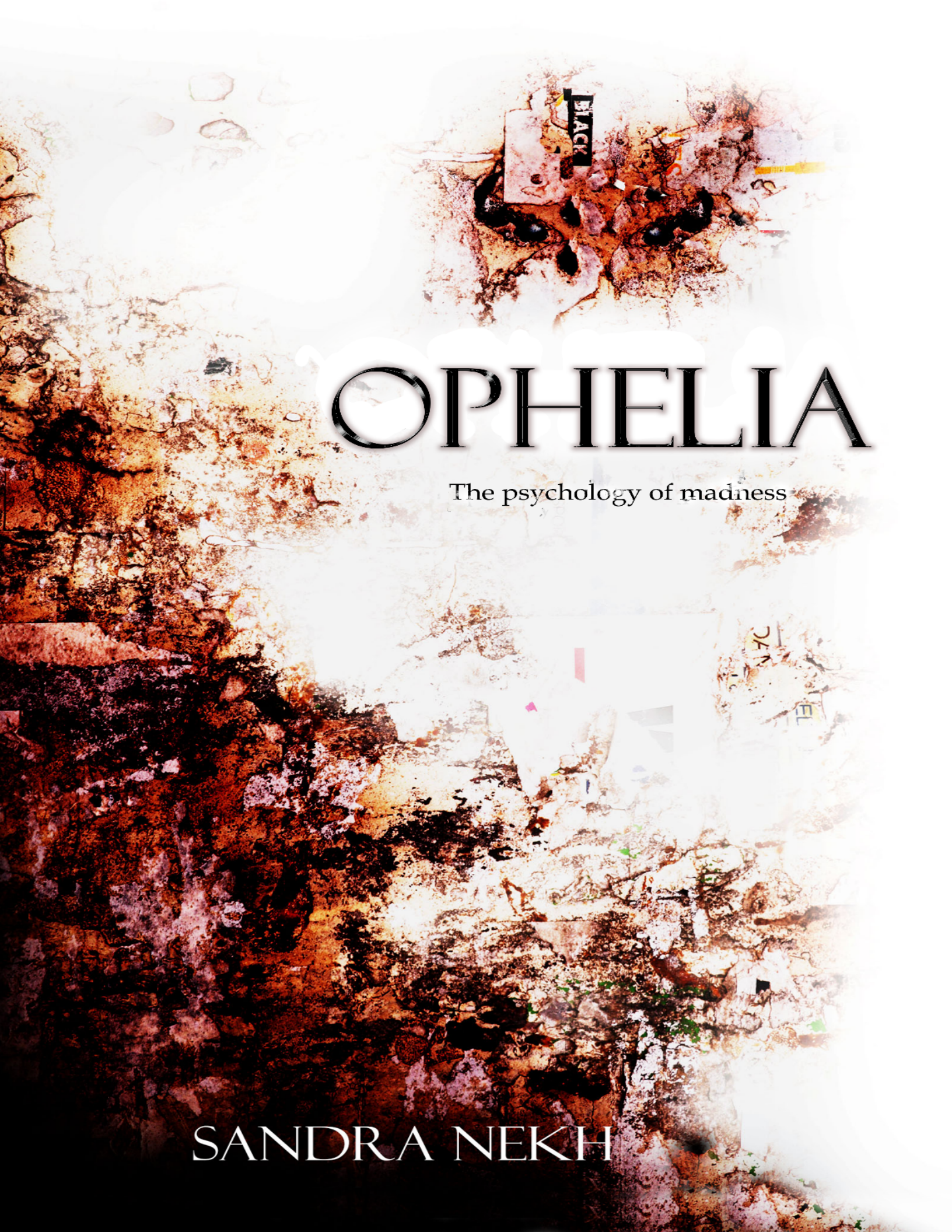
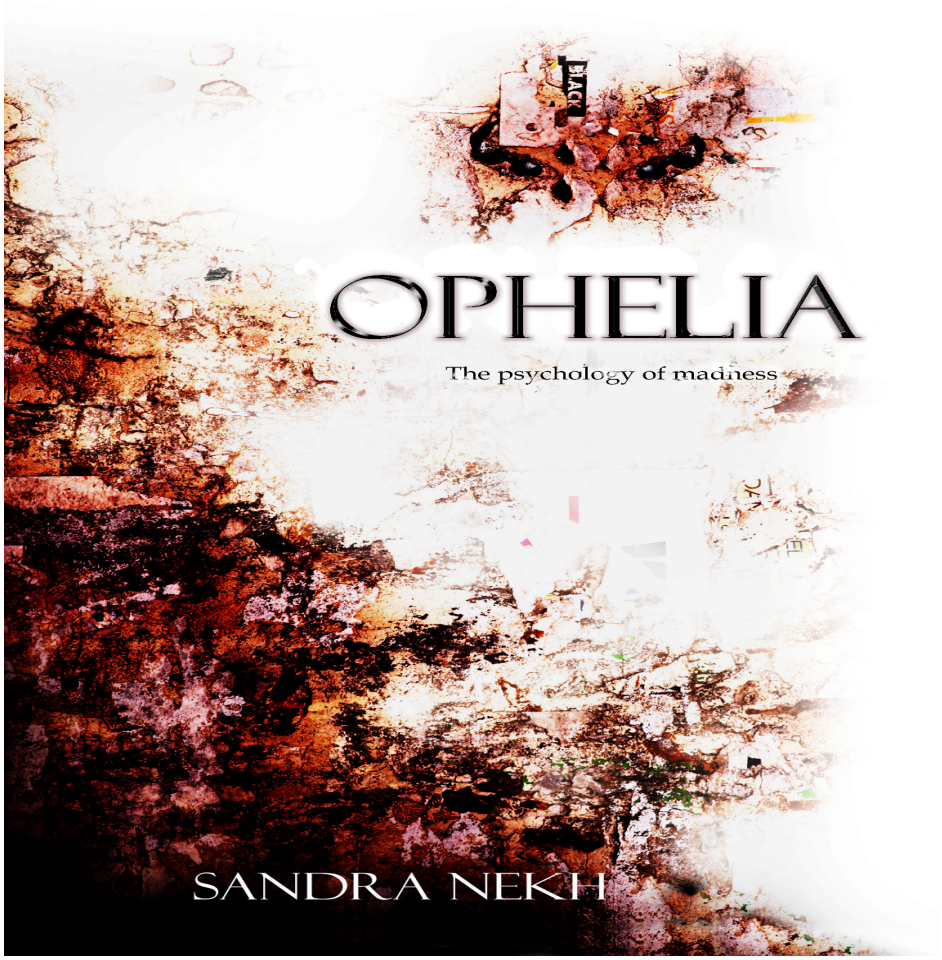


OPHELIA

The psychology of madness

SANDRA NEKH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DEDICATION

To CC, Tiel, Leo and Nasita.
With love,
Aunty Sandra.

“What kind of power was it if everybody knew that it would never be used? Better to say that it was not there, that it was no more than the power in the anus of the proud dog who tried to put out a furnace with his puny fart...”

—Chinua Achebe, Arrow of God

“I tried so hard to let you go, but some kind of madness is swallowing me whole.”

—Muse, Madness.

“Your pot is leaking.”

—Nekh

PROLOGUE

BEMUS LOOKS UP from his notebook. He laughs a little. This sickens Ophelia. “Humour me… for a second. For argument’s sake… what do you think this is?”

She stutters, her brain working slower than ever. “Sss... some kkkinnnnd of exxx...periment… This is wrong.” Though his browbeating has her all mush, she knows this much.

He leans forward, eyes lambent with excitement. “And where do you think you are?” She looks around to read her surrounding but is met by an off-white maddening paleness. Tears come to her eyes. She cannot place her existence, let alone location. “I thought so. I know how this works; you say something, then I say something back. You say something pompous—stupid even, and I say something back. Then you say something terribly insolent, and you wouldn’t even know what you would be talking about, and I would smack the life out of you repeatedly punishing that soft pompous mouth of yours till your face is a bloody pulp.” Breathing in a raged manner, he prompts her, “Now say something.” She has nothing. He concludes brashly, “You are nobody, stuck nowhere in a timeless state. How do you wonder? By your own hand.” She swallows hard, blinking most of her tears away as some still slip down her face defiantly.

I did this?! She stares at him blankly. He has her chastened of all thoughts.

“Now, define the subject; start with his name.”

“Christopher Yego….”

CHAPTER ONE

ST. PETERSBURG MISSION KASARANI.

“SADIC. WHY AM I HERE?” Christopher asks his friend Sadic when he sees that Tom —his driver— has brought them to a church. As Sadic leads Christopher down to the mission’s gates, Christopher looks back to see Tom’s stubborn cleft-twitch, a sign that Christopher will not be pleased by what he will find within the vicinity walls.

Tom remains by the car; a sleek black saloon car with tinted windows and a significant brand name defining power, class, and longevity. He wears a neat company suit with a pin over his breast pocket; he watches his boss walk into the purlieu of the church. Other than his chin, he gives nothing else away.

Christopher follows Sadic. He feels an odd and sudden tightening in his chest. Even the holy ground rejects him. He finds himself thinking of his sins. The last time he entered the hallowed grounds, he was but a child. He cannot help thinking himself unworthy. He lays it all at the gates. His sins. He speaks silently to his God and lays it all there.

They leave the church behind and walk through a grand grey gate. Something steals his attention to the left. He turns to it. Tunnel vision restricts him from noticing a story building parked about thirty meters to their right. It is a community hospital; ‘St. Petersburg Kasarani Community Hospital’. Within these gates, Christopher suddenly feels an air of tranquillity. He sees a manicured grass garden up ahead. Gardenias mark its borders. Beyond the garden is a snaking path that leads to a bungalow-style building and a three-story mansion that crowns his limited horizon. He follows Sadic. Sadic seems to know where to go. Sadic charges forth with the gait of a man on a mission. “You said you needed change —a worthy cause. I found you one! This is St. Petersburg. It is home to about one hundred in service of the Lord, including support staff who come and go—”

“Why?” Christopher asks coldly as he follows, cutting off Sadic.

Sadic chooses not to answer but leads them down the hall to meet a nun dressed in brown. Christopher finds this peculiar; he is used to see nuns in white and off-white.

“Sadic. Welcome.” They shake hands, and she turns to Christopher, “You must be Mr. Yego.” She extends her petite hand to Christopher, who delays his *salaam* —greetings— but allows for a handshake nonetheless. “It’s nice to meet you finally.” He shakes her hand too firmly. He notices how her whole form shifts with the handshake, though she still maintains a decent handshake. She is a small woman, little but strong. In more ways than just physically, he presumes. He can see a strange depth in her eyes. He wants to ask her why he is here, but she walks away and talks to them over her back. Sadic follows her closely, and Christopher has no choice but to shadow them. “We have fifteen girls. Six of them are in college, the rest in secondary and primary schools. We have the younger girls taken care of but need some help with the older girls.”

Uh —My money. Sadic, you slug! They turn into a hallway. Christopher feels they walk down paths that seem maze-like, a complex layout to a goal. He hopes the price is worth it.

“The higher the level of education, the costlier. We did not anticipate so many girls and... Well, it’s a blessing.” She laughs a little.

Christopher frowns. He sees their problem, poor planning. They never projected in time to determine the weight and size of the fruits of their labour. Now they seek handouts from people like him. People with seemingly enough to give away. “And...?” He starts to state his stake, possibly denying them their request when Sadic cuts him short. Again, Sadic reads his mind. “This is where we come in.” He steals her attention from Christopher, who was ready to hand her a verbatim thrash on poor project management.

“No, I...” Christopher begins again when Sister Margret abruptly stops walking.

“No?!” she asks Christopher. Her tiny structure turns. She peers up at him. “You can’t?!” She looks a little angry.

Christopher turns to her, confused. He barely understands his presence there.

Sadic smiles sheepishly between the two. He then proceeds to pull Christopher a few paces away. “This is what you need. You have what, five million... They have a cause. What could go wrong?” Sadic’s hands move animatedly in the air as he speaks. He could never be refined enough for subtle reactions; Christopher sees this reading on every bit of Sadic’s face, Sadic does not see what could go wrong. Christopher can feel the nun stare

at them; he steals a glance and sees that her little form is tense with angst; he has made her livid. The pounding in his ears grows as he tries hard not to detract from his calm demeanour. *Too much…* He thinks. *It's all too much!* Christopher turns back to his friend. He speaks frankly, "I don't want my money... My hard-earned money thrown down the drain. I have seen enough of such," he points to Sister Margret.

She tightens her gaze at them.

"Maggie here and their little charitable cases don't know that it never ends well."

Sadic looks at his friend. He does not see why his pockets seem so deep. "What do you have to lose?"

Apart from my money….

Sadic reads Christopher's mind. "Other than your money, if this goes wrong."

"Uh... Mmh..." He has nothing. He may even gain a name for himself. He has more to gain than lose. *But still...*

"Last year, you spent two million on vacation. Was it worth it?"

"No," Christopher whispers groggily.

Sadic smiles. "Now be nice to the nun. I like her smile." He turns back to Sister Margret.

"Are you both on the same page now?" She asks curiously, somewhat sated.

"As can be," Christopher replies. The nun and Sadic walk away, and he follows quietly.

The nun leads them down another turn. She and Sadic continue to indulge in a blissful chat about the donation prospects when they arrive at a grass-patched square in the centre of two long parallel buildings. The joining wall further along the lines of the buildings is a perimeter wall on the other side of the grass patch.

They arrive at their destination; Christopher can tell this by the nun's gait. The winding steps of finality are slower and lighter. While sweeping a gaze over the space, appreciating the minimalistic elegance of the institution, he catches a vision on a grass patch near one of the veranda's, the one furthest from them. It is a girl. She is young, not more than twenty. She is far too thin, yet he can tell from her bone structure that her form could hold a lot more mass and still be healthy. She is wearing a rugged pair of dungaree jeans. She couples it with a vest, despite the morning chill. He

cringes at the brown patches on the jean; the brown patches mark points of connection with dirty surfaces. He soon recognises that she is the price at the end of the maze. Christopher rubbernecks the girl as she is turned away from them, slightly bent. She is doing something; he wants to know what. Her action involves her left hand, the right one in her side pocket, clutched tightly to her side; she does feel cold. He watches her strike the front of her boot into the ground. She destroys the grass work. He wonders how long she has been at it, seems for a while now by the look of the growing brown hole in the grass.

Christopher still watches as she turns slightly and gifts him her profile. She raises her head and blows a cloud of smoke in the air. She goes for an inhale, lets the poison sit a little while and releases it through her nose. He is caught in her death dance when the nun speaks.

"That's O, Ophelia. She is our star pupil. Would you believe it? She is only nineteen and already showing great promise in psychological studies." Sister Margret supplies Christopher's curiosity.

He turns to the nun, blinking rapidly in disbelief. "How?" She could not be enrolled in college so young.

Sister Margret smiles broadly. Sadic is right. She has a lovely smile. "She is under the tutelage of Father Bemus Manange from the Brothers of the Light Seminary." Christopher scoffs. His distrust of men in cloak upholds. "She is brilliant. We can't say much about her mannerisms." She frowns while she holds an inflexible side glance at the girl.

"Has she done any other schooling?" Christopher asks. Sadic and the nun share a look. Christopher is enthralled. Hopefully, by Ophelia's intellect. This is good for their prospective partnership.

"Primary level up to class six, then just private sessions with—"

"The priest."

Sister Margret nods. She does not miss the disdain in his tone. She wonders who broke him. His hatred for priests is truly tangible. She moves forward towards the edge of the veranda on which they stand. "Ophelia turn that out. Come here. There are people I need you to meet."

The girl turns to the three; she takes a few seconds to study Christopher and Sadic. She could be too much to believe, but life has taught Christopher never to judge a book by its cover. Looking back at her, he sees the binary of light and day, an angelic face framed by a cloud of cigarette smoke. They watch the stick make its way to her soft lips. She steals another puff and

hastens the exhale while her eyes still linger on Christopher, soon shifting to Sadic briefly, then back to Christopher.
OPHELIA'S gaze remains on Christopher; he has caught her interest. His clothes make her wonder what his position is. Ophelia finds that among humanity, there is a hierarchy of sorts. Everyone belongs somewhere. You do not want to be at the top or the bottom. You want to be in the middle, where it is safe.

Winding her cigarette break, she throws the remaining stick, mainly the filter, to the ground and stomps it dead. She then walks up to them. Her steps are languid; she feels no need to rush.
A cough escapes her lips, and Christopher lets out a deep breath, which he does not realise he is holding.

"My Ophelia..." The nun rushes to right her clothes as the girl approaches. Ophelia blushes at the scrutiny and looks away. Christopher is roped in. Officially, he cannot walk away. "Did we not talk about presentation?" They listen to the nun reproach her softly; she does this now and in public. Christopher cannot help but sympathise. It is written all over his face.

"Sorry, Sister." She speaks with unlikely politeness. Margret, Sadic and Christopher find themselves caught in a moment of compassion; they exude a subtle and quiet reprieve.

Even as he stays, this is the point at which Christopher knows he should walk away, but he fails to do so in time. The nun turns to Sadic and Christopher. "This is Mr. Ano," Ophelia shakes Sadic's hand, "and Mr. Yego." She shakes Christopher's hand; she even manages a smile. "They are here to help raise money for the education kitty."

Christopher looks down at the young lady and feels compelled to give. "What is this?" he asks. His intense eyes are levied on Ophelia. She tries stealing her hand away. His grasp grows tighter. She looks to the nun for help though her face still holds taciturn cool.

"It's a fundraiser," replies Margret.

Christopher turns to the side past the nun to see a roomful of men and women in suits, a few in African regalia and western trends. By the lot, he can tell these are big names. Names here to brand the cause worthy of their time. "How much do you wish to raise today?"

"About two million." She smiles at the thought.

“I will give you six million. This cater to your needs?” Christopher drops Ophelia’s hand. Ophelia, in turn, steps back, her eyes still glued on him. Fresh tears start to fill her eyes.

Sadic smiles at Ophelia and the nun in a big boyish grin like he knew Christopher would cave all along.

The nun’s face is pale. Her jaw has dropped so far that Sadic can count her teeth. “Mr. Yego!” she speaks breathlessly.

Sadic cannot hold his excitement. Her reaction is priceless. “Is it enough?” he asks, knowing very well that the donation has bypassed their projections millions over.

“Yes. More than. We could start...”

“No.” Christopher speaks firmly, “Don’t start any other projects. Just sustain this one. Sadic will make arrangements. Call me when anything arises.” He bows slightly and takes his leave. Sadic says his goodbyes and follows Christopher towards the exit.

Christopher looks back, once. The nun and Ophelia embrace one another tightly. For a tough-looking girl, Ophelia is very emotional. She cries her heart out on Sister Margret’s shoulder. She shed tears of joy… and sadness. But, most of all, tears of joy.

Her dreams do come true.

———

“WHAT was that?” Sadic asks the moment they settle in Christopher's car; he watches his friend keenly. The man acted out of character. He displayed impulsivity, which is entirely unlikely in his personae; Christopher usually is borderline psychotic, a minuscule 1% of the population. He has an antisocial personality disorder, lacks empathy, and has utter disregard for societal stipulated norms. He is high functioning, exceedingly manipulative, and takes calculative risks, not to mention he barely can form personal attachments. He has a string of disgruntled exes and flings and one friend —Sadic. He left the world behind when he sorted more. Now he sits in the lights in solitude. Considering all the above, empathizing, and throwing his hard-earned money at Ophelia is highly unlike Christopher; this raises the alarm in Sadic. He was to throw his money at the mission’s project. Singling out Ophelia is problematic.

Sadic sees thin sheen of sweat coat Christopher’s brow. There were also tiny sweat beads about the tip of his nose. He is burning up. “Are you okay,

man?" Christopher nods. Sadic watches as Christopher takes off his coat and loosens his tie. He draws deep breaths as though freed from a chokehold. Surely, he is not okay. "What changed your mind?" Sadic asks calmly.

Even in this tone, his question should still ring as sharp as a siren in Christopher's mind. When he finally speaks, Christopher speaks quietly, "The priest's existence... I looked in her eyes and... She is cursed or blessed. I can't tell."

Sadic scoffs, "I have no idea what you are talking about, man," he sits back as he adjusts himself for comfort.

Tom gears the vehicle to life.

"*Umepagawa*." You have gone mad. Sadic adds in a matter-of-fact manner turning his gaze at the man. By the lost look on his face, he can tell that even Christopher considers he could have gone mad.

_____

EVERY successful man has a few rivals. These people admire his success enough to want it for themselves. Every man in charge has those about him who wish him ill will, those who want to take his place. Some dare to step up and take the fight to this more extraordinary man; some slither and whisper in the dark corners of the ills committed by the greatest while some watch.

Henry is an older adult. He has been aged for a while; some would say they have never seen him any younger. This may be true. All about him is youth. He has three sons and two daughters. All grown and married, in their mid to late twenties. They gifted him eight precious grandkids. This blood he treasures and calls his blessing.

Henry walks with a cane; he has a bad back. Sometimes, when he exerts himself, he hears it crack from the pressures of daily life. While some of these pressures are lifelong companions, some he can do without but would never. Henry's wife died about two decades ago. The kids all moved out to live their lives, leaving him alone in their mansion in Ongata Rongai, Kajiado county. The house was a sizable three-tier showcase to luxury with a lovely garden and a pool. It was necessary when he had a family. It became a waste when he was left all alone. It became too large for one man. This luxurious gift for his family became a curse to him, one too large to merely cast away.

In the beginning, Henry had refused to accept the fact that he never needed that much space in his life, so he lived in solitude for years, even fired the staff, seeking more lonesomeness, never quite minding the quiet. He had thought himself strong enough to live his last days this way, but the time proved to be a bitter pill to swallow. Soon, the isolation became too much to withstand, and he gave in to companionship; he found a young lassie to wade the cold away and kill the loneliness entirely. Henry found a simple woman with dreams of living well and marrying a successful man.

She wants babies but is patient with him since he is an older man who has already raised his children to adulthood, and she is four and a half years younger than his last-born daughter.

She is from Kenya's coast, off the mainland. A place called Shanzu. She has a presence like a witch; she talks too much but compels one to listen as she has a pitchy tone with exciting drag. Her body is a drug as she swings about her curvaceous self sensually when she walks about in her eternal collection of *lessos* (Swahili shawls). It mesmerises and disturbs greatly. She cannot let him settle long enough to think straight. Her face is a charm, her eyes the witches' globe; he gets lost in them. She has him wholly. What they have is not love, nor is it infatuation. It is something unfathomable, somewhat indescribable. Henry sort himself a problem, a good problem for it keeps him alive.

He works from home these days. Henry manages his empire from the comfort of his brick mansion. He barely leaves his home, though occasionally, he goes out to fulfil his duties to different conglomerates about the capital and its outskirts. The most crucial company is Ferthono, a psychology and sociology research company. That is their logline, literally. Truthfully, Henry knows nothing about the realm they study; he only wants to help himself with this new knowledge they generate.

In the true sense, the company's work is much deeper than psychological and sociological research. They create innovations that defy the age's most advanced technology; these innovations boost the quality of human life and cost millions to produce. The company indulges Henry's likes, who sits on the board because he has money to burn.

It is about ten in the day. The sun shines nicely through the east-facing window. He sits at his desk on another workday. Another day to prove himself capable of running his empire; he has come to be known as the old man who never relents. There is a reason for such a title; it is a work ethic

groomed when Kenyan roots were forged. It is unyielding resilience that is bone deep. Henry should be a study. He is an impressive man altogether. This morning, he goes through Ferthono's paperwork for the new quarter. Something to do with a theory… the *Ophelia Theory*. He barely understands what he is reading, but its success prospects are somewhat riveting. His concentration seeks to seed him with the slightest illumination, but he loses it all when his young temptress walks in carrying a tray of tea and goodies. This is the young wife… fresh still in her bustling twenties. He is thirty-eight years her senior; she makes the difference worth it. He loses his train of thought, his throat bobbles in a hard swallow, and he finds that he cannot keep holding the paperwork that slowly slips out of the hold as his hand falls limply on the arm of his office desk.

