other boys asked me as they taught me to fish, When will you avenge your brother? Each time someone asked the question, the question had new life. After years of wanting to be nothing like my father, I now wanted to be him. Except he was my grandfather; I wanted to be like my grandfather. My grandmother had gone mad from her need for revenge.

"Where does she live?" I asked my uncle.

"A house built then left behind by large birds," he said. "Half a day from this village if you stay on the riverbank."

I sat behind the grain keep.

I stayed there for days.

I spoke to no one.

My uncle knew it was wise to leave me alone. I thought of my grandfather and my uncle, and tried to make in my head what my father looked like. But that always died and left me with my grandfather and my mother, both naked but not touching. What does the bearer do with the thing he can't bear, throw it off? Let it crush him underneath? I was a fool for they all knew. I was an animal who would kill the first person to speak of fathers and grandfathers. I hated my father even more. My grandfather. So many moons telling myself that I did not need my father. We came to punches and blows, me and my father. And now that I have none I want him. Now that I know he would have made a sister also an aunt, I wanted to kill him. And my mother. Rage, maybe rage would lift me up, make me stand, make me walk, but there I was, still by the grain keep. Still not moving. Tears came and passed without me even knowing it, and when I knew it I refused to think it was so.

"Fuck the gods, for now I feel like I can skip on air," I said out loud. Blood was boundary, family a rope. I was free, I told myself. And would tell myself all night and all day for three days.

Copyrighted Material

I never went searching for my grandmother. What would she have done but tell me more things I did not want to hear? Things that would make me understand the past but give me more tears and grief. And grief was making me sick. I went to he who was building a fire outside his hut. Why his hut, his grain keep, his fires were all without the company of woman, I did not ask. For a boy who was not yet a man, he was raising himself.

"I will take you to the Zareba, and you will gain manhood. But you must kill the enemy before the next moon, or I will kill you," he said.

"I call you moonlight boy in my head," I said.

"Why?"

"Because your skin was dark-white like the moon, when I first saw you."

"My mother calls me Kava."

"Where is she? Where is your father, sister, brothers?"

"Night sickness, they all die. My sister was last."

"When?"

"The sun circle this world four times since."

"I feel sick from the talk of fathers. And mothers. And grandfathers. All blood."

"Cool that rage like me."

"I wish blood could burn."

"Cool that rage."

"I have them and I lost them and what I have is a lie, but the truth is worse. They left my head on fire."

"You will go to the Zareba with me."

"My uncle says I am not for the Zareba."

"You still take word from your blood then."

"My uncle says I'm not a man. That the woman at the end of this has not been cut away."

"Then pull the skin back."

Behind his hut was not far from the river. We went down to the banks. He had a gourd in his hand. He scooped water in his hand, poured it into the gourd, and waved me over. I stood still and he took some of the wet white clay and painted my face. He marked my neck, my chest, my legs, my calves, and my buttocks. Then he dipped his hand in the water and marked my skin

Copyrighted Material

in lines like a snake that tickled. I laughed, but he was stone. He marked lines on my back, down my legs. He grabbed my cock foreskin and pulled it hard and said what to do with this shriveled foro? Words were spoken up in the trees, but I ignored them. Kava said, "I wish I had an enemy to avenge my mother and father. But which man has there been, that has ever killed air?"

Copyrighted Material

THREE

Here are the things I have seen.

Three days and four nights in Kava's house. My uncle made no fuss. He was the man of this house in sun and in moon, and thought I looked at his wives with the same open mouth and loose tongue they looked at me. Truth, my uncle's house was large enough that we could go a quartermoon and never meet. But I could smell out what he hid from his women—expensive rugs from the city under the cheap ones, precious skins from great cats under cheap skins of zebra, gold coins and fetishes in pouches that stunk of the animal whose skin it was cut from. His greed made him squeeze in on himself to hide everything, which made him smaller even with his big belly.

But Kava's hut.

He had cloths and skins on the ground that were garments when I pulled them up. Black dust in a gourd for shining walls fresh. Jars of water, jars for churning butter, a gourd and a knife for drawing cow blood. This was a home still run by a mother. I never asked if his parents were buried right under him, or maybe his father left him with his mother so he learned woman's work, since he never went to hunt.

I did not want to go back to my uncle, and I would not talk to voices in trees, who never gave me anything but now demanded something. So I stayed at Kava's hut.

"How do you live alone?"

"Boy, ask what you want to ask."

Copyrighted Material

"Fuck the gods, then tell me what I want to know."

"You want to know how I live so good without mother and father. Why the gods smile on my hut?"

"No."

"The same breath carrying news of your father tell you he is dead. I cannot—"

"Then don't," I said.

"And your grandfather is a father of lies."

"So."

"Like any other father," he said, and laughed. He said this also: "These elders, they say it and sing with foul mouths that a man is nothing but his blood. Elders are stupid and their beliefs are old. Try a new belief. I try a new one every day."

"What do you mean?"

"Stay with family and blood will betray you. No Gangatom looking for me. But I envy you."

"Fuck the gods, what is there to envy?"

"To know family only after they are gone is better than to watch them go."

He turned in to the dark corner of his hut.

"How did you know the ways of woman and man?" I asked.

He laughed.

"Watching the new men and women in the bush. Luala Luala, the people above the Gangatom, have man who live with man like a wife, and woman who live with woman like a husband, and man and woman with no man or woman, who live as they choose, and in all these things there is no strangeness," he said.

How did he know since he was not yet a man, I did not ask. In the mornings we went to river rocks and painted what sweat washed away in the night. In the night I knew him as he knew me, when he wanted to sleep, his belly touching my back when he breathed. Or face beside face, his hand between my legs scooping my balls. We would wrestle and tumble and grab and jerk each other until lightning struck inside both of us.

You are a man who knows pleasures, inquisitor, though you look selfish with yours. Do you know how it feels, not in the body but in the heart, when

Copyrighted Material

you have made a man strike lightning? Or a woman, since I have done so with many. A girl whose inner boy in the fold of her flesh was not cut out is blessed twice by the god of pleasure and plenty.

Here is my belief. The first man was jealous of the first woman. Her lightning was too powerful, her screams and moans loud enough to wake up the dead. That man could never accept that the gods would gift the weaker woman with such riches, so before every girl becomes a woman, man sets up to steal it, cut it away, and throw it in the bush. But the gods put it there, hid it deep so that no man would have business going to find it. Man will pay for this.

I have seen more than these things.

The day was out, but the sun was hiding. Kava said we go into the bush and shall not be back for more than a moon. I thought good, for everything in me was growing sick from the thought of family. Of anything Ku. I thought if I stayed here much longer I would turn myself into a Gangatom, and start killing until there was a hole in the village as big as the hole I see when I close my eyes. A dead thing never lies, cheats, or betrays, and what was a family but a place where all three bloom like moss. "As long as it takes for my uncle to miss me, then," I said.

I hoped it was a hunt. I wanted to kill. But I was still afraid of the viper, and Kava stepped through bowing trees and kneeling plants and dancing flowers as if he knew where to go. Twice I was lost, twice his white hand pushed through thick leaves and grabbed me.

"Keep walking and shed your burden," Kava said.

"What?"

"Your burden. Let nothing stop you and you will shed it like snakeskin."

"The day I heard I have a brother is the day I lost a brother. The day I learned I had a father is the day I lost a father. The day I heard I had a grandfather was the day I heard he was a coward who fucks my mother. And I hear nothing of her. How do I shed such skin?"

"Keep walking," he said.

We walked through bush, and swamp, and forest, and a huge salt plain with hot cracked white dirt until daylight ran away from us. Every moment in the bush jolted me and I fell asleep and jumped awake all night. The next

Copyrighted Material

day, after some long walking, and me complaining about long walking, I heard footsteps above me in the trees and looked up. Kava said he had followed us since we turned south. I did not know we were heading south. Up above us in the tree was a black leopard. We walked and he walked. We stopped and he stopped. I clutched my spear but Kava looked up and whistled. The Leopard jumped down in front of us, stared hard and long, growled, then ran off. I said nothing, for what could be said to someone who had just spoken to a Leopard? We went farther south. The sun moved to the center of the gray sky but the jungle was thick with leaves and bush, and cold. And birds with their *wakakakaka* and *kawkawkawkaw*. We came upon a river, gray like sky and moving slow. New plants popped out of a fallen tree that bridged one side of the river to the other. Halfway across there rose out of the water two ears, eyes, nostrils, and one head as wide as a boat. The hippopotamus followed us with her eyes. Her jaws swung open wide, her head split in two, and she roared. Kava turned around and hissed at her. She sunk back under the river. Sometimes we caught up to the Leopard, and he would run off farther into the forest. He waited for us whenever we fell too far back. Though the bush got colder, I sweated more.

"We climb," I said.

"We climb from before the sun gone west," he said. We are on a mountain.

You only need to be told down is up for down to change. I was not walking south, I was walking up. The mist came down on the ground and floated through the air. Twice I thought it was spirits. Water dripped from leaves and the ground felt damp.