"*Chai?*" Tea, she whispers with that enchanting tongue, and he nods as a man disarmed. "I thought so," she places the tray on his desk and bends slightly, an elbow pressed to the padded desktop. She points to the tray with her free hand, "Biscuits or scones?"

His lips part to speak, but he is a little more than tongue-tied; his tongue seems to have backed into his throat. He cannot look away. He has a view of her perky breasts over the top edge of her shirt. He swallows thickly. Marrying this girl was either the best or worst decision of his life.

———

TEATIME comes to a swift end with the young wife's departure. Henry's mental state is questionable as he seeks the document he was working on. He lays it before him. He grabs the document gustily and flips through the pages. His brows come together in regret as he realises he did not mark his progress. Detached now, he goes for his phone. He fiddles with the gadget as he tries earning a semblance of reward beyond the physical. He searches for the 'Ophelia Theory'. Minutes later, he ends up with babble on *Ophelia's* idolisation from Shakespeare's ***Hamlet*** and the relativity of that to a state of being. He has always hated literature and forever will, so these results frustrate him rather than reward his curiosity. He moves on to search for his most exciting subject yet; the entrepreneur Christopher Yego. He would so matter-of-factly conclude that this man could be the closest he had to a proper entrant in a long time.

He wonders what the man is up to. He calls his right-hand man, a woman, Mha Juma. The moment the line goes through, he seeks

information on Christopher's current whereabouts.

As the woman speaks, Henry's face lightens in delight at the news he receives. He leans back and revels in his state of bliss. He forgets actual class, the worth of being a gentleman. His decaying faux English splendour fades fast as his true nature sips to the surface.

Henry is not a good man.

———

BEMUS Manage is a simple man with simple pleasures. He craves to be loved but finds that love does not come easily. He loves a sugary nightcap because it helps centre him after a long day. He may be a simple man, but he has undeniable hidden complexities, those only he and his creator can divulge. Before the man that stands defiant of every law ever written to this day came to be, Bemus was a cheerful and generous soul. He was ambitious enough to want to save the world and daring enough to try and actually do it.

Bemus was brought up in a tiny village in the Taveta Hills. He was the only child of a well-to-do couple; his father was a teacher, and his mother a nurse at the village clinic. He was never handed too much and lived his life within a realm of comfort rather than abundance; he was happy.

Later in life, Bemus learned the value of faithful service to the Lord. He cultured himself to live the life of a man devout to the benefit of others; a priest. He breathed his Father's air and saw no other purpose out there for him; he sweated from every pore for the Father's mercy if only so he could lead others to the gates of heaven if not see the gates himself even once. With such ideals, Bemus became a wonderful priest. Years passed, and he managed to solidify his roots in the realm of faithful men.

—What is the best time for the devil's first temptation? When a man feels undeniably safe in his faith—

The clock had struck all eight years, and with the new year came, so came Bemus' first challenge.

Over their years, even such a man would become a little jaded and seek more. He wondered about his role in earth. Surely, it is not merely to marinate in a smog of burning blessed ashes, bath in the shy sprinkles or deep pools of holy water, and exist under the endless jabber of archival litany for religion? Would this solely be it? Oh, and stand, sit, kneel, and lay about crosses. The most iconic would have to be when he stood behind

them, these crosses. He and his peers, mere mortals, were given the grace to issue blessings. His right hand would lead upwards, then slide down to the middle, at his chest, and then side to side every time they blessed. *This could not be all... There had to be more.* His mind racked on trying to find this unique purpose in life. Amid his confusion and derailment, he found a liking for Behaviourism, a study in psychology. It came as a fluke, really, nothing of his own doing. He was in the confessional in his rightful place, listening to confessions that seemed to be looped eternally. He found himself aligning these confessions with the theory he studied years ago while at the seminary.

By the twelfth wretched soul needing redemption, Bemus had a hypothesis going. His premise was highly skewed and extensively based on a young lady's dilemma about morals. She came in emotionally torn, with an aura of dissonance about her. She sniffed periodically and spoke with a voice cracked from crying. She started the pre-confessional recital, barely acknowledging his salutation. "Bless me, father, for I have sinned..." She sniffed deeply, then blew her nose. She gasped for air, then sniffed again. Bemus wondered why she would blow her nose and not get it all out in one go? "It's been a while... since I've been here." She whispered. The softness of her voice and that very moral pronouncement drew him in. The closer he inched to the partition, the harder his insides stirred. Her perfume hit him first; it stung his senses so sharply that he had to grab his nose with a hard press and shake it a little to stop sneezing.

When he had control and was now aware of the sting of her sent, he peered through the latticed openings of the closed window between them. Her gaze was downcast, and a mane of hair covered her profile, hiding her face from him. His eyes moved lower. She was dressed in a black dress with a plunging neckline; the parted fabric at her chest dripped loosely to join at the lower edge of her ribs. She moved her head and pushed some of her hair back. Bemus caught sight of a set of immaculate pearls that hung high about her narrow neck; his gaze hovered there for a couple of seconds before lowering to her chest, guided by the seams for the dress. Her skin shone with health and vitality even when in the dully-lit enclosure. She seemed healthy, wealthy, and very aware of her beauty; the cut of her outfit and her ornament design were all selected to accentuate this beauty and status. She was a rare owl in the outback of Taita Hills. Why was she here, and why was she so sad? "I have done so much…." She began but was

unable to speak more. A whole minute passed as she tried prying the words off her lips. “I… I did something...”

He leaned even closer to the divider. “Speak to me as though I am your closest friend. Remember, God listens even now.” Bemus coaxed her, “Relax. Tell me what happened?”

“We buried him today.”

She let it out in a deep huff, as though that single sentence took so much from her physically and emotionally. Now he figured out her outfit; she was coming from a burial.

“He was so young…” she burst into a fresh set of tears.

Bemus waited patiently for her to regain composure.

“He died at seven. There were so many complications with his birth, but he came through. We thought we were past it, but we were still dealing with one complication after another, years later. When we thought we had one managed, another cropped up.” Her narrative felt fragmented; she kept jumping back and forth in time as though the details came back to her as she spoke. “He was born sickly, severely underweight. He barely survived his first week on Earth. We would sit up every night trying to pray away this predicament, but it still happened.

What did we do wrong?! Nothing!” She sounded angry now, looked through the divider at Bemus with the deepest saddest eyes he had ever looked into.

He presumed she saw him, so he slightly pulled back, feeling a little open. This woman was looking right at him, the man. For some reasons, Bemus knew that she never saw God in the act of confession. She saw a man behind a barrier that should have meant something but did not. He believed so because she blasphemed even then, distraught, and in pain.

“If God cared, he would have healed him. All we did was fall in love. That was it! How were we to know that we were forbidden from the act?!”

Bemus tried to persuade her by stating that the boy was sick. “But that death is not your fault.”

“Rhesus haemolytic disease… we knew the incompatibility but ignored it. We wanted him so bad.” She whispered now, “He was so precious. We had to keep him.

People told us to get rid of him in utero. I could not because I loved him too much. I just want to take that part away, that part that remembers him

and his suffering and what I did. I want to purge myself of that memory. I cannot live like this."

"God will give you the grace to face this moment…."

"Enough!" She suddenly bellowed out, "I just need to forget. How can you make me forget?"

Bemus shared in her pain. Empathy was easy, especially when the loss did not touch directly. "In time. You will forget and ultimately forgive yourself."

"Forget a huffing child… always gasping for breath, always bleeding… always in pain." She sat back, eyes to the curtain before her. Her profile was hidden. "Tell me how."

"I don't know… but I will pray on it."

That day, she walked away dissatisfied. She never found her way to forget. Bemus ensured he ran to the face of the church to watch her walk away. He felt that he had somehow failed at what he did best. He could have done more… How? He watched her enter a black sedan car. She was driven away in a rush, as though her trip here was out of their way. The dust de-settled by the cars' wheels marked their path as she blew away. She was gone but had left something inside Bemus.

She had arisen feelings in Bemus; those feelings became the makings of his addiction to Behaviourism. She was the past that shaped his choices thereon.

While the church offered him subtle comforts, he would rather have had it all. He began to see more around him than anyone else. He knew that people would never change, for he read this state in the confessions of the contrite. Then he thought of those who did not come to ask forgiveness. Those that were too scared or otherwise too stubborn maybe even just ignorant. Thus far, his realisations were born from analysing his congregants and the visitors who visited his church. Beyond that, he knew little other than that people wanted to forget.

People needed to forget.

Bemus saw that he needed more to verify his premise. He actively investigated the most aloof of his flock. Those who were somehow registered as congregants; baptised and confirmed at his church but quaintly nonexistent. Those revealed to be a much better study —a more lucrative conquest.

In time, Bemus found himself pulling further and further from the church. He found history repeated itself even within himself. He saw the theory he chased actively illuminate his lacking. Doubt blooming into pretty petals in his heart, Bemus registered himself at the Brothers of Light Seminary for time away. He claimed a sense of fatigue. This was no lie. He was tired and in need of rest. By then, he felt drone-like, in need of assistance to move. He knew time away at the mission would help, but all it managed to do was lead him further away from the church because it was there that he found Ferthono and met a young girl by the name of Ophelia. Very strange…

BEMUS is home in his studio apartment in Pangani, a middle-class residential area in Nairobi City. This tiny home made up of one large room and secluded bathroom space is his little haven where he enjoys his nightcaps on his couch/bed, watches his TV, and rests his head away from any grand purposes for life. He is lying on the only couch in the room. A few books and a single file sit on the coffee table before the seat. The books are based on his area of psychological study, behaviourism. Various color-coded bookmarks litter the top, side, and bottom edges. The file sits open, its contents exposed. A girl's picture graces the first page of the file. She has an angular face and profoundly visible bone structure. Her skin is pale and ashy at the corners of her eyes and mouth. She has no emotion whatsoever on her face. Her eyes are half-mast and dull ―affecting.

This girl is Ophelia.

Bemus slips in and out of consciousness on the couch as it has been a long day. Ferthono in the last phase of research, right before the implementation of the Ophelia Theory. This is the most crucial part of their study. A lot rides on the project's success, and this responsibility sits on his shoulders. He goes through queer sleep that steals him away, returns him jumbled, and then takes him away again like a detestable old ghost. It feels like he has been dragged. When his lids fall, the abyss he falls into is a colossal turn of events.

Bemus falls awake for a few seconds and is dragged again within the eighth. This time, his eyes grace Ophelia's face just before he falls away. He dreams of her and what he has already done to her. The horrid rendition of the deeds representing his and Ophelia's relationship plays on.

The dream should scare him, but it does not. He could never be afraid of his subconscious. He knows enough to be aware that he is dreaming. What

is not real does not hurt; it cannot and thus does not matter. Also, he is protected by Ferthono and his academic papers. He has nothing to fear.

His dreams turn when he finds himself face to face with Christopher Yego. Here, he is massive, large enough to jolt even Bemus. Christopher faces Bemus and stares him down. Somehow Bemus frets, he blinks repeatedly in disbelieve. His face contorts into that of a frightened man. He shrinks smaller in form. Lesser even to the size of a small person. Smaller even to the size of a mouse. Christopher's lip twitches to the side into a rude smirk. He then raises a gun and points it at Bemus' head. The front of the barrel is as large as Bemus' complete form.

Yego pulls the trigger.

Bemus comes awake, sitting up erect and breathless. He is chilled with cold sweat and still, new sweat rushes off his pores profusely. Breathless and disoriented, he falls over the couch clutching his chest because his heart beats like it is about to jump out. He registers shock; his dreams have never affected him, ever... until now. He bubbles profanities, utterly engaged but stops abruptly when he suddenly comprehends the light about him. It is daytime. He slept on the couch till morning.

———

TODAY is a good day.

The sun is out, the sky is clear, and the birds are chirping. The trees look brilliantly alive in a healthy green. A fine breeze blows through the city as downtown Nairobi comes alive. Sadic drives to the Upper Hill district west of the central business district. His destination is the Ferthono building; he has some business to discuss. This meeting has nothing to do with him; it is a favour for a friend; the friend needs care for his great-aunt who suffers from a mental disorder. Sadic meets Ferthono because his friend is an underclassman who could never gain an audience with the company. All Sadic had to do was mention that he is an affiliate of Yego Enterprises. Sadic's mission is to get the older woman on the Ferthono Psych Program.

Sadic gets there early; he has about ten minutes to marvel at the new environs. The building is innovative —a production of distinctive edges and fine lines; an architectural marvel. There is an air of freshness all about him. If he takes a whiff, it is affirmation enough that there are two versions of Nairobi, this one and the one that raised him. He does not like this one too

much, except for the world Yego has created; he finds that the fineness of spaces defines the extent of rot the insides could hold.

Beyond the glass revolving doors, Sadic falls into an ample, bright reception and waiting area. He is the only visitor in the space, the only crazy man daring enough to bring himself to a nut house for a friend. There is a young receptionist sitting or standing behind the counter; he cannot tell from his position by the revolving door. He walks up to her stealthily. He seeks to rattle her slightly, maybe unsettle her enough to see an incensed state. He likes to do this to girls, especially when they look all too well put together; it keeps him youthfully pert.

The receptionist's gaze is cast onto a screen behind the counter protective barrier. He can see the light reflecting on her face, brightening it in white glow. He smiles as he walks up.

Just as he turns to face her, she looks up and smiles, startling him. He was not aware that she knew of his presence. He is impressed that she heard him. He sees more about the girl. This new revelation makes him uneasy, maybe a little guilty that he tried pulling a fast one on her. Her eyes are flinty about his chest. *Odd...* he bends slightly and looks her dead in the eyes. She does not bat a lash. She speaks with a tinge of amusement; maybe she is impressed by his light footfalls. "Good morning, welcome to Ferthono."

He bites down, unable to reply immediately.

"Good morning." She repeats, almost robot-like.

"Good morning." He salutes her back and then angles away from her, arching backward. Sadic shamelessly waves his hand before her face; he tests her sight from a safe distance. Her irises do not move. She is blind as a bat. *God…!*

"That would be your hand," she speaks up confidently, then smiles defiantly with a toothy grin.

She does not want him to win. Sadic has a thing for smiles. Despite her smile, he can tell she is upset. She handles her emotions with grace. She waits for him to apologise, but he takes his time until her smile fades. With sluggish movements, he stands upright. His eyes still locked on the girl, "You are blind." The words slip out in a careless whisper. He does not remember thinking to say them aloud. "I'm sorry."

"Yes. I am visually impaired. I never died from it." She moves something on the desk, but he misses it because his eyes are still on her face. "You are

sorry that you take me for a log by the road, or maybe a rock by the ocean... one without feelings and a mouth to speak for herself."

Sadic speaks genuinely, carefully selecting his words, "I'm sorry for inconsiderately placing my curiosity before your feelings. It's quite rude, and I regret it. My mother raised me better."

She seems pleased with this. She nods agreeably. "You are forgiven. Now, how may I help you?"

_____

LATER in the day, Sadic recants his meetings to Christopher. More importantly, he describes the Ferthono receptionist as his future wife. "I found a new exploit… two exploits really... have you heard of a Psych-Print?" While Sadic speaks with fresh-faced enthusiasm, Christopher barely reacts to his report. He stands too still before his massive office window as he stares at the expanse of the city from his relatively high vantage. "I was at this company this morning, and they claim they can isolate memory to particular behaviour... Or is it the other way about," he tries to find logic in his words. "Anyway, they call it a Psych-Print… it may be a working title; I think…."

"You found a new exploit in science fiction. Good for you, Sadic; you never cease to amaze me." He speaks dryly as he moves back to his desk.

"What has you so touchy?"

Christopher sits and settles in a disinterested plain frown, "I don't know… this day just feels uneventful." He confesses. "And the second?"

"What second?"

"The second exploit."

"Oh," he animates dramatically; he already likes to talk about her. He just met her. "I met my future wife. She is bold, beautiful, and blind."

Christopher's eyes light up, "A Triple-B affair. Did you plan this delivery?!"

"All morning till now." Christopher laughs at this. He thinks before speaking, "She is blind. This may be a challenge. You see it?"

Sadic nods, "You should meet her. She stands out easily."

"They say a man knows when he lays eyes on the one." Christopher supplies. Sadic smiles; he is pleased that Christopher does not judge him. Christopher also does not criticise him or indicate any revulsion over his very new-fangled connection. "What's her name?"

“I know one, Cecilia,” Sadic says. He leans back and takes in the name like a breath of fresh air. “Has a ring to it —Grace. Presence. Strength. Enchanting, like music.”

“It’s all in your head.” Christopher bursts his bubble.

CHAPTER TWO

CHRISTOPHER TAKES TIME OFF his schedule to visit his prospects, including the ever-intriguing Ophelia. She has cleaned up a lot. She is a few thousand tiers above the girl she was when he met her; this is the Ophelia hidden behind the imagery of rebellion. He knows now that deep inside, she is soft as mush.

Their agreement is straightforward. Christopher caters to Ophelia's expenses, and she shows him the true meaning of excellence. He keeps it comfortable, does not spend too much on her, least she forgets it is not a gift. It is a privilege, a 'paid forward'; the arrangement includes compensation for what she has been given to another that falls in her path. The other girls too. Of course, he cannot ensure payment is delivered, but the hope is good. It keeps him willing.

Three girls are off the arrangement because they dappled into a lifestyle of youthful bliss and forgot their purpose in school. That leaves Ophelia and three of the originals. Except for Ophelia, the others all go to the same university in the city. Ophelia attends a smaller privately run college on Nairobi's outskirts along Kiambu Road. This was because she never had primary and secondary schooling certifications. In conjunction with Christopher, the foundation planned with the institution to organise for her to do the crowning psychological final after doing a KNEC —Kenya National Examination Council— Secondary school exam or an equivalent. She would take the time at the college to study both. The arrangement itself is a miracle since she had proved proficient in psychology, languages, and nothing else in an aptitude test. This was how Christopher knew that she read a lot. He made it his mission to find the books that would entice her. Today he has brought a play by an English writer known for sonnets and romantic tragedies. The story is an artistic piece that she should find familiar.

He texts her that he is around and wishes to see her. She replies that she is between classes and can only make a two-minute meeting. He is pleased and can feel a jittery thud start in his chest. He stands in the hallways and waits for her enjoying the refreshment of an afternoon breeze away from the city. Christopher likes the weather here. The college has a divine locale

seemingly built in a forest clearing. The air is clean and the trees give the school a relaxing atmosphere. He considers this the perfect place to study.

Ophelia comes from his front, but a glance on his phone denies Mr. Yego a chance to watch her walk up. She is too close for him to savour the approach when he looks up. She looks pure today. Looking closely at her, he sees that she is glowing. He wants to ask who dips and sips from her pool. She is wearing a dress in emerald green, magical, and fitting. She looks unearthly. This is the first time he sees her this way. He likes it; the way the fabric curves to her form is divine. He is pleased that she has put on a few notable kilos and at the right places.

It has been two years. Before, she was just another project, some way into the good Lord's graces. Now, matters between them have changed; Christopher feels she has become more than a project —she leaves a man lusting to touch her.

"Your tailor, what if he dies?" Ophelia mentions his tailor after salutations. This is the first time she speaks of his tailor. He presumes she is speaking indirectly of his cut in suits.

He ponders this question. "I will get another," he answers seconds later.

Ophelia laughs heartily; she almost drops her books as her head falls back in the laughter.

Her laughter is different; he has never heard her laugh this way before. She is unguarded, less caring about how he sees her. He finds he likes her unhinged laugh. She could have fooled him; she had displayed this cookie hard as steel personae, yet she is human. She cries; her tears are clear, wet, and gutting. The reason he had to walk away that day he met her. She laughs; it is a glorious thing to witness. "What?" he asks, restricting himself from laughing as her laugh is infectious.

"Maybe. I believe you will attempt necromancy before you get another."

Pretty much the truth, he admits to himself after her prognosis. Christopher cannot help laughing at her crude deduction. He realises that she can be brutally honest with him. He likes it; few people in his world do. It is refreshing. "Maybe." He admits. He is, after all, the same man who has insisted his tailor take up an understudy to ensure his quality of suits remain provided even when God calibrates; the time when He winds and punches the clock. Philosophy has truth; a rich man fears inconsistency. In the same light, a god fears irrelevance. But the gods will ensure that they get their

way, because real power trumps amerced inklings of control. So the gods win, and men like Yego are forced to remember that nothing lasts forever.

When they settle from the hysteria, Ophelia asks how old the tailor is, "Sixty-four," he tells her.

She whistles dramatically. "Tick-tock. Fear the clock, my friend." She swings a warning finger at him. Then turns about to walk away.

Christopher notes fondly that she does not ask for anything; money and treats are common requests among the prospects but not Ophelia. Also, she does not say goodbye. He calls her back as he should give her the book. It is a smaller edition wrapped in black gift paper. She heeds.

"What's this?" She asks curiously, her brow rising as she receives it. He watches her feel on the package with a restricted smile plastered across his face. Her eyes grow wide as she understands what is in the wrap. "Thank you." He proudly flexes his hands and adjusts his cufflinks. The silver of his watch catches her eye. "I must go." She speaks unwillingly. He nods firmly, realising the same.

She turns and walks away. She turns and waves about a few metres off, sensing him still waiting. Soon she disappears about a corner.

When satisfied, Christopher leaves; he notes that his face is hot with emotion, his breaths are rushing, and his heart is a little more excited than before.

Always a pleasure, Ophelia... Always a pleasure.

OPHELIA is unhappy. In time she has come accustomed to the routine of her life. She does school and the mission; she lives on the school premises while in session but returns to the mission during holidays. Her schedule year-round is black and white; she knows no greys of life outside school and the mission.

She has become a standout at the mission; she attracts too much attention. The other girls and the system have taken notice of her. They treated her differently. Initially, she was the quiet girl who occasionally snuck away to smoke a cigarette, especially when stressed. Now, she is the girl that Christopher Yego cares for the most. Though Ophelia lives by routine, the few inconsistencies in her life are primarily because of Christopher Yego.

The three other girls under Yego's sponsorship have grown to dislike her. Rumours started that Yego visits Ophelia every week at the college and the gazes of disdain at the mission followed; everyone stared and whispered about the rumours when she passed. They were striking down her slow-growing confidence by half with every encounter. It started with mean words, then the occasional physical manifestations of their disdain, minuscule acts of hatred.

During the first Christmas break back at the mission, something happened, something large enough to affect the state of matters at the mission. That year, the mission buzzed with half-truth and rumour that one of the girls had relations with their most appreciated sponsor, the eligible bachelor Christopher Yego.

Within a fortnight of Christmas, the rumours had turned toxic and now claimed that the girl was pregnant and had gotten rid of it just before the break so as not to lose her place on the programme Christmas came and passed. The rumours seemed to have died down in fading whispers purged away in lyrical Christmas choral, devotional prayers and acts of mercy by the girls and nuns at the mission hospital next door. By the new year, all seemed back to normal until someone disclosed that Ophelia had been ill in the winding days of her previous semester. Reports spread like wildfires. Before Ophelia knew it, everyone at the mission was talking about her and her raunchy affair, which was essentially a bout with the flu. A far cry from a reticent trip to a back-end clinic to abort Christopher Yego's unborn child.

Innocent of the accusations, she went to the nun Margret to state her case. Margret asked her not to mind the idol gossip at the mission; there was no much she could do about it. All she could do was encourage Ophelia to ignore it all. Sister Margaret barely thought about the power she gave the bullying rumourmongers; when bullies are not checked, they gain confidence, drawing strength from the freedom and causing more harm.

The bullies started with vehement utterings meant to wind. They called her names in whispers, never mind the setting —a Christian mission house. They escalated to pulling and shoving. This went on for weeks, until what began the violent outbursts towards Ophelia, a punch in the gut.

The other three girls under Yego's sponsorship perfectly timed the incident. Ophelia was always late for lunch; she smoked a cigarette before lunch. If she disappeared when everyone was heading to the main hall, everyone would think she was away for her smoke.

While walking the hallway leading to the dining room, Ophelia came face to face with the girls. They met at the intersection. They were coming from the study halls. It did not take much for Ophelia to realise that they were waiting for her. The girls walked up to her and surrounded her, making her halt. Jostled, she took a protective stance, one leg before the other. Her hands were fisted on her sides.

"*Poko!*" Whore, one whispered. The other two giggled as they walked about her. "You think you are special?" Another asked, "All I see is a manipulative little bitch!" The girls spoke as they caged her tighter in an ever-revolving circle. She turned about, observing the girls as she tried to gauge where the hurt would come from. "*Kafiri.*" Nonbeliever, another whispered while she lightly pulled on her braid ends with a manicured hand, and then wriggled the locks free of her hold in elaborate motion. "*Msaliti!*" Betrayer, the third whispered. Ophelia's eyes were locked on the last girl that spoke. She was lost in the hate in her eyes when the largest of the three —the girl that spoke first— punched her in the gut. She never saw it coming. She fell forward, clutching her stomach. The girl got her good; somewhere on a vital organ because Ophelia thought she was dying. With the breath knocked out of her, she struggled to draw a new breath as her chest felt tight after the blow. It was hard to comprehend that the impact on her middle was why she could not breathe. Tears clouded her eyes as her throat clogged and her stomach constricted in a knot. Her whole face was hot and she imagined she was beet red. Her chest burned as she managed a restricted breath that further tightened her stomach muscles. The tightness in her middle became so unbearable an odd sensation of vagueness came over her whole form.

Ophelia had barely registered that one of the girls was holding her; this would be the girl that punched her. She led Ophelia to the nearest wall and positioned her leaning on her forearm on the wall.

Ophelia pressed in her stomach with her other hand as though this was the only way to hold her disintegrated middle together. She tried to regain her breath and release the tightness in her centre. The girls were gracious enough to wait with her.

Minutes later, a voice came up from the direction where the nuns were located. "Hey!" They all turned to it with the girls' faces masked in grave concern. It was one of the younger nuns at St. Petersburg, sister June. She studied the foursome from a distance, decoding the scene. Something

clicked in her head and she suddenly started running towards them; worry guided her actions and words, “No bullying!” she yelled as she broke the circle about Ophelia.

One spoke out angelically, “No, sister. She has bad cramps.”

Ophelia looked up to see Sister June’s highly distorted image beside her; her eyes moved to some motion to the nun’s left shoulder. She witnessed a warning finger over her lips but could not tell who it was as the girl was a little further. Her gaze fell as her knees threatened to buckle. The nun rushed to support her. Ophelia hissed, blinking away her tears.

“Is this true,” the nun asked as she peered, trying to see Ophelia’s downcast face better.

Ophelia nodded.

“Oh,” June’s voice came in an understanding whisper. She knew moon pains all too well. She turned to the other girls panning her gaze across their faces, “Okay, go. I have her.”

Almost too eager to leave, the girls scuttled away in silence. June read nothing of the incident. She led Ophelia to the dorms and never questioned what more could have happened.

That was the first time they truly hurt her, and she never spoke up. Maybe they would have never been bold enough to lie to Sister June if she had spoken up.

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ON a dry and windy Thursday in the new year, a measly week until the end of the Christmas break, Christopher visits St Petersburg.

What truly baffles is Christopher’s nerve; he comes during the nightly devotion intermission at the mission. Furthermore, he insults them further by asking them to speak specifically to Ophelia.

He says he wishes to update her on new terms regarding their agreement with the college. He lies and says he was busy working, claiming he could not find a free hour to see her earlier. For these reasons and zeros on a sheet of certified print, Sister Margret agrees to let him see Ophelia. She asks him to speak to Ophelia in the mission gardens; this is the only place they can avail of since the evening devotions are on the way.

He waits impatiently, bubbling under slightly excited, as the nun leaves to fetch Ophelia. It has been a whole season; Christmas came and went. The new year came, and he was patient —until he passed by a bookstore and

saw a paperback of Shakespeare's infamous play *Romeo and Juliet*. He caved quicker than an open mine.

It is a good fifteen minutes later when Ophelia comes out. The nun lets her walk alone. The moment Christopher sees Ophelia, he knows that something is up. She is without her usual condition. She walks up, all the while avoiding his eyes altogether. She sits on the bench provided timidly. He sits by her quietly. He feels the emotional bubble slowly creeping to pull him in. "What's wrong?" he asks softly.

"They hate me." She speaks honestly.

He can feel her emotional surge; she wants to cry but will not before him. He looks about them. The nun monitors his visit at a distance. She stands on a veranda falling into the gardens. He looks to her for answers, but she shrugs her shoulders at him. He turns back to Ophelia. "Who hates you?" he asks her. He hunches over to mirror her. He wishes for more. If only he could pull her into his arms and console her properly. This has never been their way, and the nun is watching.

"The others… we can't do this anymore." She speaks vaguely.

"Do what?"

"You must stop visiting me. You favour me over the others, and they take it out on me." She takes a silent and finite breath, "Don't."

Yego ponders her request. "No."

"They are…" Ophelia refuses to say what is troubling her.

"They are what?" He asks sadly.

She exhales deeply. "It's nothing."

Her words anger him, he reaches for her hand, but she pulls away quickly —he misses the hand by a sliver. "If you are being bullied, you should tell me. I will ensure that this kind of behaviour ends immediately."

"No!" she grabs his hand, "It's nothing. I swear." She is lying. He can read it all over her face. "What did you want to tell me?" she asks, changing the topic.

"Nothing. I just wanted to see you." He confesses —the irony.

———

SADIC and Christopher sit in Christopher's den. They replenish on the most expensive whiskey brand sold within Nairobi —*Gablo*— Christopher's drink of choice; he will spend a pretty shilling enjoying this

fine liquor even at death's door. He swore this to himself once. So far, he has managed to do so without much fuss.

Christopher appears chill in sweats and a t-shirt. Sadic has not had a chance to go home and change, he is still in his day clothes. He was summoned, called just as he was within the vicinity of his home. Christopher claimed it had been a while since they sat and had a drink and that there was no day like the present. So, Sadic heeded.

"We've come from far, you and I," Sadic says; he cuts into their quiet drinking session. Christopher nods, acknowledging his words. "I can read you best of all your family, friends and acquaintances." The drink has him feeling sanctimonious.

"Yes." Christopher encourages him.

"There is something on your mind. Do you mind sharing?"

Christopher sips his drink, formulating a viable answer to his friend's concern. They have been friends for a while, and Christopher feels pressured to share. "It's Ophelia,"

"Uh, Ophelia…" Sadic is a little disappointed that his concern rotates back to Ophelia, "What's wrong with Ophelia?" He asks, even though he sounds indifferent to the girl's plight. He raises his glass and drinks the rest of his drink.

"They are hounding her."

His words catch Sadic's attention, "At the mission? Who? The girls?"

Christopher nods.

Sadic pours himself a new drink and takes a quick gulp. "Has she told someone?"

"She told me." He is conflicted, "The girl infuriates me." Christopher reveals irritably, "She has everything within her grasp to place herself somewhere but still…."

Sadic decrypts that this is more than simply concern; it is a growing infatuation. Christopher likes Ophelia. He missed her and could not wait to see her when she was in session. Going to the mission was a mistake, and knowing Ophelia's personal affairs was an even graver issue. This incident will throw him off his game; Christopher wants to protect Ophelia, and he is the kind of man who does nothing halfway. He is a passionate man who makes mistakes when emotional. "Don't do it." Sadic speaks frankly, "You want to protect her, it's a noble thought, but it's not your place. And you don't even know how to."

“That’s not it.”

“You like her; you want her safe. You could deny it all you want, but that is true.” He has a point. “Say she was murdered this night....” This utterance earns him a stern glare from Christopher. He cannot help thinking that Christopher will find the killer and skin them alive. “I knew it! You like her. Could be the reason she infuriates you.”

“I want more…” He agrees, though doubt rides his words.

You want to marry her! Sadic can almost hear the little demon slithers into Christopher’s brain. He reads the conflict on the man’s face as Christopher shakes his head defiantly as he clumps up, refusing to share these thoughts with Sadic.

“Drink up, sleep early. We have a long day tomorrow.” Sadic finishes his drink. He rushes to wear his coat. “What will you do about the bullies? Don’t do anything stupid.”

Christopher’s answer comes too quickly. “Nothing. She will have to learn to protect herself.”

“Good choice.” Sadic qualifies as he walks to the door, “Goodnight, my friend.” he takes his leave.

Yego is left to finish the bottle of *Gablo* on his own. He has a lot to wash away.

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“PHENIUS!!!” The first girl calls out.

“Ophilias!” The second chimes.

“Ophalaphia? Phlavia…?” then the third speaks. Her voice is much deeper than the other two.

They sing out the name-calling and then laugh out loud in crude heckles. The laughing raises Ophelia from her slumber.

The dorm room holds a bevy of twelve, six beds per side and an aisle that separates the rows. Ophelia’s bed is towards the middle of the east-facing row of beds. A few other girls wake up to the racket but stay in their beds, too scared to intervene. Some turn away, afraid of being picked on next.

The bullies pat on Ophelia repeatedly as they sing in a quatrain of their versions of her name.

“Oh-Phenius!”

“Ophilias!”

“Palapholapha? Ophlavia…?”

Ophelia shields herself from the hands that pat as the chants go on. A few girls peep from beneath their blankets.

"Oh-Phenius!"

"Ophilias!"

"Philavina? Ophavilia…?"

Then suddenly there is nothing. Just quiet. A faux tranquillity. Ophelia falls for the subterfuge. They are still long enough to make her believe it is over. She unwraps her hands from her face in time to catch a bucket of chilled water with her face. The water goes into her eyes, nose, and mouth, choking her out. Doused, she tries to sit up, gasping for air. A clear plastic bag is placed over her face. She reaches for the plastic in a futile attempt to free herself. Her wet hands slide over the plastic. She tries to claw at the girls as the air runs out. They quickly hold her down, bracing her hands to her sides. She coughs a handful of water only to inhale it into her lungs. She inhales deeper, desperate for air, but draws in the strained plastic sheet. Her eyes start to buckle back into her skull.

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CHRISTOPHER trials reign heavy on his conscience. Dealing with Ophelia takes a toll. Deserting her in her hour of need weighs Christopher down. Without regard to the hour in the night, he calls his sounding board; he barely recognises the rude intrusion of Sadic's well-appreciated rest time, "Sadic, I have to do something… I cannot just sit aside and do nothing. I have a responsibility for these girls. I may not well accept it, but I do. I must care. Even in the slightest."

There is a minute-long silence as Sadic organises his thoughts. He heaves away from epithetic litany to what he would consider a very subtle reaction. "*Wee, unajua ni saa ngapi?*" Do you know what time it is? Sadic asks, a lick of grogginess evident in his tone.

"I can't just… Do you think the nun knows?"

"Sister Margret. You call me at three in the morning to ask me if the nun knows about Ophelia being bullied." He lugs sharply, "No. I do not know if the nun knows whether Ophelia," he stresses her name sarcastically, "… is being bullied."

"I should call her."

"No! Not now… Later. Say at about nine. At a time when normal people call."

SADIC hears heavy breaths through the earpiece and a drudgingly heavy sigh. He feels for Christopher. There are fewer times Christopher has shown genuine interest in a girl… but this one is not the right girl for him; she is too young and much damaged. She would only bring him problems. Christopher is A-Class all the way; stellar grades through and through, no rap sheet, never smoked a blunt. He has been well behaved and with good reason. He has an empire to protect. People depend on him —he was well on a straight path until Ophelia came into his life; she pranced about him on her wicked horse and brought out the little boy within Christopher that feels the need to coddle a small broken girl, so much furore over such a little thing. Sadic forgets that Christopher met Ophelia by his hand. If only he had never insisted on St. Petersburg.

"Christopher…it seems you have not slept since I last saw you. Take a shower and go to sleep. We will talk about this later today."

CHRISTOPHER grumbles about inconsistencies but listens. He forgoes the shower and goes straight to the bed. He is out before his head touches the pillow; into a dreamless chasm, he goes until little damsels and their problems slip into his mind.

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A SOUND wakes Christopher up the following day. He turns about the king-sized bed and rolls towards one of its edges as he sleeps diagonally across it. He pulls himself to a sitting position and stares blankly about the room and the tousled bed. His faded state is palpable; he is too tired to be morning.

Christopher is barely awake as he crawls out of bed, awakened by his chirping phone. He ignores it and goes for a satisfying morning trickle. The shower invites him in, and he takes the longest shower of his life. He takes his time to let the warm water wash away his morning staleness. When done, he forgoes his morning burst of cold water to retain some warmth for a nap afterward. He dresses in slacks despite it being a weekday. He leaves the bedroom when dressed for the second bedroom, avoiding his phone altogether.

FORTY minutes later, the doorbell rouses Yego from his nap. He looks to the bedside provision expecting to trace his watch or phone only to realise he is not in his room. He had *zombied* through his morning routine and ended up in one of his guest bedrooms. He sits up just as the bedroom door

opens. “Get up. You were right.” Sadic walks in, never minding decorum on his limits as a friend. Christopher looks at him, confused. He raises a curious brow at Sadic, tilting his head to the side. “Something happened at the mission.” That is all Christopher needs to hear. His lethargy fades in an instant as he charges off the bed.

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CHRISTOPHER trolls about like a man struck by lightning; he is peeved, alive with purpose as he walks into the St. Petersburg mission. His piqued state is easily visible in his long resolute treads, fisted palms, and the hard edges of his face. Sadic follows closely behind, seemingly chastised by the events narrated to him by the nun Margret. Worried Christopher may snap, he only told Yego a brief version of the events while they drove down.

The three bullies and the nun wait for Christopher and Sadic in a room at the mission; the girls had been sequestered there to apologise for their poor judgment and violent acts towards Ophelia to save their places under Yego’s sponsorship. Standing at the door of the room was a nun named June. Sadic and Christopher do not know her, but they have no time to meet her. Sadic, ever the gentleman, acknowledges her with a nod. She runs off, strung on emotions on the verge of busting.

Margret, Sadic, and Christopher sit across a table from the three bullies; Margret sits between the two men. She came in earlier and sat in the middle. The men merely filled the available seats. The adults listen quietly to the most coherent of the three bullies narrate the events that had ensued.

Christopher judges quietly, eyes boring into the table’s surface before him; these are the makings of a murderer in real-time. He listens to how they rudely woke Ophelia up, repeatedly hissing insults at her, then dousing her with cold water in the middle of the night. To add insult to injury, these three girls held her down with a plastic bag over her face. He cannot help his enraged body language, barely able to maintain his composure, his body judders like a compressed spring ready to blow. This barely-there restraint is a relatively sane reaction considering the events being narrated. When they start apologising, he raises his hand swiftly and effectively stops the act of contriteness; he wants details. “How many times?” he asks.

“A few times.” The nun speaks for the girls. This earns Margret a sharp side glare from Christopher. Sadic places a hand on her forearm and shakes his head at her.

“Three or four.” The speaker of the three answers.

“Eight. *Tulimuharass mara kaa nane hivi*…” We harassed her at least eight times. Another soft-voiced one speaks.

“So, eight times.

You could have killed her eight times or more; you are not sure.”

“No…” She speaks back, her voice cracking sharply as she talks in sheng, an in-between informal language spoken by Kenyan urbanites. “*Saa zingine ilikua tu kumstua*.” At times, it was just to rattle her.

“And you thought this was what, funny?!” The girl goes silent. Sniffs and quiet cries come from the two. The cold one is staring down Christopher, seemingly unfazed by their actions. He speaks his words directly at this undaunted one, “As of today, you three are off my patronage. I cannot extract you from this programme but believe me when I say you are marked.” He stands up from his seat, closely followed by Sadic and Margret. Christopher turns to the nun, “Where is she?” He asks abruptly.

A few seconds pass as the nun contemplates how to tell him no; she shakes her head at him. “I’m sorry,” she swallows hard, “You cannot see her. Family only.”

“And does she have any?” The nun shakes her head. “Come on!” Christopher grants as he turns away angrily; he must walk away before doing something he may regret. All he wants to do is park a fist in her face.

One of the three girls, with a deeper voice, comes at Christopher too forcefully. She shocks him as she starts to beg for a second chance. She grabs his forearm and cries, pleading for him not to cancel her sponsorship. Christopher shakes her off like she is a scum of the earth. “You knew the risk before, but you went ahead and ignored it. This is it; I will not supply funds to be squandered by ungrateful leeches who will end up murderous rejects of society.” She steps back apprehensively. He steps forth towards her and stares her down, towering over her. She curves backward as his power and self-importance heavily crowd the space about him. His right fist tightens powerfully as he raises it a few inches. “Now, step off before I hurt you!” the ladies in the room know that offering reprieves is not in Christopher’s nature.

“Mr. Yego!” Maggie dearest reprimands as she rushes for her girl.

Consecutively, Sadic pulls Christopher out of the room. “We should go.” He tells his friend. “No, I want to see her,” Christopher says hard-headedly, steadfast on his demand. Sadic leans over and whispers something into

Christopher's ear. Like calm waters in a stream, Yego evens out, squaring his shoulders with acceptance. He huffs two calming breaths and speaks steadily to Sadic. "I'm fine. Let's go."

"Good," Sadic says. He peeps into the room where the nun sits with the three girls reprimanding them quietly; the one hard as a rock barely reacts to the reproaching while the others cry their eyeballs out. He turns back to his friend, "Go to the car. Let me speak to the nun… maybe ask if we can get Ophelia a place outside this mission." He pauses a beat, "I don't think they will remove the others from the program."

"Ask her to let us see Ophelia."

"I will try." He promises. Christopher leaves.

Sadic watches his friend. For the first time, he feels empathy for Christopher concerning Ophelia. He is glad he remembered the magic words; 'Remember Dar-es-Salaam?'

CHAPTER THREE

THE WORLD FEELS HEAVY on Christopher's shoulders; to lift this weight seems impossible. Christopher breathes deeply, elbows anchored on his knees. He remembers Dar-es-Salaam. He recalls that Sadic was the only person bright enough to figure him out. Amazingly, he remains the only one able to read him accurately years later.

BEFORE Dar, Sadic had a flare that made him stand out; the man was a social magnet. An eye trained on him would reveal that the man was of better constitution than he had been given credit. How Sadic ended up working for him, Christopher never knew, but by God, was it not the best thing that happened to Christopher in years.

Sadic worked at the printers and as a messenger at Yego Enterprises. Once every week or so, he brushed shoulders with the mighty Yego as he delivered paperwork or was sent on errands on Yego's floor. Yego studied the man during these moments. Yego saw the value his company had neglected. He did his humbling job zealously; there was no way of not noticing the man. Also, he was likeable and without much effort. Everyone knew him. Everyone loved him. He smiled easily and always seemed to brighten the room with his entry. There was no way to dislike the man. He was careful of boundaries, and best of all, he had good relations with the subordinate staff and brought simple treats to the upper floor workers. He even made the old croon smile; this was the guard on Yego's floor. No one could make her smile, even Yego. But somehow, Sadic had enchanted the woman. They even had conversations about her children.

The man pleased Yego.

Yego watched them numerous times on the monitors in his office. The magic was real; there was something irresistibly charming about Sadic that had the world eating from the palm of his hands. This became an issue that Yego needed to fix. Given his character and popularity, it was unacceptable that a man of his calibre worked at the station he did. Of course, Yego had to fire him, but after Dar.

Christopher is an adept planner; he has always been one. Ardent with the details like he plans Armageddon. Getting the end of the world wrong is unacceptable. He treats every task with such attention. Christopher himself

had planned this one for the better part of six months, his dapple with his nemesis; Yego had a bone to pick with the man on unsettled matters from before. The location would be Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. Since the man was laying roots there, he would be situated there for a while, thus allowing Christopher enough time to plan and execute an attack.

Once, someone had snickered to him that he would have to realise that there is no better man. The existence of such a man in his cachet was simply impossible. This was the fuel that started all. The contest was for a two hundred and fifty acre plot in Kenya's highlands. The property was eco-productive, the land was fertile, and had an already lucrative farming business underway; on the property was an agri-business setup fully facilitated with greenhouses, a water system, farm infrastructure, and farmhands all year round. Best of all, a market for the goods already established. His only role would be accepting the money from sales at the end of every successful planting season. This was gold. The project was still in its ascend, with the graph still rising towards an apex of success. An old acquaintance with sights on the property wanted Christopher out of the way. He ensured just that. He sent a Trojan horse within Christopher's ranks to affect a swift blow to Christopher. The instrument was a new guard who tampered with Christopher's lift, making it freefall down 46 floors. In the incident, Christopher sprained his leg and broke his hand. He was forced to spend a month in the hospital, thus missing the bid for the property.
CHRISTOPHER remembers making the arrangements—
THEN his secretary was a young woman named Rose; she was pretty and perky with youth and vitality; she was life itself. Even with a severe overbite, she managed to ensnare even him into handing her the job with no training or experience in secretarial work. One thing he would say he appreciated about her was that she learnt fast. There was a brain behind that perky front, those firm tits, and tranquillisers for legs, she never asked twice for instruction that pleased Christopher.

"I'm leaving for Dar," he said to Rose. "Make arrangements for two; myself and the man from the print shop, Sadic. Ensure he is ready to travel by Friday. No luggage. None at all; we shall purchase what we need on the road." He would not have him pull out one of his disgraces for a suit while in Tanzania. He would have to look the part of a successful businessman. "Tell him the trip is on me."

He watched Rose's jaw drop so far that he almost broke his usually cold tinder for a gratifying laugh.

"Sadic?" She asked, making Christopher tilt his head at her,

"Do you have something to say?"

"It's just that…" she started but stopped herself. "No. I will get Sadic ready for travel Friday morning." Yego could feel her jealousy writhing, that a messenger had thus much attention from their boss. Incidentally, that was the last day they saw those revealing assortments. She started to groom for a more elevated role. She was moving gracefully from office eye candy to be a step under a corporate mistress. She claimed the power about the office, spillage from Christopher's already established superiority, which was pleasing.

So, the day came. As instructed, Sadic came dressed in slacks. Yego picked him up at the GPO ―General Post Office― bus stop early on Friday the thirteenth in a black Chrysler Voyager. Music blaring, engine raging, they started their trip by driving down to Namanga.

Their drive was calculated as everything with Yego was. Not only was Sadic company for the trip, but Yego was angling at learning about the man. He needed to know the man. A drive to Tanzania was enough time to know more about Sadic.

Sadic played into his role easily. He was your regular chatterbox. He revealed much, if not everything, about himself within the first three hours of the drive. By Namanga, Christopher thought there was no genuine base with the man until he whispered truth between sudden solemnities while looking out the window. They were waiting in line for clearance when the words were uttered, "Every man has secrets."

This sparred new fight in Yego. "Now you must tell me." Before, he was a hypocrite pretending to dislike the man because he seemed to have no secrets.

"Over my dead body."

"A man who keeps his word.

Tell me, is this secret yours and of others too?" Using the facial cues on Sadic's face alone, Yego knew that this secret belonged to many. Yego stared ahead a little while, then spoke. "You know that one may have spilled by now... There are no secrets between more than two men."

"I know." An odd silence enveloped them. Yego thought about the secrets behind a man like Sadic. He found himself morally polarising them. Sadic

on his secrets and why Yego needed to bring him to Tanzania.

Sadic broke the growing silence. “Why did you ask me to come?”

Yego speaks, trusting Sadic for the first time since the trip started with a partial truth. “We came to meet a man.”

“About what? Surely *unaweza kumumeet pekee yako*.” Surely you could meet him on your own.

“I needed a friend.”

CHRISTOPHER thinks about it... *a friend... Did I mean it, subconsciously maybe…?*

EVEN then, Christopher concluded that he must have needed one subconsciously.

Sadic looked at him differently, reading his words as part of a carefully crafted ruse. *A friend, Ha!* Yego could almost hear the scoff in Sadic’s mind.

“I am very different from you, Mr. Yego. I was raised differently from you. I don’t think we can be friends. Dude, can you even speak Kiswahili?!” Sadic asked Christopher as he tried to find a point of similarity.

“*Vyema sana*.” Very well.

Sadic’s face busted into a smile that morphed into a wide grin. He spoke no more on the subject. The music from the radio suddenly disappeared as static took over the waves. They shifted to stored music on Sadic’s phone. Before the first song began, Sadic rushed to raise the volume of the dial. “*Napenda hii wimbo!*” I love this song, he declared. Christopher wanted to correct his awful Swahili, but he stopped himself; to be friends with Sadic, he would have to learn to accept the man’s linguistic depravity. Other than that, the man was solid gold.