"We are not far," he said, right before I asked.

I thought we were searching for a clearing, but we went deeper in the bush. Branches swung around and hit me in the face, vines wrapped around my legs to pull me down, trees bent over to look at me and each line in their barks was a frown. And Kava started talking to leaves. And cursing. The moonlight boy had gone mad. But he was not talking to leaves but to people hiding underneath them. A man and a woman, skin like Kava's ash, hair like silver earth, but no taller than your elbow to your middle finger. Yumboes, of course. Good fairies of the leaves, but I did not know then. They were

Copyrighted Material

walking on branches until Kava grabbed a branch and they climbed his arms up to his shoulders. Both of them had hair on their backs, and eyes that glowed. The male sat on Kava's right shoulder, the female on the left. The man reached into a sack and pulled out a pipe. I stayed behind until my jaw came back up to my mouth, watching tall Kava, two halflings, one leaving a thick trail of pipe smoke.

"A boy?"

"Yes," said the man.

"Is he hungry?"

"We feed him berries, and hog milk. A little blood," said the woman. They both sounded like children.

For a long time walking all I saw was Kava's back. I smelled the baby's dried vomit before he got to him, sitting up on a dead anthill, flower in his mouth, his lips and cheek red. Kava kneeled before the baby, and the little man and woman jumped off his shoulder. Kava took up the baby in his arms and asked for water. Water, he said again, and looked at me. I remembered that I was carrying his waterskins. He poured some in his palm and fed the child. The little man and woman both carried over a gourd with a little hog's milk left. I was over Kava's shoulder when the baby smiled, two top teeth like a mouse's, gums everywhere else.

"Mingi," he said.

"What does that mean?"

He started walking, with the baby, not answering me. Then he stopped.

"The gods had no watchful eye on him," the little man said. "We could not . . ." He did not finish.

I didn't see until we passed the sweet stink of it. Two little feet peeking out of the bush, the bottoms of the feet blue. Flies raising nasty music. The last meal threatened to come up through my mouth. The sweet stink followed us even when we had gone very far. A bad smell, like a good one, can follow you into tomorrow. Then it rained a little and the trees sent the smell of fruit down to us. Kava hid the baby's face with his hand. He spoke before I asked.

"Do you not see his mouth?"

Copyrighted Material

"His mouth is a baby's mouth, like every other baby's mouth."

"Too old to be such a fool," Kava said.

"You don't know my age and neither—"

"Quiet. The boy is mingi, also the dead girl. In his mouth, you saw two teeth. But they were on the top, not bottom; that is why he is mingi. A child whose top teeth come before bottom teeth is a curse and must be destroyed. Or else that curse spreads to the mother, the father, the family and brings drought, famine, and plague to the village. Our elders declared it so."

"The other one. Were his teeth also—"

"There are many mingi."

"This is the talk of old women. Not the talk of cities."

"What is a city?"

"What are the other mingi?"

"We walk now. We walk more."

"Where?"

The Leopard jumped out of the bush and the little people ran behind Kava. He growled, looked behind him, and roared. I thought he wanted Kava to hand him the baby.

The Leopard crouched down on the ground, then rolled on his back, and stretched and shook like he had a sickness. He growled again like a dog hit with a stone. His front legs grew long but the back legs grew longer. His back widened and sucked up his tail. The fur vanished but he was still hairy. He rolled until we saw a man's face, but eyes still yellow and clear like sand struck by lightning. Hair on his head black and wild, going down his temple and his cheek. Kava looked at him as if in the world one always sees these things.

"This is what happens when we move too late," the black Leopard said.

"The baby would still be dead, even if we had run," Kava said.

"I mean late by days; we are two days late. This one's death is on our hands."

"All the more to save this one. Let us move. The green snakes have already caught his scent. The hyenas caught the scent of the other."

"Snakes. Hyenas." The black Leopard laughed. "I will bury that child. I am not following you until I do."

Copyrighted Material

"Bury her with what?" Kava asked.

"I will find something."

"Then we wait," Kava said.

"Do not wait sake of me."

"I do not wait because of you."

"Five days, Asani."

"I come when I come, cat."

"I waited five days."

"You should have waited longer."

The black Leopard growled so loud I thought he would change back.

"Go bury the girl," Kava said.

The black Leopard looked at me. I think that was the first time he noticed I was here. He sniffed, turned his head away, and went back into the bush.

Kava answered a question before I asked it.

"He is just like any other in the bush. The gods made him, but they forget who the gods made first."

But that was not one of the questions I wanted to ask.