Six hours after arriving in Dar, Christopher had Sadic looking sharp in a suit and committing a crime. “The job takes two men.” He told Sadic. “You should charm him into trusting you. I will get the information myself.”

“Could we not pay some girls to have their way with him and take photos?!”

“No! No digital footprints to trace back to us.”

Sadic was turning red as he spoke. “We have been *chopping* money all day!” He grabbed the lapels of his suit jacket. He was wearing a designer, tailored to fit him right. Even he did not recognise himself when

Christopher was done remaking him. “I saw cameras; there is footage somewhere of us here.”

“You are a very hardworking employee. You deserve a treat.” Christopher justified pre-emptively.

“I am not a dog to be rewarded in treats.”

“You are perceptive. Why do you think you are here?” asked Christopher.

Sadic thought it over a moment before speaking. “Personality, charm…” his eyes narrowed at Christopher. “Distraction. I am here as a distraction?!”

“Good.” He pointed to the man they were after. “Now, talk to the man on the first table by the window. I will get us some drinks.” Sadic glared at him but did as told. Later, he would have words with Christopher about the difference between a friend and a loyal pet.

Six drinks later, their mark was charitable as a flogger. He offered to buy Sadic a drink, but Sadic offered to do so on his boss’s coin. “My friend here is planning to wed. He found himself a French-speaking melanin girl from London. If you know what I mean… such a man should surely be in a position to buy us drinks.” He smiled at his boss. Christopher sat there impervious to the smile and the heat within the space. He still had his tie tight at his throat, while Sadic and the other man had theirs loosened.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Their mark confessed to Sadic; he shifted his gaze to Christopher. “I feel I know you from somewhere…” he yelled, never needing to. The alcohol was working.

Christopher smiled. “No. I have one of those faces.”

Sadic winked at Christopher, who was seated opposite him and their mark. Sadic’s purpose was to ensure that the man did not figure out who Yego was. “It’s more an experience; I should try to describe her.” Sadic easily captured their man’s attention. Before beginning his description, Sadic looked to Christopher for approval.

“By all means.”

Sadic arched his back slightly, assuming a pose. Their mark was already starting to laugh. “She is delicate, her back seemingly arched every day. She has a thin waist, an apple bottom, and D cups; this one is not merely mortal; we’re talking about a goddess. She has the most even-toned skin I have ever laid eyes upon. And a magnificent pout.” He effectively folded his lips in a severe pout. Even Christopher wanted to laugh. Sadic animated cradling his hands like he held something precious. “It’s as though she generally expects his lips on her plump pair at all times!” Then, he suddenly pointed at the

man, in a more sombre tone, “Has eyes that stare into your soul, man! Palest brown globes, I ever did look into.” He shook his head and stared at the man dead in the eye. “Then she speaks...” He swerved his head and pushed away an imaginary lock of hair. “*Sauti*, mhhh!” her voice... His head bopped, and then his whole frame stilted into a frozen caricature. The man was already laughing hysterically.

A natural, Christopher could not help thinking.

“*Mon Cheri, qu’est-ce que c’est?* Pavilion…? Gablo?” Sadic pulled French complete with an accent out of his arse Christopher laughed.

“Props, my friend. Only a mad man would marry such a girl!” the man commented while reaching for his drink.

“Why?” asked Christopher.

“That’s trouble right there. You will forever be weighted, waiting for the moment she realises she is too good for you.”

“You speak like a man who knows this well.” Christopher dampened the mood like talk of the morning star.

“Years.” He sipped his drink hastily, then sighed. Then, sipped again. “Once I knew such a girl. She broke my heart properly. I learned the value of real eyes. An edge is vital; it keeps her honest.”

Sadic stepped in, “Haven’t I told you the best part yet. Her mother,”

“Let me guess, ageless. Seeming like a twin to the girl.”

“No.” Christopher laughed. He had this one in the bag. “Fat as your favourite aunty.” He watched agreement in the man’s eyes. He could relate. He nodded with a smile. “Best dammed cook you ever met. That’s the reason I’m marrying her!” They all laughed so hard.

One session bubbled into another until it was yards and yards of laughter from all three men. When one segment died down, they drank, told more stories, and laughed until the man passed out from exhaustion and drink.

Sadic pulled him to the bathroom. Christopher met them there later. Christopher came to find the man propped on a closed toilet seat, with Sadic standing by the stall door, glaring down at him. “What now?” he asked Christopher.

“Search his pockets. I need his phone.” Christopher answered as he studied the area of the club on his phone. Sadic handed him the man’s phone and wallet when he put his phone away. Christopher went through the wallet and pocketed it. He fiddled with the hand-set beat and then

handed it back to Sadic. “It has a fingerprint scanner.” Sadic did not move an inch from their mark. “This is wrong.”

“Do you know this man?” Sadic shook his head, “Or the reason we are here?” Again, Sadic shook his head. “Then do your job.” He shook the phone at Sadic, who did not take it.

“With all due respect. This is not my job.” He side-glanced the man and then back to Yego.

Christopher fought his demons for half a minute, “Fine. I will do it myself!” He grabbed Sadic by his sleeve and pulled him out of the stall. He bent and placed the man’s right thumb over the sensor pad on the side of the phone. It did not work. He went for the left thumb.

Sadic watched. He swept his hands over his head with ever-growing anxiety. Soon, he was pacing.

“I want to take everything away from him.” The phone lit up much brighter as it let Christopher in.

“It doesn’t matter what he did,” Sadic said nervously. He anchored at the sinks and watched as Christopher crouched before the man as he went through the phone. “You fight fair. You do not follow the man to Dar to steal… what is this, what are we doing?” Christopher got a second device from his inner jacket pocket and started to clone the phone. “Christopher!”

Christopher did not flinch. He placed the phones on his lap, leaned to his side, and raised his pants bottom edge to his cuff; a loaded syringe was tacked at the top ridge of his sock.

“Stop! *Wacha!*” Sadic suddenly yelled. He rushed to ensure the door was still secured, then came back and parked himself by the outer wall of the stall, hands propped on the frame, “Mr. Yego. You don’t want to do this.” He spoke harshly. “This is not you.”

Christopher grabbed the syringe and spared Sadic a couple of seconds before removing the man’s left shoe. “You do not know me enough. This could be my truest form, you... would never know!”

“You don’t want to do this,” Sadic spoke cautiously. Christopher ignored him, never stopping to consider Sadic’s words.

“About a decade ago, when I was in college, a friend and I wrote an algorithm; one that projected markets to an accuracy of 98.8%.

This should have made us a name in business then.” Christopher put the sock on the floor. He then raised the man’s foot closer to his face, “We lived

a difficult life and had accumulated academic loans… a win was something we valued more than life itself.

We got the news that my friend here was accepting proposals from tech start-ups. To qualify, we borrowed some money to register a company. We had to push so much paperwork to present our project to this man. We were stupid enough to walk into this man's office and give him everything.

He went underground after that. We got nothing from the deal except a restraining order and goons harassing us every time we tried to see the man at his office.

Sadic, this is more than just personal. I was willing to let bygones be gone, but later, when we were after the same thing, and this man tried to pull a fast one on me, again… he is more likely to win because he has been at this longer."

"Christopher, you are the most powerful man I know..."

"Not nearly, I'm not. I still have a long way to go. This..." He looked loathly at the man passed out before them, "This man took it all way. I had to start from the bottom, as though the first time was not hard enough."

Sadic watched in horror as Christopher stuck the needle under the man's right big toenail and pressed the piston, releasing the load into the man's body.

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"WHAT did you give him?" Sadic asked as they drove back to Namanga not an hour after the act.

"You can't know. Deniability. In case we are caught."

"Did you kill the man?!"

Christopher laughed. "We are not that cold!"

Christopher used plurality when defining his actions, reminding Sadic that he was an accomplice. "Then what did you do?" Sadic refused to admit that he was a willing participant in the crime.

"We gave him the beginning of a habit," Christopher answered, looking at Sadic to note his reaction. Christopher reached into his pocket and fetched his mark's wallet. He then tossed it to Sadic. Sadic went through its contents; it had an Identity Card, some Kenyan and Tanzanian notes, and a few old receipts.

Christopher reached across and grabbed the wallet. He proceeded to ruffle through it carelessly while still guiding the car. He pulled the money out, separated the cash, and threw the Tanzanian notes out the window. He

passed the Kenyan to Sadic, who promptly refused to accept the money. Christopher smirked and placed the notes in his jacket pocket. He took out all the other contents of the wallet and threw them out the window. He tossed the wallet at Sadic, who barely caught it in an uncertain grab.

"That's quality; Ethiopian leather. You should keep it."

Sadic eyed him strangely, holding the wallet like it burned his hands. "We just left him there,"

"What would you have me do? Cuddle him to soberness? Wipe his bottom and sing *kumbaya* when he rises from his coma?" Sadic had nothing to say back. He swallowed hard at the questions. "I thought so. Let it go. If you have any receipts, ensure they are burned. Remember, we were never here." He continued to drive, smiling like a psycho. "Look on the bright side; now, we have a secret," he smiled wider, "Between us."

Christopher dropped Sadic off at the GPO bus stop within the city centre. Before he left, he handed Sadic a parcel with a wad of money to buy his silence and continue the aesthetics of a successful businessman; he warned him to never step into the office wearing the rugs he wore before. He also told him his tides would shift; he needed to be ready.

The moment Christopher entered the office Monday morning, he fired Sadic.

Firing the man was the best decision for them. Yego could gift him a grander role in an affiliate programme Calculating on this elevation, he would have to ensure the man is within his highly lacking inner circle —it is hard for Christopher to make friends let alone affiliates and acquaintances. He needs his guy. Sadic was intelligent and conscious enough to know when to defy his rule. He bled charm and had a silver tongue so sharp he was unstoppable when on a roll. Christopher saw no other man fit for the role.

That morning, Sadic walked past Christopher's secretary, noting the girl's change but not showing enough concern to stop his pursuit of justice. Raging as an inferno built steadily within, he burst into Christopher's office unannounced.

Christopher smiled.

"*Ulinishow twende TZ... Nikacome. Ukanilead kuchekesha huyo msee… Nikaheed. Halafu unanitumia hii* message *ati niko fired?!*" You told me to go to Tanzania; I came. You led me to humour that guy, I heeded. And then

you sent me this message that I am fired?! Sadic threw his *Kabambe* on the table before Yego. “What the hell?!” He was angry.

Christopher, all but charmed, leaned back in his chair, “Please have a seat.” The man sat stiffly, barely contained in the office furniture. “I fired you for a reason.”

“*Juu siku skilizana na wewe* Dar?” Because I never agreed with you in Dar-es-Saalam?

“No. Because you do not fear me.”

“*Mimi si mmoja wao!*” I am not one of them! He pointed to the inner wall of Christopher’s office that sat between them and the rest of the office, “Get that right.” He started to leave, making Christopher raise his voice at the man. “Sit!”

Sadic sat silently, eyes wide, and stared at Yego.

“For Christ’s sake,” Christopher whispered, then took a few calming breaths. “Will you listen?!” Sadic stayed quiet. “You were in the wrong office. You have a fire in you that serves more hurt than any other man or woman in this office. I want you out of the printers and here on the twenty-first floor. You will work with me for an affiliate company. On paper, you will be placed in the project management team and consult for human relations. You are the connection between myself and these departments. I can’t make you a director for obvious reasons, but I need you here. Apart from your JD,” ―job description― “You will chase prospects for me.”

Sadic stilled, eyes squared on Yego. “What is the catch?”

“I need... a friend. Someone I trust. Someone to keep me in check, tell me when I am wrong.”

Sadic sat back, slouching in his seat. He quickly decided. “I will need a few things.”

Christopher laughed. “You were right,” He pulled the cloned phone out of his desk drawer and handed it to Sadic, “First, get rid of that, then we shall talk terms.

Do you wish to sign an NDA for Dar?”

Sadic laughed. “Dar...!” He unexpectedly looked clueless. “I spent my weekend trapped under a fine young thing in my single room.”

SADIC finds Christopher in a mood when he comes back to the car and finds the co-driver seat reclined at a slight angle. Christopher has an arm

pitched over his face. The music plays too loudly in the limited space. Sadic turns it down, thus marking his entrance.

Christopher sits up. “What did she say?” he asks.

“I pulled all strings I could. She said no.”

Christopher bites down.

They sit in silence looking out the windscreen. They sit like this for a while, studying all the visitors coming into the mission compound. Most turn towards the hospital.

Sadic can hear his friend’s gears turning. He offers the only good news he can at the moment. “She agreed to let Ophelia leave the mission dorm if we get her housing at the college.”

“Done,” Christopher says leaning back and reclining his seat to a laying position. “Take me home; my head is fucking killing me!” He swears as he raises his foot and places it on the dashboard while his raised knee rests on his window seal. He shuts his eyes, propping an arm over his face as he had before.

Christopher rarely drops the *F-bomb*, but Sadic knows it is serious when he does. That is how he knows not to nag. It is best to take him home. Let him handle his demons in the confines of his home.

CHAPTER FOUR

OPHELIA WATCHES from her hospital room window as Sadic's car drives off. She stands there long after they are gone looking into space. The door pulls her attention to the present as it creaks open and then shuts. She turns to see the nun Margret already in the room.

"Ophelia, you should be resting," she moves to get Ophelia back in bed and tuck her in. Margret sits by the bed and runs a hand over the girl's cheek when Ophelia settles between the sheets. "You scared us."

"They scared me." She whispers back.

"I know."

Silence reigns.

"We are making different arrangements for you. Do you mind staying at the college?" Ophelia shakes her head at this. "Okay.

Father Bemus will be here to see you this evening." Tears come to Ophelia's eyes. She turns her head away from Margret. "Oh…. it's okay," The nun assures her, "Everything will be okay. This will never happen again. It's over… shhh."

Ophelia bursts into tears while hiding her face from Margret. Margret assumes she cries because of what she has been through; this is not why; she cries because they would let Bemus see her over Christopher.

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DAYS move too quickly. Soon, Ophelia is out of the hospital and back at the mission. Her stay is brief and restricted; she sees only a few recognisable faces during the two nights she spends there.

She is soon taken to her new dwelling at the college by Sadic and Sister Margret. The college accepts a healthy payoff from Yego to rent the place to Ophelia within their grounds even when she is off session; the fine print states that she could have it as long as she is a student there. It is a small studio with enough room for a kitchenette, a sitting/resting area, and an en-suite half-bath. It is cosy —she appreciates the effort. The lightly furnished studio belonged to a groundkeeper who left when he married and needed a larger space off the college grounds for his growing family.

Ophelia walks in last. She quietly studies the place while her companions rage through it as they comment on the windows, curtains, tile… and

anything else they place their eyes upon. Frozen by the door, she feels the sting of tears in her eyes. She blinks them away as she watches the two explore the quarters. She hears them speak, but she makes little sense of what they say. All she wants is for them to leave so she can cry away all her pent-up emotions.

After what seems like an eternity, Margret and Sadic leave. Ophelia rushes to lock the door. She gives the place a one-off and then runs to her bed. She can finally let her emotions have the best of her.

She crawls onto the bed, exhausted and at the last strength. She lays her head slowly on the fluffy pillow. She closes her eyes and takes a deep calming breath. She is bathed in the strangeness of newness. The smell is in the blankets, the sheets, the pillow… It is all about her. She reaches within her bag laid on the floor by the bed and feels the inner walls of the bag. Her fingers find a small tab of menthol jelly. She pulls it out and unfastens it, then smears it a little over her upper lip and at the opening of her nostrils. She then lays back down, a bit sated by the smell of minty familiarity.

Sleep takes her away amidst sobs and dreams of her last night at the mission.

CHRISTOPHER'S concern over Ophelia is ever-building despite her untainted record at the college; his visits turn from longing to ensuring Ophelia is still alive. His literary gifts turn from beautifully written classical tales to a concrete repertoire of complex text on self-defence, self-awareness, self-strengthening, and any other I-know-am-weak-excrement-expunging guide sold on the market, and it is a lot! Yego even suggests Aikido if Karate is too much for her.

Despite his poorly expressed mental condition, his friendship with Ophelia has blossomed; they play a fair game of hearts and daggers. She finds ways to push his limits, which he finds intriguing, and he plays the greater man and finds ways to correct her misalignments.

Christopher believes his heart has stopped thrice since meeting Ophelia; he has had palpitations about a dozen times, six chills, and three worry-induced euphoric encounters. Her interactions with the rest of the world conspire against him. Whenever he hears about her meeting someone new or old, he worries that something can go wrong. He finds he has to grasp restraint when it comes to Ophelia. Even though he wants to see her every

day, if only to calm his throbbing self, he manages a day each week. The heavens grant him enough self-control to keep him away the rest of the days.

He visits on random days when his schedule clears up. One reason is that he does not wish to make his timings obvious for security; Christopher has been feeling hounded. For a couple of months, he has felt odd chills that raised his hair at the back of his neck. After that, he would suddenly feel a bizarre dullness that came over him like the shadow of a passing cloud. For this reason, he keeps his visits brief, lest his fate befalls Ophelia. A casual visitation schedule keeps Ophelia guessing; he enjoys seeing those initial moments when she lays her eyes on him, and her face breaks the tenor of institutional decorum.

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THE FIRST SEMESTER of Ophelia's third year in school is largely uneventful. Her education progresses well, and her social life has somewhat improved; she has found acquaintances within her unit groupings. Her growing confidence. Her education in general psychology makes her blissfully hopeful about a bright future.

Her friendship with Christopher has blossomed; Ophelia misses him when he is away, and she savours his visits. These visits have become the highlight of her time at the college. He constantly supplies her ever-growing library. He has reduced his supply of self-help books and started to lean back towards classical literature. He, however, could not help bring about an edition of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. At this, she simply smiled and walked off.

Ophelia loves that Christopher never overstays or pushes for more; time is flinty and it should never be wasted on shy gazes and crimson blushes. She feels that he sees her and gets her; for instance, he never pushes her even if she has nothing more to say than a hello when she has no words for him. During such times, he comes and they sit together. When the time is right, he leaves. It always feels like he knows the danger of overindulgence.

On his third visit, a month into the semester, Ophelia notices a change in Christopher; he is anxious. Before, when he came to visit, a little light shone in his eyes, which engulfed her, making her lighter. Even on the worst days, Christopher's visits always seemed to cheer her up, and when he left, she always felt a loss. Now he has her worried, with questions

swarming her mind about his wellbeing. Ophelia asks him what is on his mind, and he says he is tired and has not slept in days. At this, Ophelia deduces a hypothesis. She is not the issue. For the first time in months, everything is right with her. But Christopher is being hounded by someone if not something. He is worn, with dark circles below his eyes, and his dark eyes are dead.

She has studied this phenomenon, a man's fears; this once, this man's fears have nothing to do with her. She notes with concern that she has begun to see cracks in Christopher's perfect facade for the first time since she met him. She studied personality, and Christopher's revealed persona was one she enjoyed digging into; he would not fear anything apparent, and what would hurt him would be in his mind.

While Christopher would fear little in his life, his character, if pressed, would have a fear of his mind, underlying anxiety, and thus sleepless nights. Two principles govern sleep and wakefulness: sleep - dependent and sleep-independent circadian processes. In the first principle, if he stayed awake long enough, he would eventually be forced into sleep by his accumulated sleep pressure. Maybe, whatever hounds him will leave him or face him in his dreams. In his dreams, he could process what disturbs him on his own and rid himself of the trouble of his shadows and tiredness in a single strike. With the second principle, Christopher would function at an energised range despite a lack of sleep, being highly active but crushed by the pressure of sleep in bouts, such as the one she is witnessing. But even in this way, Christopher will still crush. He should sort himself out soon.

He leaves, and Ophelia is left wallowing in worry. She juggles school and nervousness as she awaits Christopher's next visit, anxious to discover if his troubles have left him. While awaiting Mr. Yego's visit, she receives a special visit from an old friend only days later. It has been a while since she has seen this friend, and she is eager to spend time with him. He tells her that much has changed with him and that his office is not where it once was at the Brothers of Light Seminary. He now works on the outskirts of Kiambu town ―Kiambu County. He asks her if he can show her his new office, which is less than a thirty-minute drive from her college. Ophelia does not know why, but she accepts to leave the campus with Bemus that afternoon, ignorant that Christopher may visit. She would blame it on a possession of sorts and on the weather... she truly knows not why she went with the man.

BEMUS takes Ophelia to novel grounds. She has never seen this side of Kenya before. She grew up in the city, she knows the inner crevices of the beautifully flawed Nairobi, but beyond the city limits, her eyes are as fresh as those of a child. Working on a new canvas, Ophelia savours the view. Her heart delights in this change from her daily schedule; she enjoys the drive to Kiambu, marking her memory with new commemorations of a world so close but still so distant.

She smiles a lot.

He, too, smiles, for her joy makes him happy.

They go down the highway past the main city square, then turn west and drive a kilometre off the highway. When they arrive at their destination, she watches him eagerly as he parks the car before a dull and used building that is not too old; it should be a little over a decade old. Ophelia wonders how he would end up here of all places. She follows him diligently out of the car and shuts the door while looking about, impressed by the country environs, blinded by her excitement. “Father, this place is different. What happened to your office at the seminary?” she asks as they headed towards the building entrance. He remains quiet as he leads her into the building; either he does not hear her or he hears her and does not answer.

Ophelia follows Bemus through a dingy, dimly lit hallway to a corner office on the ground floor. He unlocks the door and walks in the room first, turns on the light, and Ophelia skips in quickly. Something about the hallway gives her chills. He shuts the door behind her —Ophelia stalls by the door. The chills have become more pronounced, enough to raise goose pimples all over her forearms.

Bemus walks past her and two visitors’ chairs towards the only desk in the room. It is smaller than his old desk and cluttered with everything from books to old files, stained teacups, and old food wrappers. He goes about it and then sits on an old office chair. Bemus begins to pile up things on the desk to create a semblance of order and space. He finds his laptop somewhere on the desk; he opens its lid and starts turning it on. As it boots, he looks up at her and smiles.

She smiles back tightly. Ophelia observes that Bemus is acting strangely cagily in the quiet that follows. Also, he never answered her when she asked why his office had relocated.

Bemus points at the chair before his desk. Hesitating, she gathers courage and walks up to take the seat. She sits stiffly. She watches him type into the

computer quietly. His jaw ticks as he bites down; he releases the tension soon after, only to bite down again. She lowers her head to make eye contact, but the reflection from the screen hides his eyes from her; she cannot read his eyes. She clears her throat to pull his attention, but he continues to type, ignoring her.

She turns her head away and starts to feel an infuriation build within. When she turns back, he raises his eyes and looks at her over his glasses' top rim. "It is small... but I needed an office. I am visiting from Nairobi, and since I will be here for some time..." He speaks with his usual heavily accented voice. She always felt his accent felt a little foreign but not too far away. He could also be Kenyan... with a uniquely cultured accent. She watches as he shrugs his shoulder at her to indicate the lack of choice in his office space. She suspects he just told a lie and feels a lack of dominion over his lie.

When trying to assert her place in the world, Ophelia learned an important lesson; lie if you must, and if you do, ensure that you own your lie.

She shelves her observation and idly looks at the space. Without meaning to, she zeros in on cues, evidence of his dishonesty. The walls are new, not too used, and painted in recent years. There are no pictures or paintings of religious affiliations. Ophelia's brain fires, *show me a priest without the simulacra of Christ or His Mother Mary, and I show you a liar*. Her gaze falls on the switch by the door as she scans through with a critical eye. There are marks on it and about it, layers of sweat and dirt, a testament to human connection. This office has been in use longer than he claims. She remembers the outside of the building. *He has been here longer than he claims... Why is he lying?!* She wonders. Ophelia turns her eye back to Bemus. His gaze on the computer screen shifts from side to side as he works, never minding her. She has brief freedom to read the space some more.

Everything within the space seems office-normal but unfamiliar. She looks at the piles of books on the desk and notes with curiosity that not even one is a Christian book, just psychology and philosophy books. She scans the table and sees one thing that catches her eye. She remembers it sat on his desk at the seminary, a red pen holder. If the office is temporary, a plastic pen holder will be the last thing a man would bring along.

Ophelia feels a more substantial chill go through her. She discreetly takes out her phone and texts sister Margret. It has been a while; she hopes the nun will read her message and answer sooner than later. She inquires of the man before her. *He has been gone a while; where has he been? Has he been here all along?*

Five minutes pass. Ophelia feels her palms sweat. She rubs the palm of her free hand over the skirt of her dress. She takes a deep, calming breath that pulls the faux-priest's attention to her.

"Are you okay? Would you like some tea?" Bemus asks. She shakes her head at him. "Just a little longer. I must send this document, and then we can talk. You can tell me how your schooling is going on... okay?"

She nods. She can feel her legs start to shake. His gaze falls. She eyes her phone for a reply, but nothing has come. She scrolls down for notifications and sees that there is no Wi-Fi. She looks to see no LAN cable connected to the computer. He is playing her… unless he plans to work a miracle of the act of sending an email... which she highly doubts, he must be lying to her. He is not working; he is buying time. Her eyes flicker to the battery marker on her phone, and her face falls; her phone battery sits pretty at 7%. Her heart beats faster by the minute. She starts to think of a way to run.

Manange is a crude man with the instincts of a fox —he heard her breaths change pace and realised she had him figured out. "You were always brilliant, weren't you?" He smiles as he shuts down the laptop screen and looks up at her. His smile fades quickly.

Ophelia squares herself for a confrontation. "Why am I here?" she asks boldly.

He looks a little disappointed.

She stands up in a flash, and he is up too.

"Is it not obvious...?" Manange speaks as he turns about the table slowly, sidestepping his chair. She mimics his moves and falls in step with him in an anticlockwise motion. In truth, she has no idea of what he is talking about; that which should have been obvious seems to have evaded her. "You are my legacy." He reveals, keen on the reaction on her face. She is still clueless.

She picks up a book from the table and throws it at him. Bemus ducks it and suddenly pounces, quickly closing the space between them. Unprepared, he grabs her by the upper arm within seconds. He pushes her to the wall and draws closer until he can whisper in her ear, he does

precisely that, and the next thing she knows, she is lux as the thinnest rope. He takes away all her anxiety with a simple phrase uttered glibly.

"See, my dear… we achieved perfection. The words work!" He speaks up as he pulls away from her. He studies her with reeling zeal, pleased with himself.

She stands before him, still as a rock, her eyes flinty laced in tears. She is bound to his words. She cannot fight him; with only a special phrase, he has asked her to still, and she has. He has invaded her mind. Now she has no choice but to do as he commands.

Oh, God!

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YEARS AGO…

"WHAT IS THIS crazy man doing to my little princess, mmmh?" A tall lady spoke as she crouched despite her skin-tight dress and six-inch heels to kiss a little girl seated on the floor. The little girl smiled, looking up at her mother. The woman pulled the sensors off the child's face and dropped them on the floor. "Anthony." She frowned at her husband. "This is your child!" She dropped her case and picked the baby off the floor.

For the first time since she walked into the room, Anthony, looked up from his computer. He embodied a mad scientist as his hair sat unkempt over his cranium, a slight beard, and large metallic-rimmed glasses that rode low on his high bridged nose overran his face. "Eh?" He had not heard a word she said.

"You should be ashamed of yourself!" She yelled at him though her tone had ting of humour.

He looked to see his sensors off the child. They lay discarded on the floor where the baby had sat. "Amy, I need that baby." He hustled, trying to collect a few things from his made-up work area in their living space.

Amy walked away, leaving a trail of shoes and effects on the ground as she headed to the kitchen to grab a snack. "Not today, honey. It's playtime with mummy…" she spoke to the child, making a smiley face, "Isn't it." The child laughed. She yelled at her husband, turning her head away from the child, "Vivian?"

Anthony had followed her with his sensors and laptop. "I'm not sure. She was here…." He looked about the kitchen for Vivian as though she was an item to sit still until when needed.

Amy looked at him sympathetically. She came close enough to touch his scruffy face and tried to smooth his scruff but failed. He had gone caveman on her; she liked this version but hated it too. “You look terrible.”

He laughed it off, pulled away, placed the laptop on the kitchen island, and grabbed the baby from Amy. “Two minutes. I swear.”

The baby smiled at her father, grabbing his chin. The tickle being too much, he pulled his face away. He placed the sensors as Amy took a juice box from the fridge.

With a juice in hand, she watched her family, intrigued by the crazy man she married. When he set the sensors, he pulled the laptop an arm’s length away, protecting it from the child’s grabbing hands. He eyed his readings on the computer, utterly disconnected from the child. Amy watched. She smiled until he suddenly yelled at the child, scaring her into a crying feat.

“Anthony!”

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“MY little Ophelia,” Anthony said over the rain on a wet night in the city. They were to connect home from the city, but the rains had slowed things down that night. They stood about as they waited for the shower to lessen so they could brave it and find a bus that went home.

They were late going home after a day out, the first time in a long time. Amy had no idea how she pulled him away from his work, but they had a day off. They had visited a cultural centre south of the city whose name translated to the ‘Homesteads of Kenya’. The centre celebrated the cultures of the people who made Kenyan tribes.

The day had crept on Anthony, and he had just realised that Ophelia knew nothing of her heritage and tribe.

They had taught their daughter nothing about herself.

As the rain poured down, Anthony thought of what he would teach his daughter once he was done with this *Ophelia* business, and that was how he and Amy started fighting.

Caught in themselves, they forgot to keenly watch their daughter, who had grown into a bubbly and curious unmanageable little thing. She was playing in the rain on the street. They forgot her even though they were actively talking about her even at that moment.

“Look at her.” None of them looked at Ophelia. “Is she not the definition of perfection?” Anthony insisted.

“Her name is not Ophelia… the least you could do is call her by her grandmother’s name since you had to name her after your people!”

“It’s just a name Amy.... and... and she...” He pointed to the side where he had left the child, and his jaw dropped when he saw the child was not where they had left her.

They turned about frantic at the same moment to see her, oblivious to their hashed disagreement or their anxiety over losing her. She was playing in the rain.

Amy could not help but smile. She agreed with him on one matter; they made a wonderful baby. He threatened to end it all with his research. His little sensors and trolling his bloody laptop about recording every little thing she said and did was her problem. “You should stop. My friends think it’s strange… Anthony, your friends think it’s strange. They will take our child away from us.” She sounded genuinely apprehensive.

“Over my dead body.” He spoke, pissed that she dared speak such words. His attention was drawn out again by a swirl of pink and yellow as their little *Ophelia* played in her pink boots and her little yellow raincoat in the rain. They watched as she looked up at the sky, letting the water pour over her face. She smiled at the sky. She was happy.

“Do you think we should interrupt… it’s like she dances to the music of the heavens.” This pronouncement earned him a punch to his side. He gasped in pain, leaning slightly forward. “Okay, stop her.” He breathed.

“We will dance to the sounds of hacking; *musique de* pneumonia!” Amy said as she rushed to the girl in the rain.

Even slouched, easing from the pain in his kidney or whatever, Anthony watched as his wife talked to *his Ophelia*, convincing her to come out of the rain. He loved his family… but he loved his research too. He could not pick one over the other. She was right; he needed to ease up on the study. Erroneous speculation alone had them subject to blather. He wanted to say he could stop, but he knew himself well; he could not. He promised himself to ease up on it, it was the least he could do to keep Amy happy.

A man’s resolution rarely falls in line with the will of the powers that be; with refined tenacity, Anthony got his first epiphany. The heavens themselves opened his mind to see more. Anthony saw the hypothesis he should have been working on all along. He had been going at it the wrong way. He stood upright, his face contorted with the revelation, then pain.

“Amy…” He whispered as he ushered his wife and daughter off the street and onto the veranda of the building that offered them shelter. Their little girl smiled at him as she always did. He kissed his wife’s forehead. “I’m sorry.” He said.

She smiled at him, “It’s fine.”

They went home braving the pouring rain.

Amy thought they had settled the matter, or had almost settled it. She knew killing a habit was hard. She believed that in time he would see the error of his ways. Little did she know that night had sparked more than just a little insight into his research. His epiphany had opened new doors into the world of the unknown, with more answers to find. Anthony’s research defined his career and his work for all those years. That one night would be why she would come to hate her husband forever.

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‘*HEY…*’ Anthony wanted to say, but the cat got his tongue.

He stood at the doorway to his daughter’s room. She was older and in her second year of high school. He watched as she sat silently on her bed; she listened to something on her iPod, and her fingers idly danced about each other. This made him smile. She looked at peace in her room, safe from him. He noted that she looked thin, gangly, and almost sickly. Her body had not yet started to morph into a womanly form. She seemed younger than her actual age. She looked up a second, staring into space, and Anthony’s breath caught; she was pretty on the face. His daughter will break hearts. His gaze wandered about the room; she had made little effort to personalise the space. This had never worried them since she had always been a minimalist. The only thing that pulled attention to a little bit of who she was the Christmas lights about her dressing mirror. They shone beautifully. Ophelia stuck a single photograph of their little family on the mirror. He saw more about his daughter in that moment than he had in her entire life. He had questions about that day; he vowed to ask them. They would bring insight into Ophelia’s actual character.

Sensing his presence, she turned to the door as she relieved her ears of the earphones. With her face solemn with the paleness of death, she faked a brief smile at him, and then it was gone as soon as it came.

“One more time.” He told her. She twisted her mouth to the side, held it there, and then narrowed her eyes to him. “I promise.”

“Does mum know?” He shook his head at her. They remained still, in contemplative silence; each knew the secret’s magnitude and dreaded the consequences.

Anthony pointed at the mirror. “You should have more photos there, friends… acquaintances, crushes. Anyone really. I don’t care.” She looked at the mirror and smiled briefly. “And what would we talk about?” She was smart. She read his actual question from his words.

“I don’t know… girl things, experiences, life.” She laughed at his suggestions, making him smile sadly.

“Dad, I don’t know who I am. I’m seated here listening to static because I don’t know what to listen to.”

Silence.

“I know it’s a lot… just one last time. I promise. I’m about to find the yoke.” He spoke. He pleaded with her to help him.

“You said that last time.”

“This is it. I swear.”

More silence.

“Your *‘Yoke’* will be the death of me.” He almost laughed, though there was nothing to laugh about their conversation. He could see the gears turn in her head. She could not deny him because he was her father. He always had asserted himself as an authoritative force in her life. She was weak to him. She had no backbone when it came to him... And he knew it. He took advantage of it. He could see her already accepting even before she spoke. “I will tell mum.” She threatened, “If….”

“I know, “

She got off the bed and grabbed her coat. “Where is mum anyway?”

“She had to work late, again.” He cleared the doorway, letting her pass.

“Think she cares about what we are doing?” She asked, looking up at him for an answer. He turned off her overhead lights leaving the Christmas lights on. “She would skin me alive if she knew.” They cleared the doorway, and he shut the door.

“You owe me big!” He laughed. “I’m gon’ cash in big time!” she swore.

He laughed some more. Anthony had set up a small workspace in the family guestroom outside the main house next to the garage. With the room mostly empty except for a table and a few handy chairs, he had room to think, create, and experiment with his theories. He had a car battery there; his subject read little of it. She forgot that Anthony’s methods were

scientific; he liked to see his theories come to life. Too bad he could not share them with anyone, not yet. Ophelia was the only one who knew.

He sat her in a chair next to the battery. She was a little on edge, in the throes of an impending panic attack. This happened every time, after the thought of her growing little stash of money faded and the uncertainty of her father's experimental ways became evident. He wanted to calm her and ease her into the day's session, but he was anxious. That was it; it had to be the day. There was no other day to finish his research. Amy was close to find out about his private time with their daughter, and he could not risk the love of his life for anything. He had told himself this all day; he was ready to end the experiments as soon as he had definitive proof of his working theory.

Ophelia turned her head, saw his crude connection to a car battery, and her breath hitched. Anthony had elevated from a collective of twelve D-Size 1.5 Volt batteries. "Dad…"

He cut her short, "It's okay. I will not use more than what's enough, I promise."

"You promise a lot." She chose to distract herself from the present by picking on his faults.

He knelt before her, then placed her wrists on the armchair and pressed down on her knuckles, insinuating that she grabbed onto the edges of the chair's arm. She did so without fuss. She looked up to him and waited. He sat back on his knees and looked up at her. They shared a quiet moment. "I mean it. Everything will be…."

"Then life happens."

He laughed sadly. "Life has its ways.

Shall we?" She nodded. "What's your name?"

"A…" Ophelia began.

"The research..." He amended, and she nodded apologetically.

"Ophelia."

"Good." He recorded this on his laptop. "How old are you?"

SIX hours in, and they were still at it. Anthony could see tire in his daughter. She could barely keep them open, but he continued to prob. "What was the key?" *Please*... He wanted to beg, but he had to remain in

control, in charge of the experiment. If he did not, he would ruin everything.

"I don't know the key."

"We talked about this. We mentioned the key not three weeks ago. You said you understood what it was. Think back. Isolate that day. That memory: you wore a red dress, black shoes….

Find the crucial within the chaff."

At some level, Anthony was proud of his daughter, his heartbeat faster by the minute with the anticipation of ending the experiment. The theory held. He just needed consistency. She had to maintain her position, despite the threat of torture. He believed it was without his daughter's character to hide something and suffer the consequences of the secret.

He was about to crack the *Ophelia Theory*.

She shook her head at him. "Dad… I don't kno…."

"Ophelia, remember. It's your brain. You decide what's important. Find the key!"

His fingers moved before he allowed them to. He pressed the button that unleashed a surge of current. The current went through the wires via a step-down transformer and then to the chair she sat in. Anthony electrocuted his daughter to confirm that his theory worked. He did not have to, but he did anyway.

Ophelia ground her teeth, untethered, and fell to the ground, disconnected from the current. She went into shock; shakes and spasms raged her body. Her eyes went white as her eyeballs sunk back into her skull. She convulsed repeatedly.

Anthony grabbed her and protected her from herself. He barely reacted emotionally or otherwise to his daughter.

Anthony did not hear Amy park her car. He did not hear her heels clicking as she walked up to the door and opened it. He did not hear the hinge creak as the door fell open. Amy had stood there for more than thirty seconds staring in horror at her daughter convulsing.

Anthony turned when he suddenly felt a force come at him hard. It was too late as Amy had already raised her bag at him. The bag struck him across his face, a buckle scratching his skin at the cheekbone.

"Tony! What the hell did you do!!! Oh-My-God!" She yelled at him as she pressed forth, dropped her bag and reached for her daughter.

Anthony pushed her away. “It must run its course. It’s about done.” He spoke so high-handedly as though it was not his sixteen-year-old daughter convulsing on the floor.

Amy looked around the room as her daughter’s convulsions simmered into shakes, reading her husband’s workroom. Her face marred with horror, and she turned back to Anthony. She was seething venom. He held their girl by her shoulders. Her eyes slowly opened as her breaths began to even out, “That’s its baby,” Anthony whispered. “Just breathe.”

Amy hit him again, “You ass hole!” his voice reminded her of a broken promise, “You promised!” She hit him again, this time with a closed fist arousing his anger.

“Enough!” He barked at her.

At that, Amy backed off. She took hesitant steps backward as though his outburst physically hurt her. She quietly left the room.

“The key, baby?” Anthony asked. No reply came, just laboured breaths.

All his attention on his experiment, Anthony failed to hear Amy coming back into the room.

She raised her hand and pointed a pistol at her husband, at his head. “Get away from her.” She hissed. Anthony ignored her. “Get away from my daughter!” She screamed.

“The key, baby?” Anthony asked again as Amy came about them. She braced her shaking gun-wielding hand with her other hand as she pointed the gun at his face. Even with the gun aimed at him, all his concentration was on his Yoke; he still needed answers from his subject. Ophelia shook her head at him, seeing only him. She whispered in incoherence. “You don’t remember?” He asked. The girl tried to nod, but she was too spent. She gave him a prolonged wink. “Good job, baby. Good job.”

Amy sobbed quietly. With the safety already pulled, she pressed the trigger, and the gun went off.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHRISTOPHER WALKS out of his car and takes his usual long strides to the reception to register himself as a guest of Ophelia's, this is the norm at the institution, and he finds he never mind doing it. After he puts his name down and signs in, he texts her about his arrival. Typically, she replies almost immediately; he gets no prompt reply today.

He strolls out of the office to save himself from the pairs of eyes at the reception, those eyes that deduced lewd misconceptions, feeding mouths that spread rumours. He stands outside while waiting for Ophelia's reply. Ten minutes pass and still no message comes.

Christopher tires and decides to look about their usual spots; she is not in the hallway leading to the garden-sitting area beside the reception area nor is she at the parking lot waiting bay, he looks by his car to be sure and she is not there; just his driver —Tom— looking curiously at him while stepping out of the vehicle. He doubles back the way he came, back to the reception, anxious. She is not there. He calls her phone —this is the first time he has had to call her— her phone goes to voice mail.

He swears, panic rising fast. He runs into the office, "Where is she?" he yells, his voice booming within the limited space. The two women in the room look up. The younger of the two, the secretary, knocks over her coffee. As she rushes to pull paperwork away from the spreading liquid while pushing the liquid over the edge of the desk with her other hand, the second woman, the older of the two asks, "Who?" She is not delighted by his tone. Christopher rushes to grab the visitor's book. "Sir, if you please..." The secretary tries to calm him, but appeasing him seems unmanageable. "Ophelia. You have a student here by the name of Ophelia. Where is she?" He fires, and the girl cringes. She shrinks smaller in fear. Her face wrinkles into a horrified repose; she cannot offer him anything more than fear. She finds the strength to call the security office at the gate and then wedges herself into a corner of the office. The second woman in the room stares at Christopher wide-eyed, waiting for security to fix him.

Christopher sees no help coming his way, and goes about the matter his way; he takes the visitor's logbook, goes through it to see who has recently

visited Ophelia. He scrolls intently for her name on the student's column, finds her name, and then scrolls left to see who visited her.

The chaos in the room turns into a distant murmur as he reads a name he never wished to have affiliated with Ophelia again. Christopher blinks twice, eyes fixated on the words written in heinously bold lettering.

I should have told her. I should have denied her... God! I should have... Even his thoughts fizzle to incoherence as his vision fails him for a second or more. He shuts his eyes and tells himself that he must have imagined it. The man would not have the guts to follow her here. He opens his eyes and sees there, right before his very eyes, hand-printed and in bold red ink, the name Bemus Manange.

Christopher blinks twice. He holds his eyes shut in the final blink and opens them firmly to confirm that his eyes do not deceive him.

'Fr. Bemus Manange 2.34 PM'. A comment reads at the edge of the page; 'The student left at 2.56 PM'.

Christopher steps back unsteadily. His back collides with a security guard's chest as he rushes in. Christopher sees sloshes of black in his vision as he tries to understand what is happening. She left…. *With him...?!*

He remembers a chilly Saturday night…

———

A FEW WEEKS AGO…

THE prime Saturday night news rang a familiar name, Bemus Manange. Christopher sat up the moment the Priest's name resonated in his space. It stained the prevalent serene. He listened,

"The former priest turned psychoanalyst spoke to us at his office at Aquinas DANA University. He speaks of the importance of classical conditioning in children to help them have a positive attitude towards school." The man said, "If children hate school, they will not perform to the best of their ability. But, if they come to associate school with creativity, blissful interactions, and fun learning, they will perform...."

Christopher got carried away in the broadcast, but a phase called his attention, 'former priest'?! He dialled the nun Margret's number; she picked up on the fourth ring. "Hello." He muted the TV.

"Good evening."

"Good evening, how do you do?" she asked.

“I’m well, thank you. I have a question,” before the nun allowed Christopher to ask, he proceeded, “The priest Bemus was discontinued from the order, or did he leave of his own volition?”

He heard the nun take a deep breath. “He was discontinued.”

“Why?” Christopher needed to place facts with his initial dislike for the priest,

“I do not know the details; he may have put his needs before his work in service to the church.”

Christopher pondered her words. The line felt cold as the silence sipped to Margret’s end. “Is Ophelia safe?” Yego asked.

“As can be. Last time I checked, Ophelia had not been in contact with Bemus. Why are you asking this now? It is a little late, don’t you think.” He read the double meaning and chose to go for the more straightforward question.

“Do you have prayers to go to?” He asked sardonically,

“I do. Are we done here?” The nun had a bite.

“One more thing. How long since he left the order?”

“About a year and a half.” *Safe to say, he is not going back*, Christopher deduced. He thanked the nun and hung up. He sat back, slumping deeper into his love seat.

Despite the backdrop of the news, he found himself analysing the man’s name. *Bemus*... He had heard this word before and not in the context of a name. *Bemus*... He got his phone and went to the Google search page. He typed the name; it showed him an error in spelling, correcting him by adding an ‘e’ to his provision.

‘Bemuse (V) to bewilder or puzzle.’

He chuckled but held the rest of the laugh with herculean strength. “God bless your mother.” He prayed as he watched a mute Bemus speak. The man’s hands animated wildly as he spoke. For some reason, this fascinated Christopher to continue watching.

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“FIND her...” Christopher whispers. He barely hears the protocol rant by the security guy directed at him. “Find Ophelia!” He suddenly yells as he runs out of the room in need of fresh air since the air around him grows stale and thick by the second.

“She left with a man. ‘F-R’ Bemus Manange.” He hears the guard speak to him within the reception room. “F-R for father? The man is a priest...”

Christopher grits his teeth. He shakes visibly. He partly steps back in. “The man is not an actual priest. He was discontinued from the order over a year ago!”

The secretary exclaims in shock as she picks up the receiver and suddenly calls the police in command of herself. “Hello...”

Christopher walks away. They are no help. His mind drifts to other ways of getting Ophelia. She could have her phone, even if it was dead. He hopes that she has it with her. He calls the number of her service providers. He must go through the charade of a few command keys, but he is soon connected to a customer care agent. To help Ophelia, he would have to be smart. He assumes control as he does on everything he finds dear to him.

Bemus picked the wrong victim to prey on.

———

CHRISTOPHER is raving, chest pumping like a raging bull. His treads are quick and angry. He wields a Beretta in conspicuous chrome in plain sight in his hand.

He hates Bemus; he wants to kill the man, believing there should be no pardon for such filth. His belief was deeply rooted in losing a friend to suicide because a priest felt a little touchy with his alter boys. Christopher, then a protestant, vowed never to watch the same happen to another. Let alone his precious Ophelia. *The nerve…* The man should worship a favouring supreme, for Christopher swears he will end him if even a hair is loose off Ophelia’s head.

Christopher bumps into a lady in the thin, dimly lit hallway of a shabbily built business building a few minutes from Kiambu town centre. She looks like a tenant; he can tell by her stance ―she carries herself with pride. This may be her first lease. “Bemus.” Christopher grants.

“*Offisi ya mwisho,* side *ya* right.” The last office on the right. Christopher walks through without as much as a thank you.

Seething something fierce, Christopher bursts into the office gun, pointing at nothing. He places his mark and recalibrates, pointing the barrel at Bemus. Shocked by the sudden intrusion, Bemus turns to the door and frowns at Christopher, his face a ghoulish resemblance to the devil himself.

Hostility arcs over the two men. For a few seconds, they are locked in a brief impasse.

Christopher looks away, trusting his Beretta to keep Bemus in check. He reads the scene. Bemus stands on the side of his desk with a notebook in hand. Ophelia stands before Bemus, pressed to the wall, wide eyes on the man like she is frozen in time. “Ophelia,” Christopher calls out to her. She does not turn to him. Her eyes are still set on Bemus, who slowly moves away even with Christopher’s gun barrel still levied at him. From the corner of his eyes, Christopher sees Bemus slip the notebook into his pocket, inch behind his desk gradually, and raises his hands in surrender. The man falls further into Christopher’s peripheral, freezing for a couple of seconds when Christopher jerks the gun at him, eyes still set on his woman. “Ophelia!” Christopher calls Ophelia as he makes his way to her. Bemus gradually inches away... soon, he is beyond the line of fire.

Ophelia’s gaze turns about with Bemus until her eyes fall on Christopher. She is waiting on Bemus to break her spell, but nothing happens. Christopher slips his hand behind her braids and caps the back of her neck; he looks her deep in her eyes, his gaze shifting from one eye to another, trying to read the unreadable.