"How did you come upon each other?"

Kava still watched where the Leopard left in the bush.

"Before the Zareba. I had to prove that the boy with no mother is worthy of becoming a man, or die the boy. *He must go out past the bush, slip past Gangatom warriors in open fields. He must not come back without the skin of a great cat.* Listen to what come to pass. I was in the yellow bush. I heard a branch crack and a baby cry and I saw that Leopard holding a baby at the neck. With his teeth he's holding him. I draw my spear and he growls and drop the baby. I am thinking I will save this baby, but the baby start bawling and will not quiet until the Leopard pick him up again with his teeth. I throw my spear, I miss, he is on me and even as I blink I see a man about to punch me. He says, You are just a boy. You will carry the baby. So I carried him. He found me the skin of a dead lion and I took it back to the chief."

"The beast just says carry this mingi child and you carry him?" I asked.

"What was mingi? I didn't know until we came to she," Kava said.

Copyrighted Material

"That is not . . . Who is she?"

"She is who we come to meet."

"And since then you sneak off near the end of every moon and bring mingi children to this she? Your answer leaves more questions."

"Then ask what you want to know."

I was quiet.

We waited until the Leopard came back, in the shape of a man with the frown gone from his face. Now he walked behind us, sometimes so far back that I thought he went off on his own, sometimes so close I could feel him sniff me. On him I smelled the leaves he ran through and the fresh wet of dew, the dead scent of the girl and the fresh musk of the grave dirt under his fingernails. The sun was almost ready to go.

Kava is like most men; he carries two smells. One when the sweat runs down his back and dries, the sweat of hard work. And one that hides under the arms, between the legs, between the buttocks, what you smell when close enough to touch with lips. The black Leopard had only the second smell. Never had I seen it before, a man whose hair was black cotton. On his back and legs when he passed me to take the baby from Kava. His chest, two little mountains, his buttocks big, legs thick. He looked as if he would crush the child in his arms, but licked dust off the baby's forehead. Only birds spoke. There we were, a man white like the moon, a Leopard who stood as a man, a man and a woman tall as a shrub, and a baby bigger than them both. Darkness was spreading herself. The little woman hopped from Kava to the Leopard, and sat on his arm, laughing with the baby.

A voice inside me said they were some sort of blood kin and I was the stranger. Kava told no one who I was.

We came up to a small, wild stream. Large rocks and stones marked the banks, green moss covering them like a rug. The stream cackled and sprayed mist up into the branches, ferns and bamboo stalks hanging over. The Leopard placed the baby on a rock, crouched right by the banks, and lapped the water. Kava filled his waterskins. The little man played with the baby. I was surprised he was awake. I stood by the Leopard but he still took no notice. Kava stood farther down, looking for fish.

Copyrighted Material

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I told you."

"This is not the mountain. We went around, then down several paces ago."

"We will get there in two more days."

"Where?"

He crouched down, cupped some water, and drank it.

"I want to go back," I said.

"There is no going back," he said.

"I want to go back."

"Then go."

"Who is the Leopard to you?"

Kava looked at me and laughed. A laugh that said, I am not even a man yet, but you give me man problems. Maybe the woman in me was rising. Maybe I should have grabbed my own cock skin and smashed it off with a rock. This is what I should have said. I did not like the man-Leopard. I did not know him to dislike him, but disliked him anyway. He smelled like the crack of an old man's ass. This is what I would have said. Do you talk without speaking? Do you know each other as brothers? Do you sleep with your hand between his legs? Shall I stay awake till the moon is fat and even the night beasts sleep to see if he comes to you—or will you go to the Leopard and lie on top of him, or him on top of you, or maybe he is like one of those my father liked in the city, who put men in their mouths?

The baby, sitting up, laughed at the little man and woman making faces and jumping up and down like monkeys.

"Name him."

I turned around. The Leopard.

"He needs a name," he said.

"I don't even know yours."

"I don't need one. What did your father name you?"

"I don't know my father."

"Even I know my father. He fought a crocodile, and a snake and a hyena only to drive himself mad with man envy. But he chased after the antelope faster than a cheetah. Have you done that? Bit deep with your sharpest teeth

Copyrighted Material

so that the warm blood bursts into your mouth and the flesh is still throbbing with life?"

"No."

"You are like Asani then."

"My uncle calls him Kava, and all in the village."

"You burn food, then eat it. You eat ash."

"Will you leave tonight?"

"I shall leave when I feel to. We sleep here tonight. In the morning we take the baby across new lands. I will find food, though it will not be much since all the beasts heard our approach."