“Ophelia. What’s going on? What has he done to you?” She tries to speak, but the words will not come. Her eyes start to well up in frustration.

Christopher’s phone rings and suddenly she is present. A purl of awareness surges her into a fit of hysteria. Christopher hears the door bang shut, marking Manange’s escape as Ophelia tumbles into his arms.

It takes Christopher all of fifteen seconds to realise that the inferno that overshadows Ophelia’s cries is his chirping phone. He puts the gun in its holster and grabs his phone. “Yego. Speak.” He talks into the receiver with frosty brashness. It scares his caller. It is the nun Margret.

“Mr. Yego. Have you heard from Ophelia...? I got a text from her...” Her voice shakes as she starts to sob. “I didn’t know he would reach...”

“She is fine. I have her.” He hangs up and looks down at his withered bud, which he failed to protect.

Minutes later, Christopher sits Ophelia in his car. There is just him, no driver —he drove himself for the first time in a long while, for he feared he would commit a crime, thus spared his driver the fate when push comes to shove; lessons from Dar’. Soon, he has them driving through Kiambu town as they head towards Nairobi County.

Christopher tears through the road like it failed him in some way. He proves the grander master.

APART from his dangerous driving, Ophelia feels a little jittery because Bemus has inculcated God's fear in her. He can control her. This type of psychology is new to her; she had thought it was science fiction, but now, she lives it.

OPHELIA has this lost puppy look on her face. At intervals, when Christopher looks over at her in the co-driver's seat, he sees the little girl he met in St. Petersburg. His fist connects with the steering wheel, and she jumps a mile. This gives premise to his sudden outburst, "What were you thinking?! I told you, part of the deal included being careful." He swerves the car and misses an overtaking truck by inches. The vehicle slowly accelerates down a slope with a curve.

OPHELIA cannot look away, let alone draw a proper breath.

"Never let your guard down. You placed yourself in harm's way. What if I never had the brains to think and call the network?! What then?" He asks her sternly, looking at her and waiting for an answer. Shockingly, he expects her to answer.

The road! She wants to say. Her eyes are glued to the bend up ahead on the road. *He is driving right at it!* "Christopher!" She yells. He turns in time to veer the car and align it in their lane. Ophelia shuts her eyes and grabs the dashboard with both hands anchoring herself.

"You are supposed to be the smart one!" he bellows.

The car keeps on. Ophelia cannot feel herself anymore. *Something… something is wrong… I can't…* She struggles to draw a breath. As though he reads her mind, Christopher parks by the road at a rough halt that jerks them forward and then sideways. As the engine dies, Ophelia leans back and breathes deeply. She is grateful for the still from motion.

In a tone, his range shy of yelling, he curses at her, "I refuse to believe that you are a regular Calamity Jane." She does not appreciate his condescension; her eyes fall open. She is surprised. *His tone…* he speaks to her as though she is a child. This is a personal affront at best. She is not sure she can stand this Yego. She reaches for a cigarette from her satchel, her breaths coming hastily. Fingers shaking, she manages to trace one stick. All the while, Christopher eyes her heatedly; she wonders why, yet she is the victim here. The moment the stick touches her lips, he yanks it out and throws it out his open window.

“You do not smoke in my car!”

She does not even have a light, for heaven’s sake! They are in a deadlock with steel gazes planted on each other. Her gaze turns blank as she becomes aware of her retreat; she can feel the features of her door biting into her back. With her left-hand fingers, she starts to reach for the door lock. She traces it out. She hopes to escape, but her gambit is discovered too soon. He senses the plot, and child proves the door. Seeing no way out, she breaks. “He can control me! He curved thoughts in my mind, and my body followed. I have no idea how but it happened.”

LIES. “That’s impossible!”

“Don’t you think I know that?!” She is heaving again. She runs her fingers through her braids.

He watches her break into millions of pieces, the manifesting of hopelessness, first anger, then the extraction of a soul. She crawls deeper into her hole. She has no tears, no shakes… grows dead by the second. He sees that he was wrong. He swears to learn more of this Bemus. He, too, is a little riveted by the afternoon’s events.

When she looks coherent enough to take questions, he asks, “Do you need the college environment to complete your studies?” She shakes her head without a second to ponder the answer. “I’m moving you to the house in Solei, Muthaiga.” She does not ague. The silence grows in the cavity of the car, making the space seem so small, to unfathomable proportions. Christopher breaks it. “Are you okay? Did he touch you?” She shakes her head at him. “Good,” he tries to smile, but the smile does not touch his eyes. “Let’s get you home. You look worse than I feel.” She chokes on a chuckle. It, too, does not touch her eyes.

Christopher starts the car, driving a lot more carefully than before. Soon, Ophelia falls asleep, lulled by the soft murmur of the car’s engine. He also believes that she sleeps because she is exhausted by the tumultuous events of the afternoon.

BEMUS is at Ferthono offices early the next day. Whenever he comes here, it feels like the first time. He loves the building; it is a marvel to be appreciated. He is also amazed by the area the building stands in. It feels like a post-modern architectural hub in this area of Nairobi called Upper Hill.

Today, he stands before Ferthono's board. Bemus hopes to convince the board to bring Ophelia in, that it may be in their best interest. They must record the findings in real-time as they happen. Though twelve sit on this conglomerate, eight men and four women, he has his mind-set to convince just one. He knows the most important of them all is Vivian Ntalale Oleng'ani. She is the deciding factor. Vote or not, if Vivian is on board, three-quarters of the lot will follow.

Duly noted is the absence of Henry.

Bemus speaks after the salutation protocol. "We should bring Ophelia in; continuity is needed. I see progression in her superior personality. She oversees more than we allowed her." A few awe about the room. Vivian, though, is not impressed. "Separating the memories of the two personas is the first step… She appears to be tapping into the emotional state of the lesser personae."

"Maybe joining the two projects was not such a good idea. What's her relationship with Mr. Yego?" A female on the board asks.

"She likes him a little more than she should."

"And I thought you said her selected character personae would never accept him as a viable mate, your words not mine."

"Ophelia would not, but the inferior would."

"How much time do you need with her?" Vivian asks, and the room turns its attention to her.

"Three months."

Shock registers on a few faces. A man speaks up, "He will notice three months. What about Henry's research? He may not be present today, but I assure you he will not be pleased if we disregard his investigation."

"Am I to understand that Mr. Yego has formed no bond with Ophelia; he will let her go easily for three months?" Vivian asks.

"Have you not heard? He came to the set-up in Kiambu brandishing a firearm in broad daylight." Another lady speaks. A few in the room giggle and erupt into ovations like teenagers. The quietest female turns crimson in a severe blush; she looks just about to swoon.

"So, extracting her may be difficult," Vivian says.

Bemus affirms this, "Yes. In addition, he moved her to his house in Solei, Muthaiga." Bemus reports. Some board members whistle and laugh as most board members fall into mini discussions over the matter.

“Okay, okay… that’s enough!” Another man speaks out. He looks to Vivian for guidance. “Madam, what do we do?”

"Develop an extraction plan for much later, let Mr. Yego and Ophelia settle into a routine… let their guard down. Only then will we grab her. Also, ensure that Mr. Yego is clear of the vicinity before you go in.” She looks about the table for an objection and sees none. She goes on. “Collect our other subjects for further evaluation.” Bemus starts to turn away when she calls out, “And Bemus… are you sure the words worked?”

Bemus’ face breaks into the widest grin, “Like a charm.”

“Before the extraction, I want to witness the application of the words to the other subjects. Work on that for now. Ladies and gentlemen, it’s safe to say that the *Ophelia Theory* works. Congratulations are in order.” Faces in the room light up as Vivian stands up to leave. She rushes to her office. BEHIND the visor of heavy walls shielding her from the rest of the office, Vivian leans heavily on the mahogany door and lets the emotions surging from within bubble out. She takes deep breaths meant to calm her. She fists her shaking hands as a sheen of sweat beats the surface of her forehead, and tears come to her eyes.

“Anthony, *nisamehe*…” Forgive me. Tears spring a leak, and she cries while beating her chest remorsefully.

Vivian has been ambitious since her formative years when she sprouted breasts and realised the value of the little lumps on her chest. She knew well the woman’s place in her society and knew just how to flip the script when she found out that her face could be considered a little more than just average. She was thin as a stick, but she found that a dress with a rounded skirt could give her more definition and give the illusion of wider hips. She was dark as coal, but then she realised that a few too many days indoors and some skin-lightening cream would give her a lighter shade. Crippled by life itself, born of a poor background, she had to settle down to work for her cousin Anthony and his family as a home keeper to make ends meet. She called him her brother. She may have been an excellent home keeper, but only time and the perfect temptation would prove the woman’s worth.

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SOLEI, MUTHAIGA.

“ARE you Catholic?” Christopher asks Ophelia. They sit at his dining table, where she likes to read. He has a library in his study, but she hates the space

and says it is dark and gloomy. The shadows lark too strongly, thus giving her nightmares, so she prefers to study at the dining table instead. Christopher likes to think it is because she hates to be alone, so he sits with her sometimes, today being one of those days. “Do you practice the faith?” he presses. He wants to know more than what his file on her says. This file was prepared for him by the nun Margret. It is vague and half-complete, as though no one was paying attention to the details. Everything is seemingly inconclusive, apart from her health —her medical records are detailed and up to date.

“In actuality? No.” Ophelia answers, then turns a page of her book.

“No?!” Christopher asks, incredulously. He knows he is distracting her, but he cannot help himself; he has nothing more to do with work done for the day other than poke at her all evening —he had a wholly impure thought earlier in the day; this left him a little wanting, and the idea of sin rushed into his mind, leaving him a little touchy on account of rarely partaking in primal activities lately. Also, the fact that Ophelia came to him through the church. As in ‘The Church’; the Catholic Church—

Christopher wants to judge her, curse her out for being a non-believer and reaping the benefits of a whole religion. Despite her answer leaving a bitter taste in his mouth and profane lingua not being beyond Christopher, he quietly waits for her to explain herself. Even he answers to God only… And, indeed, God sees why he is irritated. After all, she has been through, how could she not practice the faith that sponsors her somewhat fortunes? He ignores the pains that came with those fortunes; this could be considered churlish.

“You seem pissed.” Ophelia commentates, her face twitching with amusement. She looks up at him.

“I don’t understand. Is it not a requirement?”

“Are God’s people all of the same religion?” Ophelia asks. Christopher does not answer. “I fell in line. In need of help, I got it despite my belief. The mission helps non-Catholics and non-believers too.”

“Are you a believer...?”

She looks away from him. “I would not know,”

He reads it for what it is. She suddenly appears ashamed of her confessed uncertainty. Shortly, a spark appears in her eyes, “Are you judging me?”

“No judgement here. I, too, barely know my place in this world concerning faith.” *But I guess I believe in God.* He could not say it out loud.

She smiles shyly.

Silence rears its head, knocks them both into an awkwardness they are unprepared for.

Christopher breaks it unceremoniously, jumping to his point. “So, do I have to wait till marriage to lay with you?”

To this, he earns her gaze as her jaw drops. She feels a rise in temperature in the room. Her ears burn hot. She squirms in her chair. “What do you mean?” she asks.

———

AS mandated by no one, Christopher and Ophelia share a different bond from what they had before. They fornicate. Go against the Father’s list of conditions; these same laws were written in the Old Testament. The rules are set to be followed by man, who profess the faith, believers —but these two barely acknowledge their stand, let alone understand it.

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SIXTEEN minutes is all Christopher needs; a minute over a quarter of an hour. That single minute is the only time during the session that no part of his body will not explore Ophelia’s.

He grabs her so quickly, and she yields, letting him hold her against the wall. He goes for her neck, nuzzling his lips and lightly biting the skin, blessing the slight pinch with chaste kisses. He nuzzles here and presses his lips there... he nibbles and sucks his way into her head. Soon after, she blanks out, unaware of what is going on.

Her head falls back, giving him full reign. Her eyes close as odd dizziness washes over her. She clutches to him, feeling her legs give in. Growing all the needier with possessive undertones, he grabs her waist, crushing into her, making her moan. He moves, wriggles to place himself between her legs.

WHEN settled between her legs, Christopher vaguely recognises the feel of her legs coming up about him to secure a grip around his waist. He goes for her lips again, sharing her breath, then another… they kiss for what feels like an eternity.

When he feels the strain too hard to handle, he leads them to the nearest surface he can think of, the couch. He does not want to take her against the wall as if the couch will offer them both the slightest of dignitary bliss; at

least, it will be more comfortable. They move again, covering the distance, lips still locked.

Christopher lays Ophelia on the couch, looks down at her desirable form, and forgets the nuances of protection and inquisitions of birth control. He dives in raw, vaguely prepared to deal with any consequences later.

FOR two seemingly self-professed non-believers of sorts, they feel the weight of their actions sit heavy between them. They are sleek in sweats, both half-dressed as they had rushed to share in each other, being naked an afterthought rather than a necessity. Chests heavy, they work to catch their breath, tracing themselves from a state of euphoria. Like two folly-plagued beings on a crane hanging for life over the pits of hell, Christopher and Ophelia are simmering seemingly before throngs, ready for judgement They face those earlier ignored nuances and inquisitions.

CHRISTOPHER was rough, seemingly too yearning ―in a good way, he chased after what he needed, pulled her with him in the rise to climax in a struggle like no other. It was not a matter of dominance. It was clear who was in charge… It was a matter of the chase, though, both needing something and going for it.

"Are you clea...?" Ophelia begins to ask, and he cuts her short.

"Yes." He speaks with an intense edge.

"I'm clean." She tells him. He knows she is clean because her medical records sit in the lowest right drawer of the desk in his den; he needs to know whether she is on any birth inhibiter. "Birth control?" He asks.

She shakes her head.

At this, he sighs and rushes to stand; he leaves her alone on the couch.

FEELING exposed, Ophelia grabs at her clothes and covers her exposed bits as Christopher walks to the door. Ophelia wonders if he is not pleased with her. A tear starts to slip down her face; it is not an emotional tear, merely a reaction to their prior activities, or so she hoped. She rushes to wipe the discomfort of the wetness.

Sensing her mood shift, he abruptly turns back, only to kiss her lips briefly. She feels a lack of commitment in the kiss. Christopher leaves after that. He goes before she can say much about their next step. Ophelia sits there, amazed that she is waiting for him. She wants to wring him out, clutch her nails to his neck, and claw his tendons out. *What an ass,* she swears as she gets off the couch.

She hears his car engine come to life. He is leaving. She rushes to the nearest bathroom feeling a spillage of emotion coming on. Sin is clear even for a non-believer —she gave in and too soon to Mr. Yego; she did exactly what the girls from the mission had primed, their words becoming a premonition of sorts. Then, she thought they were belittling her, carving off her pride, and reducing her to the role of a body for Mr. Yego.

At the moment, she *has* proved as much.

———

CHRISTOPHER drives away from the house. The nearest shopping centre is in the Aga Khan Area, approximately eight kilometres from Solei. He hopes that at least a chemist in the area is open. He steals a glance at the dashboard clock... it is 11.30 PM. His fist meets the steering wheel, but he laughs coming to terms.

He remembers what he has done; his face suddenly pales. He remembers how good it felt, and the colour rushes back to his face. She is no newbie, though she still holds some innocence. He wonders again for the second time since meeting her, *who the hell sips from her life stream!* He remembers her moans, whispers, and shy smiles. He hides his smile from no one as he is alone in the car. Soon, Christopher starts to laugh. The laughter lifts from his gut, up and out of his throat. Soon he is laughing away, nodding at the empty road before him. He cranks the stereo.

He enjoys the spoils of his conquest.

———

BY the end of the week, Christopher and Ophelia have unlimited access to pleasure at its best. They have grown accustomed to their sin, and it has already morphed into a lusty craving to be with each other at all times. As they welcome the new month, a chilly July, Christopher thanks the stars for giving him a new life; moving Ophelia to the house was a good call. In this way, she is predisposed to him and him alone. However, this access comes with limitations; they are subject to life and its licences; life must come first. She has school, and he has work.

Christopher works a lot; he wants to be able to provide for Ophelia; the drive pushes him to work harder and smarter. He gives his all when at the office so he can dive into the pleasures of life when he gets home. She too follows the same formula, and somehow it works.

Soon, Christopher realises that maybe he cares more than he would admit.

CHAPTER SIX

SADIC HAS BEEN SCHEDULING his visit to Ferthono for some time now; he is trying to find the perfect way to induct himself into Cecelia's life. He wants to do more than see her. If he is lucky, he can coax her into dinner or drinks. The inveigling will have to be at her office.

He comes early, crammed with faith and confidence. When he arrives at the Ferthono building, he sits at the reception for about an hour and watches Cecilia work. She is good at what she does. She is precipitate but gentle and has a refreshing genuineness to her. He knows she is aware of his presence, but she works like she is not bothered; he learns she is used to the attention.

Sadic finds himself looking about the reception space; he sees cameras. He can see five, four at each corner of the room, one above him, pointed right at Cecilia. They are placed to have no dead spots. For reception, it is more than well secured.

For a receptionist…. Unless she is an asset. He smiles; she is full of surprises.

4 PM comes quickly, and he stands and walks up to her just as the clock strikes O'clock. "Hey. I want to take you out for dinner or drinks."

She does not need a moment to think about it assertively. She answers with a resounding 'No'.

Her reply takes him by storm, "Why?"

"I don't date men who like to stare."

"I wasn't staring, merely appreciating a..."

"Either way. You like to watch; I hate being watched."

His gaze tightens on her; he sees it. It is a game she plays. "Could have fooled me. Five cameras," he sees understanding on her face. "Someone watches you all day, and you sit there cutely and cool as a cucumber." He leans slightly over her countertop and approaches an inch from her face; he sees her defiance as she bites the inside of her lower lip. "Get your bag. I will be outside." With that, he turns and leaves.

Sadic has round one.

Cecilia comes out eleven minutes later, bag and coat in hand. She walks up to him like she sees him standing by a park bench placed to the left of the building. He goes to her and meets her halfway. He takes her bag and coat. He leads them back to the bench. She follows his significant footfalls.

They are intentional, he wants her to hear them. She follows until he stops; she hears him sit and pat twice on the bench. She uses her hand to guide her as she sits.

"Do you want me to chase you?" He asks her squarely, placing her in an uncomfortable place.

"No."

"Then what do you want?" he asks.

She thinks about it. "I don't like games. Don't pursue me for triumph... Don't use me as a trophy."

He sighs. "You don't know me. It's scary enough that I am a stranger, but you will come to understand me in time. I will tell you this here and now. I don't chase for the fun of it. If I want you, I will pursue you. I need you for more than just the physical. I would pay good money to spend some time with you. You, though, don't strike me as a girl who likes money thrown at her... If you let me, I promise to give you love, time, security, and the independence you need." She looks like she is about to cry. Sadic has round two. "I'm all in. Are you with me?" She nods. "Are you willing to give me a chance?" She agrees, seemingly disbelieving her decision despite her affirmation.

They sit for a while as she internalises his words and their place in each other's lives.

"Why Ferthono?" Sadic finally asks, breaking the silence.

"Because here I am more… I'm never tethered, lacking, or falling short. I get to be me, and Ferthono has accepted that."

"How long have you worked here?"

"About eight years." *Whoa!* He did not see that come.

She senses his astonishment. "I got the job right out of high school. I trained on the job. I have a lot to be grateful for.

What about you? How long have you worked for Mr. Yego? Do you know him personally?"

Cecilia has heard of the man and his elusive nature. She wonders if his staff interacts with him directly or via proxy, as does the rest of the world. "Six years. You could say that I know him well." She laughs, gives off a baleful vibe, and he had her pegged as benevolent. The girl has a darker side.

He is about to ask why, but she volunteers the cause for her laugh. "I would say you are lying. You know him very well. I bet you work with him

—with him. You get me?"

They are in an uncomfortable spot; he does not know whether to trust her yet with the details of his friendship with Yego, yet she proves him poor at keeping details of his life private. She reads him like he is an open book. He changes the topic. "Favourite music genre; yours is hip hop."

"How did you know?"

"I have talents too." He whispers, inches closer. "You are good at it too, at reading people."

"Part of my job... I find it easy. I guess I do it without thinking much."

"Tell me about you." He requests.

"Some other time, maybe, I'm hungry, and you owe me dinner... and drinks."

———

VIVIAN watches Sadic lead Cecelia into his GTI from her office window. They look minuscule from her elevated position, but she is not too far to notice it is mutual; whatever Sadic feels for Cecilia, she does too. Cecilia's otherwise autonomous demeanour looks dulled significantly when she is with Sadic. He has gentlemanly mannerisms; he carries her bag and coat and opens her door. He watches Cecilia settle in before he hands over her effects and shuts the door.

Vivian points to the window just as Bemus opens her office door. He hustles to the window with her, and they watch Sadic settle with Cecilia in his car; they take their time, chatting a few seconds before Sadic starts the car and drives off.

"Do you think he knows?" Bemus asks; they are all very aware that Sadic works at Yego's camp. They, however, do not know the capacity, but they are clear on one fact; he is very close to Yego. The threat, Yego, may be seeking out a mole.

"No. He is love-struck. Can barely see ten feet before him." Vivian tells him.

"Okay…"

"You should ensure we don't lose another asset; talk to me about the *Ophelia Theory*. How far are we?"

"We are very close," Bemus confesses as he walks away from the window. Vivian turns about to catch a third person within her office space. She jumps, scared by a girl so unobtrusive that her presence had been

disregarded altogether. She looks ghostly in a delicate blue medical gown and no shoes. She is thin as a stick and pale as death. Her eyes look dead.

Vivian leers at the girl, her face crinkles in slight fear. Vivian is significantly affected.

"This is Monica. She is void as a vacuum." Bemus offers.

You don't say! Vivian swears even though she is not following.

"Would you like to try the words on her?"

———

SADIC and Cecilia's conversation relocates to a hole-in-the-wall restaurant in Upper Hill; she has often eaten here and likes it. All he sees are attempts at civility. The restaurant is an old and tiny structure of corrugated iron sheet slices. Little wooden benches are placed beside small wonky tables. It is uncultured. It reminds him of where he came from. Sadic does not like being reminded; he left that way of life a while back; it is hard to find humility enough to accept it again, even now when he has the means to eat anywhere he wants to. He had once eaten in the darkest holes in Kenya, but he would never take Cecilia for the type. Additionally, eating here means she crosses a highway four times to get here and back to her office.

She says they should get some food if lucky, as the restaurant sells only lunch. Gratuitously, she comments that the place smells like her mother's kitchen in Sirisia, Western Kenya.

A waiter who looks like he works in the kitchen comes to take their order. —Cecilia called it a little slice of Mama's cooking; how? The cook is male! Sadic tries a hand at indifference as he eyes the man's used apron marked with old coal and broth stains. Sadic's face is void of any emotional disposition as he turns up to look at the man in the face and make his order. "You have juice… any brand, really." *Please, please… no fresh juice!*

"Vitali."

Oh, thank God! "Blackcurrant, *baridi*." Chilled.

"Uh, no fridge."

"Okay. Room temp." Sadic says, earning himself a toxic glare. The man turns to Cecilia, who orders without much thought. She reminds Sadic that she is a regular. "*Chapati ndengu*." Chapati and greengrams. The man nods and walks away.

In the waiting, they review their earlier conversation. "You read people; what could you tell me about myself." He banks on the day they met for

first impressions and today for polarity.

"Well… You are handsome. I felt the air shift about every time you were around. People stop and stare... may be the reason they never kicked you out at Ferthono. You should know, they don't let just anyone sit at the reception waiting on receptionists."

"But you are not just a receptionist." He supplies, and she ignores this observation.

"People look at you lustfully, not how they look at me… they pity me. They wonder about the ruse behind my presence on Earth. I bet you anyone who saw us come here can't believe us. I can hear their breaths hitch and then whispers.... Some would claim they are happy even and declare us cute even... And some would bluntly disregard us... can't see how we may like each other."

"You are more paranoid than I thought." He says even though eyes dart to them in silent judgement at that very moment.