I knew I was going to stay awake that night. I saw Kava and the Leopard walk off, the flames rising and blocking my view. I told myself that I was going to stay awake and watch them. And I did. I moved so close to the flame that it nearly singed my brow. I went to the river, now cold enough to shake bone, and threw water on my face. I stared through the dark, followed the white spots of Kava's skin. I curled my fingers into a fist so hard that my nails dug into the palm. Whatever those two would do, I was going to see and I was going to shout, or hiss, or curse. So when the Leopard stirred me awake, I jumped, shocked that I had fallen asleep. Kava threw water on the fire, just as I rose.

"We go," the Leopard said.

"Why?"

"We go," he said, and turned away from me.

He changed to a cat. Kava wrapped the baby in cloth and slung him on the Leopard's back. He did not wait. I rubbed my eyes and opened them again. The little man and woman were back on Kava's shoulder.

"One owl talk to me," the little woman said. "A day behind in the bush. Them say you read wind? No so? He say you have a nose."

"I don't understand."

"Somebody, they following us," she said.

"Who?"

"Asani, he saying you have a nose."

"Who?"

Copyrighted Material

"Asani."

"No, who is following us?"

"They moving by night, not by day," Kava said.

"He said I have a nose?"

"He saying you were a tracker."

Kava was already walking away when he said, We go. Farther off into the darkness, Leopard jumped from tree to tree with a baby strapped on his back. Kava called me over.

"We need to move," he said.

All around was dark, night blue, green, and gray; even the sky had few stars. But then the bush began to make sense. Trees were hands pushing out of the earth and spreading crooked fingers. The curling snake was a path. The fluttering night wings belonged to owls, not devils.

"Follow the Leopard," Kava said.

"I don't know where he went," I said.

"Yes, you do."

He rubbed his right hand across my nose. The Leopard came to life right in my face. I could see him and his trail, ripe as his skin through the bush. I pointed.

Leopard had gone right, then down fifty paces, crossed the stream by jumping from one tree to the next, then went south. Stopped to piss at four trees to confuse whoever was following us. I knew I had the nose, as Kava said, but I never knew that it could follow. Even as the Leopard got far he was still right under my nose. And Kava, and his smells and the little woman, and the rose she rubbed in her folds, and the man, and the nectar he drank, and the bugs he ate, too much of the bitter when he needed the sweet, and the waterskins, and the water inside that still smelled of buffalo, and the stream. And more, and more than that, and even more, enough to drive me to some kind of madness.

"Breathe everything out," Kava said.

"Breathe everything out.

"Breathe everything out."

I exhaled long and slow.

"Now breathe in the Leopard."

Copyrighted Material

He touched my chest and rubbed around the heart. I wished I could see his eyes in the dark.

"Breathe in the Leopard."

And then I saw him again with my nose. I knew where he was going. And whoever spooked the Leopard was beginning to spook me. I pointed right.

"We go this way," I said.

We ran all night. Beyond the stream and the branches bent over it, we ran through trees with grand roots, roots that rose above the ground and snaked the lands in tangles and curls. Right before dawn I mistook one for a sleeping python. Trees taller than fifty men standing on shoulders, and as soon as the sky changed, the leaves turned into birds that flew away. We came up the grasslands, with shrubs and weeds that reached above our knees, but no trees. We came upon salt lands in a low valley with white dirt that blinded us with light and crunched under our feet, with no animals as far as one could see, which meant those following us could see us. I said nothing. The grasslands stretched from last of the night to first of the day, where everything was gray. That Leopard scent in front like a line, or a road. Twice we came close to see him, running on all fours with the baby tied to his back. Once, three Leopards ran alongside him, and left us alone. We passed elephants and lions and scared a few zebras. We passed through a thicket of trees with few leaves, like the bones of trees, and their whispers were louder. And still we ran.

Morning peeked as if about to change her mind. The fourth day since Kava and I set out. The little woman said whoever was following slept by day and hunted at night. So we walked. Past a forest of killed trees the air went wet again, thick as it went down the nose into the chest. The trees had leaves again and the leaves were getting darker, bigger. We came upon a field of trees larger than anything I had ever seen in the world. I would have run out of men to count. They weren't even trees, but the crooked fingers of buried giants sticking out of the ground and covered in grass, branches, and green moss. Giant stalks bursting out of the ground and reaching into the sky, giant stalks curling into the ground like an open fist. I walked past one and beside it I was a mouse. The ground was mounds and little hills; nowhere was level. Everywhere looked as if another giant finger was going to push through the ground, followed by a hand and an arm and a green man taller than five

Copyrighted Material