She reaches for his face. She does not ask, but he gives approval by guiding her hands. She lays them gently on the sides of his face and smiles. His face is manly, angled, and rough. He has more than a stubble forming, a bit of a beard. She breathes much deeper now, actively forcing herself into a relaxed state.

Sadic looks at Cecilia. He enjoys her exploration of his face. This has never happened before. It is strangely exhilarating. "You may have met Yego six years ago, but you work high in his ranks. I place you at eight figures annularly." She continues to say. He smiles, and it goes through her. "He made you some ways," her hands drop to his jacket lapels. She feels on them as they guide her hands down to his chest. She can feel his heart throb for war in there.

His adrenaline has spiked so high that he can barely contain himself.

"May I tell you what I think? He gave you a seat next to him at the table. You were made." He takes a minor offence at her choice of words; she has round three. "You dress sharply. I believe in tailored suits. Use designer essence and speak with a learnt and not innate polish. You did not grow up rich; this is a recent path. You dressed as so initially because you had to fit in... But now you do because you know you look the part and love that you do. You like it. You are proud of your place now." She flips the script just as he is getting comfortable, "You use too much cologne." He chuckles, disbelieving her audacity. "Just a dub. Don't drown in it." He tries to push

her away, relatively peeved by her statement, but she forces herself closer. “You don’t like the truth, even though you hand it coldest every day of your life.”

She has him settled in an utterly perturbed state. “Woman... Don’t cross a line here.” He reprimands her.

“You can’t take it to a level because you never want to appear weak before anyone, especially me. I disarm you... yet you want to be the macho man for the blind girl.”

Quietly, he slips out of her hold and off the bench. He paces a little before he turns back to her.

She sits and waits and listens to his heightened condition. She reads him through the tension that suddenly comes her way. A few patrons leave. Some stay to stare at the drama unfolding.

Sadic abruptly throws words at her, “I must admit... You are right about a lot of it. I made it... by a stroke of luck. He handed me a position... gifted me… and I… I am grateful. He gifted me life on a silver platter and trusted me with much more than I could immerse in a lifetime. He is like a brother now, and I will never squander that gift.”

“I come from nothing.” She confesses.

He remembers where he is from and suddenly feels guilty for acting like a prude, “I have my faults; some I may have cultured because of my lifestyle, but they define this man because history and the present are connected. I came from that to this; I will never be ashamed of where I came from.” She never said he was… he fills gaps in others’ speculations. “On cologne... maybe I overdo it. If it’s an issue, I could tone it down.” She nods slightly. Sadic returns to her. He takes his place on the bench. “My turn.” She breathes a little shaky now; she suffers his dis-ease; she hates being schooled but dishes it out like today’s gossip. He places a hand on her shoulder and tries to calm her. She looks up at him, right in the eyes; he can swear she sees him. “You are beautiful. You know this, but you forget.” She blushes and looks away. He guides her gaze as he pushes his hand, which is on her shoulder, up the side of her neck to her cheek. He cradles it as he speaks, his thumb gently rubbing her soft skin. “And intelligent.

You are not merely a receptionist at Ferthono. You read people well; I guessed that’s part of your job before….

You like honesty and simplicity, hate to draw attention to yourself.” Her brows come together. “You are easily affected, you feel more than most,

and it made you a bit of a wuss," she laughs. "But you are strong in ways you may never know. You inspire me." Maybe to prepare for the deep dive, he breaks a moment, "I..." He stutters. "I want to know you better." He pulls her forward and closes the distance between them. He chastely kisses her forehead and pulls away.

Silence.

"Well, when you put it like that!" she jests. "How can a girl say no?" AFTER she eats, they talk until they are asked to leave.

Sadic walks her home. She says her house is only a kilometre away. This gives him comfort. He is glad her commute is reasonable, considering her condition. By the time they clock her door, the sun is down, and the night has ushered in a chilly breeze.

She asks him to come in, and he denies her. He would love a nightcap, but he has a few things to do before bed. The night is still young, and his brain is alive with projections of a future with Cecilia. He should channel that fire elsewhere or else, if not within Cecilia's folds.

He leaves her beyond her door's threshold with another kiss on her forehead. He heads back to collect his car to go to the office, elated in a state of new love.

MR. YEGO walks into a coffee café on Gado Street within Nairobi city limits. The city is alive with the evening rush. Human noise hovers over Nairobi in a most noticeable fuss. Within the café, there is a sense of tranquillity; soft music from a famous Afro-Pop band plays. He recognises the band; it is local and well-deserving of acclaim. In a distant muffle, the city rages on.

It is not hard for him to find his girl; he scans the upper floor and sees the back of a head tipped too low to see a face. He walks through tables of guests as they indulge in evening delights and libations to Ophelia, who sleeps soundly despite the human noise about her. There is a pile of books on Ophelia's side, and the book before her plays the role of a pillow. She sleeps with her face towards the aisle. Her hands are crossed under her head on the book, one lower than the other. She is about three-quarters way done with the book.

Christopher pulls up a chair from a neighbouring table and places it on the aisle adjacent to her position on the table. "Ophelia…" he whispers to

her. She does not wake. He puts his hand lightly on her back and gently shakes it, “O.” She comes alive, her eyes flap open after a dance of denial. “I’m sorry, I’m late. Have you eaten?” he asks as she sits up, squeezes a restricted yawn that he finds utterly adorable.

“No, I couldn’t eat alone.” She confesses.

He raises his finger at a waiter rushing to return soiled dishes to the kitchen, and she promises to return promptly. Christopher watches her put away her book; she places a bookmark between the pages to mark her progress, then shuts the book and piles it with the others beside her. Christopher cannot help his smile. He likes that she respects her texts. “You were right.”

“About what?” She looks up, concerned. This would be the first time Christopher Yego admits he is wrong about something.

“About my tailor….”

“He died?!” She shrieks, eyes wide in horror.

Her speculation is largely erroneous. He maintains a level of calm for both. “Oh, no. His understudy died.”

She is confused, she knew not of the understudy. He feels a prerequisite to clarify. “I have been paying the man for years to train an understudy if he dies.” Ophelia offers him a series of understanding nods. The nods are slow, like she feels the bouts of a special kind of struggle from within. With the final nod, she bursts out laughing in crude heckles. He cannot help smiling again. She then grasps how uncultured she must seem, stopping herself from laughing. However, Christopher can still see signs in her eyes and ever-twitching lip. She wants to let those rudimentary giggles of insensitivity rip. “I’m sorry… I’m so sorry. This is sad… so sad.”

“Very.” He reproaches without much seriousness in his tone.

“I knew you… I called it!” So as not to sound insensitive, she asks how he died.

“Fell off a train.”

“Oh, God!”

Their waiter comes and hands them two menus, and then walks away.

“Ophelia,” Christopher takes Ophelia’s hand closest to him and rubs circles over the back of the hand. This little act is not a consolation; she feels nothing for the dead boy; he is about to shock her, and he hopes she can handle it well enough. She responds by looking intently into his eyes. He speaks his words calmly, “Will you marry me?”

———

THREE WEEKS LATER...

SADIC is furious. He can count up to six times that he has been this mad; four were because of a woman, the other two... one can easily guess. His brain meticulously spars for the right words to tell Christopher. His philistine nature takes over before he craftily selects his words, but he still yells at Christopher. “You married her?!”

“Yes. Right there.” Christopher points at a gazebo in the garden through his living room window. “It was simple, just the staff, Stacy and Eleanor.”

“You said that she infuriates you to bits.” Sadic is confused, and a little disappointed. “I thought I was going to be your best man.”

“She may be under the tutelage of the devil... truly, she knows how to work my nerves raw.” He sips his *Gablo*. “I’m sorry, it was a rushed affair.” He lies about not having Sadic at his nuptial ceremony.

Sadic sits heavily in the nearest chair that huffs on the landing. “So, you marry that?!”

Christopher laughs. He sips his drink. He looks down at his friend. “I did not find a woman to challenge me or rock my world. I found one who understands me and is unafraid to tell me the truth. Point me to any other, and I know you will be lying. And on being my best man... I knew you would disapprove. I’m sorry. I will make it up to you, plus you have been busy with Cecilia. I barely see you.”

Silence.

“Yego, you barely know this girl.”

“This woman, my wife.” Christopher rushes to correct him and fills his friend’s glass with more drink. His wedding ring clinks with the glass. They both stare at the band and look away soon after. Christopher walks away. “We have a lifetime to know each other. But first, tonight we go out and celebrate this union.” With a sheepish grin plastered, Christopher bends and toasts Sadic’s glass by force. They drink; Sadic to avoid seven years of bad sex, Christopher drinks because a toast warrants drinking, and, he is thrilled.

Like a void of awkwardness calls her in, Ophelia walks in ready to party; she is all made up, her plump lips in a sultry red tint that matches her skimpy dress in a regal hue of blood red. Sadic does not know where to look; her dress barely covers anything, and where it does, it sits tightly,

twisting about her body, leaving nothing to the imagination. This moment is the first time he has seen her this way. His eyes find his glass, and he drinks the rest of his liquor. When he looks up again, his tilt finds her legs. She is wearing the highest heels Sadic has ever seen; the dress makes her legs look infinitely eternal. She looks good, he must admit. She cleans up well. He watches Christopher walk to her. With the shoes, she near reaches him in height. Sadic goes for another sip of his drink to find the glass empty. "Fu...!" He frowns at the glass and swallows hard feelings as he tries to fix the strange dryness in his throat.

"O, Sadic is not taken by our union."

Sadic chokes on the spit pulled in his mouth. He looks at the couple and catches the infuriating visual of them walking into each other's arms.

"It is all about the timing..." Sadic defends himself. He wonders why Christopher feels the need to share this with Ophelia... He wonders what will become of the secrets they share.

"Understandable." She agrees with him, and this fascinates Christopher.

"How?" Sadic asks, his voice higher than usual.

She pulls out of Christopher's hands and walks to Sadic. She even sits in the seat he is in and turns to him. "I come from nothing." She studies Sadic; he reads like the palm of her hand. She laughs and points at Sadic's face. She abruptly snaps her fingers at him, and Sadic jumps a little with the snap. "There it is." As though hypnotised, he stares at her wide-eyed. "I come from nothing, but I never died from it." She tells him.

But I never died from it; he has heard this phrase before, off Cecilia's lips. Strange… He brings himself back to the present. And where is that? He wants to ask. He bets even Christopher has no idea. "Understand that I care for my friend," Sadic tells her. The truth is that he is almost offended by her boldness. Yego's words are true; the girl has no filter.

Sadic and Ophelia air their differences right in front of Christopher. He sips his drink as his universe aligns to hand him his fate.

"Yes, and I commend you for it. I promise I will not do anything that harms Christopher."

"See, that's just it. You... you're too heavy." She does not understand. "You are too much; it will break him when you leave." He whispers; nevertheless, Yego hears everything. He speaks of the day she left with Bemus without knowing what she was doing. The memory sits powerfully lurid in all their minds.

She sees his fear. Her brows come together in empathy. “I promise,” her eyes water up, “that was not me. I would never walk away from Christopher intentionally.”

After some seconds of studying her face, Sadic concludes that he believes her. He nods affirmatively.

All is well in the house Yego, and this pleases Christopher.

———

A few hours before daybreak, the trio and an additional female for Sadic let their inhibitions dissipate as they indulge in gregarious living at a nightclub within the city.

The first time they came here, Christopher was single. Now married, he finds he likes the space more. The night seems still young despite it being the wee hours in the morning. He and Ophelia dance among other revellers on the dance floor. Sadic, too, flexes about a pretty young thing. He finds consolation in a stranger, as do many men when away from their women. Sadic is guarded, though. He interacts with his companion inattentively as he avoids standing too close so as not to insinuate a future. He keeps their movements platonic, almost too cheeky, and it works. She thinks nothing more of them than two people who like dancing on a night out. His mind leads him back to Cecilia. He knows he should make time and see her again soon. This night proves to him that, without a doubt, Cecilia is the girl for him. He is unsure whether this proof comes clear because Christopher has bound himself to Ophelia for eternity or because he has spent hours with a different girl and felt nothing. Whatever the reason, he wants his bond with Cecilia to be solidified.

The trio ushers in the new dawn, bluntly disregarding all secrets about them. They choose to see the new narrative, writing a new chapter rather than lingering on an irreconcilable past, Ophelia’s.

———

MARRYING Ophelia was impulsive but vastly rewarding. For a girl who most claim grew up in Nairobi’s hubbub environs, she proves to be anti-philistine. She is graceful and humble. She respects his position as a husband, the priesthood of the family and worships him for all that he is. She proves without a doubt that the coat should never define the being. Christopher treats her well; he prefers that she does little house-related chores; he claims he married a companion and not a new housekeeper to

add to his already sizeable staff. She is in her final year of college; he wants her to concentrate on her final year. This is a big year; she is getting her KNEC Secondary certificate and finishing her psychology degree. He wants nothing to come between her and her studying.

Christopher knows sacrifice regarding Ophelia. More than once, even he had to forgo his matrimonial right to devour her sex for the sake of Ophelia. Yes, Son of Adam, son of man himself; Christopher Yego withholds sex to ensure he does not push his young wife to limits she cannot handle. It is near impossible but doable. Christopher has developed an almost satisfactory relationship with his dominant hand and an excellent case of KY-Jelly. He is good friends with his overriding extension, a symbiotic relationship. This happens less than when she puts out or he feels he cannot do without the purely otherworldly connection —when they did share in the sacred act, it was as though the heavens opened to sing hallelujah.
BEING MARRIED TO Christopher is interesting. Ophelia feels euphoric. Most days, she sits on the border between a dream state and reality, weighing her sanity against her emotions. Her existence is marked in an alternate universe. She can barely feel her form. She floats in non-existence, disbelieving her new life. It is a good life.

———

IT has been a busy couple of days; it is that time when Yego Enterprises wind up another financial year. Yego's empire is whirled in the turmoil of closing accounts and preparations for new partnerships in the coming financial year. The office runs like Hell's Kitchen, and the staff feels the season's weight.

Sadic, too, feels this pressure as it is his job to ensure that everything about Christopher runs smoothly. Locked in his office, he struggles to push through work when he only wants to lay back and wish it all away. Sadic's office is a little smaller than Yego's but still significant; he has a wall-to-wall view of the city and could not ask for more. He has two screens before him demanding his gaze. He also has a pile of files before him, an open diary, and a pen in his dominant hand. His eyes are slightly bloodshot as he struggles to read through the document in his other hand, reviewing the details on each screen before him. Though he seems rather engrossed in his work, his attention flips from the work before him, and new ideas pop up like bloody whack-a-mole! He gets like this at least twice a year, hounds on

a new idea, niche… something with a drive that is almost unearthly. Sadic is in dire need of a holiday; at this rate, Yego's enterprises will be his death.

His phone rings shortly. With a little autopilot, he picks it with a rare coldness. This startles the being at the other end of the line.

"Sadic, did I catch you at a bad time?" Cecelia asks.

"Uh, CC… I'm sorry. It's just a long day."

"Come to lunch with me." She coaxes.

He smiles sadly and looks at his desk. His eyes dash to the clock on his desktop; it is about fifteen minutes to three. He figures that she must be talking about eating after work as she had on their first date. She eats terribly, but he has no strength to reproach her habits in sustenance. "I'm sorry," He speaks softly, "I can't make it today. You should get something to eat before the workday is over,"

"I have an apple."

He laughs slightly. "… Something filling."

"Okay." She sounds very perky, excited, thus making him ask her where she is. "At work, I'm about to meet a new friend."

"Oh." *Interesting*.

"I wanted to ask you," she suddenly speaks sombrely. "Is Sadic an Islamic name? Are you Muslim?"

He knew this day would come. "Maybe. I would not know."

He can feel her mood darken. "How?"

"Because."

"You are terrible at this… being open about yourself. How do you not know?"

He does not feel like dwelling on the past. He may have been a Muslim, but a Christian raised him. A friend's family took him in when he turned into an orphan at a young age. He truly has no idea of the origins of his name. "My friend is married to a girl; she…." He hesitates. He can almost see her lift her kind face at him, encouraging him to go on. "Well, he knows nothing about her. We met her a while back; I don't even think she knows anything about herself.…

It's hard to admit, but I share her fate; I know nothing of my birth. I found myself acknowledging the name. The more I think about it, the more I feel I should know more about it…

…truth is, I never really thought about it."

"You are rare." Is her response.

He laughs. “You suppose,” He sighs, “It’s you. I am scared you will not like the real me.”

“But that’s where you are wrong.” She says, “I already feel more for you than I have anyone, ever.”

“You flutter me.”

“I tell you the truth. The past means you got to be; the details you worry I will not appreciate are a passing cloud. If you feel you need to know more of it, I will walk through time with you, but Sadic, I don’t care who you were. I care for the man that you are today.”

They share an accepting silence when she suddenly says she must go. He connects her ‘new friend’ as work-related. They say a brief goodbye. Sadic returns to his abysmal present. Drowning under the files, he finds he has lost his concentration. He reaches for his phone and falls into a social media binge as he tries to catch up with the ever-shifting material of social media.

———

CECILIA sits on a bench in a small indoor-outdoor garden space at the centre of the Ferthono structural wonder.

The garden is plain, with the only plants being a little grass patch with an ageing Chinese Bamboo shrub. It leans heavily to one side. A single bench is placed in the middle of the patch; it is pale in white, matching the floors and the walls of the garden. Above this silent haven is a skylight roof that shows the hidden inner limit walls of the building.

Cecilia bites on her apple. She hears footfalls approaching and briefly turns to the bamboo tree as she chews quietly. After a moment with the tree, she turns to face the girl walking up. Her name is Monica; they met once before. The girl takes tentative steps towards Cecilia, who swallows her fruit and smiles loop-sided, the loop away from the girl. Cecilia can feel Monica’s eyes studying her; she plays the ignorant victim to the scrutiny. “You are blind.” The girl comments, dazed by the fact.

“Visually impaired, I never died from it,” Cecilia says, taking another bite from her apple.

“Can you see the tree?”

“No... Visually impaired is a kinder way to say, I am blind. I can feel the tree. There are many ways to see.” Cecilia pats the bench. She welcomes Monica to sit with her. The girl sits.

Cecilia takes a deep nervous inhale and holds it; she acts like it is the best thing that has happened to her. The girl watches keenly, as though she takes notes on how to breathe. Cecilia lets the breath out in a patiently dragged exhale, “Now, you try it.”

Monica does so.

They find silence a graceful companion. They sit quietly, enjoying the calmness of a beautiful day. Until Cecilia breaks it, speaking softly, “It’s clean air. Feels crisp.” Monica nods. “I never forget smells… and laughs,” twisting sideways at Monica, Cecilia whispers, “You smell of cocoa butter.”

“I do?”

“It’s a nice scent to have.” She encourages.

The silence that comes next severely resounds for a long moment until the girl speaks. “I like vanilla more.”

———

“OH, crap!” Vivian scolds, “Get her out. She is no use to us.”

Bemus points to Monica and the lab aid behind him and hustles away to retrieve Monica. Seconds later, she appears in the bamboo tree garden. She walks up to the girl and pulls her off the bench rather forcefully.

“I must go now,” Monica reports to Cecelia blandly.

“Be strong; nothing bad lasts forever.”

The girl looks clueless for a bit, but then smiles. “That’s sweet. Thank you.” She says, and Cecilia looks like she is about to cry. Monica is pulled away, back into the building.

As soon as the girl is gone, and Cecelia cannot feel her anymore, her smile falls. Tears come to her eyes as she looks down and takes a final bite at the apple. She then gets up as she chews her bite and places the apple’s crest on the grass patch next to the tree. “Time… Mr. B.” She speaks to the tree, “You have been a good friend.”

Vivian’s face tightens, her eyes fixed on Cecilia.

“You see what I see?” Bemus asks Vivian. “She is an asset. I will deal with her when the time is right. In the meantime, retrieve the data from her bracelet. She may not be here long.”

“Will do, Vivian.

May we talk about Annie?”

———

CHRISTOPHER and Ophelia enjoy a nightcap on a simple night at their house in Solei. Christopher drinks spiked coffee while Ophelia delights in a warm mug of cocoa.

"What do you do all day?" Ophelia asks him; she understands that he goes to work, but she knows not the details of his job.

"I work." He briefs his answer to a finite selection of words. He studies her face; he prefers to memorise this face he loves too much rather than speak of matters work. Christopher finds his work a feat these days. He would rather be home with his wife.

It is late December, and Christmas comes to knock. He has never been one for traditions, but she makes him willing. He wants to make some this year. Christopher is unsure whether to go with the all-Western approach to the holiday or a traditional African approach. They could make their own traditions or wing the holiday's festivities. She has mentioned before her holidays at the mission. The days typically start with morning prayers and then mass. Later, the girls would join the nuns at the mission's convent for chores, a little volunteering, lunch, and socialisation. More prayer. Mass: loads of confederations of masses and dedication marked their days. More praying.... *oh, the routine of it all!* Knowing Ophelia, Christopher presumes she must have been bored stiff of the routine. Sadly, though, he supposes that making traditions would involve curving some sort of routine.

Ophelia breaks through his conscious, "Your turn. Ask me something, anything." They have been married for a few months now, yet they barely know each other. She wants to know more of him, the man behind the veneer; she would hope that he too would love to know her.

"I don't know what to ask. I have never done this before."

"Okay, I will go again." She offers.

He reads her youth in her words. He suddenly feels that she may be too young for him. Or maybe he is too old for her. It should mean the same thing, but in so many ways ―and at this moment― it does not. He listens as she asks, "Favourite street corner?" He wants to ask why that would matter but chooses to answer. He parts his lips but shuts them when he blanks out on an answer. He has nothing. He never stills long enough to look at street corners and decide the best of them all. She speaks, sensing his answer will not come easily. "The junction of Mama Ngina Street and this road that leads to Kimathi Street."

"Where the statue sits?"

“No... At the zebra crossing, there is a clock and a tree. Between Hilton, uh… the building with flags and all… International House and the building that holds that African restaurant….” He nods; he understands ‘her street corner’. “There is light; it’s high and far-reaching. At night, you can see it from City Hall. The light reflects on the Hilton, funnels out because….”

“The Hilton is round.” He says.

She smiles at him and says, “There’s a city clock. In the dead of night, I could almost hear the clock tick. I started staring at it, waiting for the minute hand to turn. There’s nothing more riveting than watching the minute….”

“How do you speak English so well?” He asks abruptly, cutting her short, “I don’t think I have ever heard you speak in any other language.” He watches her and waits for an answer, but she has suddenly gone mute. “What tribe are you?” he asks just as the realisation hits him. *Are you even Kenyan?* Normally, he would not care, but it would not hurt to know what tribe his wife hails from. She starts to tug on her fingers. She is uncomfortable with this line of questions. His fingers glaze her chin suddenly; he raises her gaze to meet his, “I have never judged you, and I will not start today.”

She smiles shyly. “I’m not sure about my tribe. I can’t remember much from before. I think I blocked it out for some reason.” She shrugs. “I learnt to culture my speech to Bemus’. He was erudite and eloquent. I wanted to be like him." She selects her words carefully. "He gave me books ―the way you do― but the books he gave me were more educational, geared towards academic subjects. Initially, his selections were wide, but they slowly narrowed to Psychology then Behaviourism.”

“How long have you known him?”

She must think about it; interestingly, she cannot state the number of years. “A while…” *I guess*. She shakes her head as though dislodging thought. “Uh, I’m not sure.”

“How did you meet him?” he asks sombrely.

“He stayed at the Brothers of Light Seminary. They gave us food... a few other kids and I. If you stayed all day to read, you would get a bed. I traded cold nights for knowledge.” Silence comes about them, but Ophelia chuckles suddenly. “BoLS… get it?”

He nods sadly. “You are going to hell,” he comments, making her laugh. Christopher goes quiet, sips his drink, and then licks his lips sensually

—insinuating a secret.

"Do tell!" She mocks, then she sips her cocoa.

"Yes..." He says but still does not speak of anything substantial.

Yego knows that he can be a bore, but he finds that she does find him fascinating; she also seems to enjoy pushing him. "Tell me what you are thinking." She insists.

"You are very smart."

She blushes something fierce. "Read the right books at the right time, I guess." This earns her a kiss. "Favourite street corner?" She asks when he pulls away.

"Um," he thinks for half a minute, "I would say... Koinange Street and Kenyatta Avenue around the GPO." GPO, the Grand Post Office, Ophelia nods to this encouraging him to go on. "I once saw a couple hug. They weren't Kenyan. There was a bit of traffic, so I had about three minutes to watch the man hold the girl in his arms. She must have had a bad day. I found their love… it was very… open. Overt. I could never be that overt. It was... Touching."

She eyes him a while before echoing him, "*Touching*."

"Yes."

He does not wish to elaborate, so she moves on, "Strangest thing ever?" She urges him to speak with her eyes wide in anticipation. She leans forward as she waits for an answer. She has a good feeling about this one.

"I saw a bee in the city." *Why would a bee exist in a concrete jungle? This is his logic; where would it do bee things?*

"Not so strange, we have trees and flowers in the city. Potted flowers, eh… ;

'The Green City under the Sun'… Nairobi."

"If it was Machakos, land of flowers; 'The Place to be', I would understand… but Nairobi, uh-uh!"

"You still lose."

"I thought this was about getting to know each other?!" He frowns playfully.

She laughs again, enthralling him in the feat. He ponders the wonders of sugar; he feels like she is the one taking alcohol and not him.

"Ok. No competition. Strangest thing ever..." She does not have to think about it. It seems she has many floating around her head. "I dreamt I was

whipping Asians once. I think this was after the Chinese inv—vestment in Africa."

His eyes grow wide at her. "Why?!"

"I can't remember. This one girl had layers of protective padding meant to protect her from the lashes," she nods like this is a good thing, "I lowered them, layer by layer," she demonstrates with the beddings. "And whipped the hell out of her!"

"You are strange."

"It was my subconscious reacting to some news I saw about an International Chinese company that whipped grown men and women like children when they made mistakes. I think I was *touched* by it." She shrugs her shoulders. "Maybe I am strange, but you like this strange... a lot! Don't you?" She wiggles her brows playfully, making him laugh.

He kisses her deeply. Christopher has never seen her this easy, this alive. She brings a light to his world that has him vindicated. He is a whole new person. *What would he do without her...?* He cannot think beyond Ophelia.

He pulls back and looks at her. "Very much." He decides not to plan Christmas; he lets the cheery holiday winds take charge of their Christmas plans, and this Christmas becomes the best holiday he has had in a very long time.

THE new year felt cursed from the beginning; business was not good for Yego. He felt the year's strain in its first and second months. Christopher was about done with the year by the closing week of February, but fate would have more in store.

February 28th; this date will forever be etched in Christopher's memory; this is the day he comes home after a long day at the office to find a police squad car at his house. His staff is in twos and threes, holding each other as strangers rush in and out of his house in a dreadful rush that makes his heart pick instantly.

Ophelia… He cannot see his wife among the men and women standing about. He rushes out of his car franticly, searching for his wife —she was home when he left. She has not left the house since concluding her studies. She has been savouring every day, lazing about the house, claiming to be rewarding herself for the three years of brutal grinding on books.

He grabs one of his staff, the gardener Vinnie. "What's going on? Where is O?" His tone and projection attract the attention of all about him. A few cower away, afraid to meet his eyes.

Two policemen walk up to him. “Mr. Yego. Will you please come with us?” One speaks as he slips his hand about his upper arm.

Christopher fights him off instantly. And turns to the gardener. “Vinnie, where is Ophelia?” There is an urgency in his voice. He fights for control even as he sees more police come outside his house. He turns to charge into the entryway, but they block his path. He turns to the boy Vinnie who refuses to answer though Christopher reads fear on his face. *Fear*... he discerns what the source of his fear could be… *my reaction... He is scared of my reaction*... He charges for the door when the police block his path. Frantic, he starts to lose his cool. “Where the hell is O?!” He screams at the man, “Ophelia!” he calls out, directing his appeal towards the house.

“Sir, your wife, one Ophelia Yego, is missing. We are still investigating,” The policeman speaks, but Christopher hears nothing more. His vision goes black, and his hearing starts to fade. “Mr. Yeg…!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

OPHELIA ROUSES to the smirk buoyancy of Bemus as he coaxes her awake. “Breathe!” She scrabbles alive. She finds that her ankle is bound to the bed in chains. “Yes... Wake up! Been a minute.” He evaluates. She knows exactly how long it has been nineteen months and four days since she last saw him. She has no idea how, but Bemus sits before her. Emotionally inundated and with questions swarming in her head, she tries to gauge the important ones to start with, but he cuts her off before she can ask any. “I know you have questions. First... We need to talk about your contract.”

She eyes him curiously, noticing a slight change in his skin tone. He looks positively radiant and in a suit. For a man on the run, he sure does look dapper. “What contract?” Bemus removes his very special notebook and writes down some words; he makes serious work of his note-taking. She eyes him, anxiety steadily rising. “Bemus, what contract?” She yanks her chained leg. The act is an insinuated question; why am I chained.

“Okay, seems we may have to go the long way.” He puts his notebook away and reaches for his phone. He activates a recording app. “State your name.” She tightens her lips. She refuses to answer him. “The sooner you answer, the faster you get back to your life. Name, please.” He repeats himself. She should know; he hates repeating himself.

“UNLESS....” he goes for his notebook. He writes on as he waits for her to speak.

Ophelia remains tight-lipped.

Minutes later, she utters not even the slightest of sounds. She just stares at him. He puts away his book. He knows that she understands her state without being told. In her eyes, he must look and act like a mad scientist conducting a study on a cornered animal...

OPHELIA does think so. She knows that she is a case study of sorts. She wonders what; her memory fails her. Then, the issue of a contract. What contract did she sign to place herself in this position?

Bemus looks at her leg, then face and back to the leg, insinuating something. She tilts her head inquisitively. Am I missing something? Bemus frowns. He looks up at a camera in one of the top corners of the

room. She follows his gaze. She gets more anxious when she becomes aware that someone else is watching. It is unnerving. She feels a chill go through her. It winds at her feet, rattling the chain. Then, something strange happens. She feels the sting of electricity go through her. It starts small as a zing but then surges until she is sprawling on the bed as the light, but a significant current goes through her. Her jaws clump shut as a gargling choke threatens to end her. Now she knows they plan to shock her incorrigible self into compliance— When the current dies, she can breathe again.

Tears stream down her face despite feeling dead inside. When she oversees her mental state, desolation, and despair envelope her, she whispers her name, "Ophelia. My name is Ophelia Yego."

_____

"YOU have heard of a company called Ferthono," Sadic tells Christopher.

"What does this company have to do with Ophelia and me?" He sounds worn, maybe a little disinterested.

"I know you are a little groggy but hear me out," Sadic sits in a chair planted before Christopher's desk. He dressed casually despite it being a weekday, a testament to the times. Christopher, however, is as immaculate as ever in his tailored suit, though his tie is loose; its choking effect unappreciated when the air hung so thin about him.

It is afternoon, and Nairobi feels like it has moved kilometres closer to hell; the Sun burns too hot this day. Even with the air conditioner, a little heat still enters Christopher's high-end office. He listens to his friend brief him on his findings. "I talked to you about the Psych-Print a while ago. That research is done at Ferthono. Cecilia works at Ferthono." He lets this bit of information sit, then goes on. "We met Ophelia through St. Petersburg Mission. She was a street child trained in psychology, and privately."

"What are you gearing at?"

"How many street rats do you know trained in psychology...?" Street rat…! If only Christopher had the strength. Sadic continues, "How many do you know that are so eloquent?"

Christopher ponders the question like he needs to. "None."

"Exactly!" Sadic looks utterly pleased with himself. "I believe she was placed there for you to notice her. She was interesting enough for you to see her; she was broken enough for you to empathise. You saw a gap and filled it." He leans back into the leather seat. "My friend, you were baited."

Christopher is too quiet. For about two minutes, he just thinks. “But you selected the charity. Anyone could have walked in last. Anyone could have noticed her. How is it that I noticed her and not any other of the men and women who sat within the meeting hall?”

Sadic shares the same curiosity. “I don’t have much now. What I know is that the girl was a beacon, and you caught her light.”

“What of the company?”

“Ferthono,” Sadic leans forward and opens the file he placed before Christopher. “It’s a Kenyan company. It specialises in psychological research; they claim sociology too.” Christopher raises an eyebrow at Sadic. “Shocked me too apparently, not all psychologists in Kenya practise in a medical capacity or teach...” He chuckles —his audience is not pleased. He reverts to point and elaborate details within the file, flipping through half the file while bubbling through facts until he stops at a picture of men and women in a file. They are in pristine lab coats. They have smiles on, like they just proved the existence of a loop in time. “These are doctors, brain men who work at Ferthono. Do you see any familiar faces?” Sadic asks as he reverts to games.

Christopher plays along. He scans through the faces of the men and women standing in the file within the photograph. So far, he sees only strange faces until the pan through leads him to an all too familiar face. “The priest, Bemus!” Christopher whispers harshly.

“Exactly!”

Christopher feels the heat intensifies from within. He reaches for his tie, loosening it further away from his neck.

Sadic goes on, “He is pulling her strings. All we need to know is how deep this thing goes... and who hired them to bait you.”

Christopher pushes away the file. “You are wrong. Ophelia would never do this. She may act tough, but I assure you that she is harmless as a child. Sadic leans forward, his chest pressed against the edge of the desk. He points at the file. “She wouldn’t, but Ferthono would. At the right price. Someone wants to know what makes you tick, and they found the right vessel to deliver the bulletin.” He has a point. “Yego, you are a powerful man. You sit among the most successful young men in Nairobi and live a costlier life; surely you have enemies.” Christopher can think of a few. “Some with the resources to actualise this.” He speaks sense, again. “The girl may be innocent, but it is by her hand that they seek to end you.” It

sounds like a diatribe rather than the truth. It feels like Sadic carelessly throws words, unaware of their consequences.

"I still need to find her."

"We will find her. I'm with you all the way. The presence of this company and its interest in you raises my curiosity. More reason to have her here." Sadic's voice turns into a whisper, "Here where we know exactly what she is doing."

———

"DO you know what happens to the white rhino?" Bemus asks. Ophelia shakes her head at him. She sits before him in a silk slip highly exposed and raw from the treatment. She feels the chill in the room grow intense, coupled with the sweat it gives the shakes. In the waiting for a reply, he studies her body as it shudders in a tremor. He describes it in his little notebook. "What will happen to the White Rhino?" She cringes at the question. "Answer me. I do not appreciate being ignored."

"It turns extinct." She answers, her voice low... stretched too thin.

"It turns chimera." He corrects her calculated conjecture. "Like the little piggy with the human genes in it." He whispers. "The key to behavioural acclimatisation is here," he taps twice at his temple. "It's in the psyche." She looks at him, hooded under a narrowed gaze. He cannot tell her state by her eyes. All he has is her body language. Apart from the shaking, she holds her own. She sits upright in the metallic chair. He reads some sort of defiance in her language. "The key is part repetition..." He whispers like he deluges state secrets. "Conditioning…. You know that?" She does not speak. "Talk. You have a tongue."

"Yes."

"Good, now define the tenets of that theory."

"Theory propounded by B.F Skinner…."

"Do not promulgate inferences from text at me; give me your understanding of the theory." As soon as the words leave his mouth, he changes his mind. He wants to start again, go back to the baseline, and build from there. "Okay… let's start from the top." He pauses and touches his left ear. He has a listening device in.

She notes this.

"I'm told we have a guest watching. It would be nice if you impressed." He opens a new page of his notebook. "Particular memory retrieval.

Subordinate personae," Bemus looks at his notes as he speaks. "Word of the day, pestilence."

"A virulent disease that is devastating." She answers wearily.

"Significance to humankind, get specific." He probs.

"A pernicious entity; The First Horseman."

"Malignance aside…."

"Marks the Armageddon." She answers on cue.

"Very good." He coxes. "Now, superior personae. Word of the day; petulance." She turns her head and looks at him in a Dutch tilt. She is confused. "Have you heard this word before?" he asks her.

"Yes."

"And… meaning please."

"Petulance… an entity… specific… marks something." She stutters.

He looks up from his notebook. "B.F Skinner."

"Propagator of Psychological Theory?"

He reverts to ask the basics. He needs to know if she knows fact in the least; maybe understanding is what evades her. After all, she is highly medicated. "Year of Birth?" She answers correctly; 1904.

"Petulance."

"I don't know."

HENRY stands in a room of monitors. They combine to form a super-monitor that shows live footage of Ophelia and Bemus' sessions. He looks keen on the interview. His brain suddenly fires as he recognises the words spoken in the conversation; he steps forward hastily. "What was that?!" He points at Ophelia. "Was that… Revelations?!"

The other soul in the room nods. She shifts her weight from one leg to the other, her slender frame striking in a fitting black designer dress and delicate strappy nude heels. She has a hand across her midline; it supports the other by the elbow. She keeps biting her thumb pad lightly, then dragging it out slowly in a tease. It is a show of anxiety. "Yes, that is Revelations."

Henry grants, "Why did he create a baseline on religion, yet he knows how flitting the base can be?!" He walks back a few steps, visibly angered, and starts to pace. "Vivian, she may hit her head and forget her God

altogether. She may even just hit her toe and swear to desert her God! I don't understand why?!"

Vivian calms herself with a deep inhale, refusing to spout the litany of profanity forming in her mind. She turns to Henry and speaks with forced submission to the man, "Bemus is the best man for the job. I assure you, he knows what he is doing. You will learn all you need to know when we finish our work with Ophelia. We still have time."

"You have not answered my question, why religion."

The lady throws her hands in the air, frustrated, "I don't know! The man was a priest. I have no idea of the inner workings of a man such as this. Who's to say the blue-balls and red wine did not mess him up a little?"

"Fine." He is disappointed. He points at Ophelia, "This better work."

"It will. I believe in my man." Ferthono believes in my man!

Henry comes back before the screen. "So," he wiggles in his stance, "Help me understand. The base questions are different for the two personalities?"

Vivian smiles, finally…. He asks what is relevant. "That's just it; there are no two personalities. This subject is one with no other within. This is simply disunion of the mind at its best. We follow a timeline sequence and separate her personas based on that timeline."

"That makes no sense. Ophelia is conversant with Psychology, and the other… what…? Religion?!"

"It's a form of compartmentalisation. We have her memories from earlier making the inferior personae, and her memories from now making the superior, Ophelia. In simpler terms, we work about her present memories to determine what we need to maintain the superior personae's cover," she mocks him. "Get you your answers."

"And how is that not bipolarity?"

She turns about and taps him on the back twice, like she is a company-sent pallbearer consoling a widower. Her face wears a coldness, the face Vivian wears before all about her. A guise of authority, a consistency she has learned, should represent the head of the Ferthono board. Vivian speaks to Henry as though he is a child, "It will take me years to educate you on the wonders of the brain… we simply do not have enough time."

"Wow! Six years on Ferthono's board… and this is what I get!" He mutters, "I need to know more."

“I will send you a brochure.” She tells him coldly. Henry turns red and hot as Hades. Vivian turns away from him, her attention shifting to the screens before them. “Now, shhh! This is important to some of us.” She looks like a child on an adventure. She suddenly turns to Henry, “Oh, fun fact; Ophelia smokes; the other has never smoked a cigarette in her life!”

———

HOURS later, Bemus is still questioning Ophelia despite her visual exhibition of the last straw.

“Why are you doing this to me…?” She whispers, disoriented and numb, eyes dead with exhaustion.

He writes in his little book as he replies. “Your reparations will be ample. Now, define your subject.”

“No… I don’t want it… please.” She begs. “Let me go. I will not tell anyone anything.”

Bemus looks up from his notebook. He laughs. This sickens Ophelia. “Humour me… for a second. For argument’s sake… what do you think this is?”

She stutters, her brain working slower than ever. “Sss... some kkkinnnnd of exxx...periment… This is wrong.” Though his browbeating has her all mush, she knows this much.

He leans forward, eyes lambent with excitement. “And where do you think you are?” She looks around to read her surroundings but is met by an off-white maddening paleness. Tears come to her eyes. She cannot place her existence, let alone location. “I thought so. I know how this works; you say something, then I say something back. You say something pompous—stupid even, and I say something back. Then you say something terribly insolent, and you wouldn’t even know what you would be talking about, and I would smack the life out of you repeatedly punishing that soft pompous mouth of yours till your face is a bloody pulp.” Breathing in a raged manner, he prompts her, “Now say something.” She has nothing. He concludes brashly, “You are nobody, stuck nowhere in a timeless state. How do you wonder? By your own hand.” She swallows hard, blinking most of her tears away as some still slip down her face defiantly.

I did this?! She stares at him blankly. He has her chastened of all thoughts.

“Now, define the subject; start with his name.”

“Christopher Yego….”

———

THE man that Ophelia faces in the room of horrors is an evolutionary result of a better man woken out of his slumber, by the wrong people and in the wrong way. Before, Bemus knew without a doubt the hierarchy of beings. God, Angels, and Saints; were at the top of the pyramid, then those were closely followed by the man who was seemingly elevated because he was likened to God himself. This was not a bad thing to believe. But, it all changed when he started working for Ferthono. He woke to realise just how skewed his perception was. His religious perspective was based on faith, absolute trust in the unseen. Then, he met Science, unequivocal confidence in facts and figures. He learnt a new hierarchy. Predators sat at the top, then man because he is an intelligent species. Then, animals that are genetically closest to man, animals that share plenty of similarities with a man then the rest, the food, fuel, etc. Bemus had to learn the basics of this theory: animals offer the safest and most readily available test subjects.

There is a tale told to all newbies at Ferthono of how man learnt the depths of danger. They put an entity —preferably living— into the range of the unknown, a replaceable, easy to manipulate living thing, and saw how they took to this new condition. That would be a sheep, calf… dog. Once, someone asked him, ‘How do you think the cat gained nine lives?’ Bemus nearly passed out from the illumination. It took him some time, but he too fell in line. Animal rights groups will cry mercy, but this is Africa; an animal is either food, fuel, protection, or roadkill —pets are rare. To prove his strength, he had to end the lives of four mice and six rabbits. All were bred in the lab for testing and other purposes. By the ninth, he had grown a pair.

Thus torturing Ophelia in the name of science is not without his character or the more onerous limits of their human condition.

He feels nothing.

———

IT HAS BEEN a month since Ophelia disappeared. Sadic has nothing more to offer other than the name Ferthono. Even with Cecilia, Ferthono proves a hard nut to crack. They have been scouring through every pit in Nairobi and beyond for Ophelia and have found nothing. It is as though she never

existed altogether, like she was a wave of smoke in the air, to dissipate into nothing.

Melancholia is becoming Christopher; a solemnity rules his life now. He is beginning to see the futility of life itself. Even as Tom drives him to his next big cheque, he seems oddly unaware of where he is. He is being driven North, up the TRS, Thika Road Super-Highway. He is off on another exploratory tour looking for more to immerse himself in as he tries to escape reality; this need to grow is heightened by his exposed shortcomings. He knows now he is weak and susceptible to so much, this feeble nature largely materialising from Ophelia's loss.

He looks out the window, suddenly drawn in by a bright billboard dominated by sky blue.

Ferthono!

As though Sadic had opened Pandora's box by mentioning them to him, now he sees them everywhere. They have cursed him with their existence. They seem to sponsor everything. Christopher sees their light blue logo everywhere; on coffee mugs, stationery... billboards. It is as though his eyes have been opened, and he now sees the allusive bloody unicorn. He recognises he has been *zombie-ing* away through life itself, unaware of them and their grasp.

He knows this so far; Ferthono is involved in health, business, education, and farming! God, they are in technology too. They run the most advanced lab in biomechanics and genetics on this side of the Sahara. He has been blind all the while. He has been so engrossed in creating his own abroad that he forgot about the critical contenders within borders. While Ferthono has never ranked high on corporation rankings, they were rising fast and would easily sit on the throne for years to come at the rate they were going. They have also grown bolder this year. In a country sated in politics and corruption of the systems, the beast that is Ferthono was left unchecked. Now, it may be too big to thwart.

Ignorance beats bliss.

They do not shy away from the light because they know its purpose, yet he still feels he cannot come out enough into the light. In truth, it merely looks like Ferthono is everywhere. His hate is too real, thus feeding him this narrative. Christopher also has a bit of a confirmation bias brewing. He must look twice even thrice now to believe his eyes or ears. He is sad and

angry, wasted by the reality about him. He also feels threatened, they are more significant than him, and the company is better than Yego Enterprises.

He flips his laptop screen open; after scanning his prints for access to the device, he searches Ferthono. He clicks into the first video.

Christopher watches Vivian Ntalale Oreng'ani on YouTube. She is the face and voice of Ferthono. Every time the company must make a statement, her face accompanies the statement, good or bad.

She is worth the time, visually appealing, beautiful and stylish, a dark goddess. She is confident and eloquent, an erudite force. Ferthono is lucky to have her. She is aware of the attention and walks about soaking it up. In the video, she is dressed in red. Even her goddamn heels are in the sultry demonic hue. Bloody witch…. He imagines she is content with her place on earth; he wonders why she searches for more. Then, he remembers himself. People like us are never content…. He likens his need for more to his hypothesis of Ms. Ntalale's character. Something about her stands out to him, like a memory of himself. She reminds him of a younger Christopher Yego, greedy and reckless.

The clip starts with the audience at a presentation clapping; Christopher realises that it is part of a more extended recording. "We should stay in charge. The truth is that currently, our children can educate us in the world of technology, yet we came about this technology before them. I am simply trying to say that we need to stay current and be aware of the present levels of the technology we have created. We should be current physiologically and emotionally —stay linked to the present. This…" She taps on her temple, her slender frame shifting sideways. The camera changes to give Yego Ntalale's defined profile. "Should be in the now... And this is where Ferthono comes in…" she fumbles with a remote that controls the projector that shows her colourful PowerPoint on a screen behind her and smiles modestly at the audience. The camera cuts, shifting to a wide-angle. "This is you without Ferthono." Up on her projection comes a man beat by life itself; his body looks sulky, weak, and overrun. An x-ray graphic illuminates the nerves in his head in branching red lines with a white glow mapping them out all over the brain. Christopher can almost see the entities that plague the man. They feel numerous and dire, like death itself.

Vivian clicks on her remote and continues to speak, "And, this is you with Ferthono." Neurons fire in a sky blue. He can almost see how well in command this being is. He smiles and acknowledges their illusion; even

Christopher wishes this is his brain. It works well and unsettles him, for he knows his life is without Ferthono. He sees his lazy neurones fire with dead sparks; they fail altogether and rapture into small explosions that define his indisposed state.

"Ferthono caters to your psych and all other aspects of your life. We offer wholesome support and glide you into your excellent future on the slippery slopes of Mt. Ferthono." A few people laugh. "We are technologically apt to provide you a safe existence for you and your family. Ferthono has the know-how in STEM (Sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and medicine. We value none STEM programmes that feed our rich heritage and culture as the people of East Africa. We help the farmers and the food industry supply your table with safe and wholesome meals that help your families grow and glow." The crowd roars. "This baby corporation caters to your day-to-day needs even without you realising it. We offer internships and mentorship capabilities to maintain an informed citizenry.

In simple terms, would you like to get linked to the present?" The crowd roars in hysteria. "Well then," she sounds like she has been gifted the power of the world, "Who is joining us on Mt. Ferthono?" the crowd roars powerfully in support. "Welcome to Ferthono!"

The clip ends.

"Fuck!"

VIVIAN walks into Ophelia's room of horror. She noted with concern that Ophelia has nightmares. Ferthono watched Ophelia scream her lungs out most nights, and no one mentioned it to her, but since they recorded everything, she has had a chance to review older recordings. Every time Bemus sees her, he leaves her subconscious fractured. She gets fitful dreams after every session with Bemus. She speaks in her sleep; she asks why her, sometimes she calls out to her father, other times she remembers Christopher. While she would like them to end, her stormy nights mean something to the research. They watch everything, analyse it, and read meaning into it. It is all part of the study. It is a sad case of the mouse, the little medical mouse.

Pitched by the door, Vivian watches Ophelia sleep. She sleeps fitfully and pitifully unrestfully. Her memories of them plague her. Face tight, afraid to show more care than permitted for their subject, Vivian watches quietly.

When Ophelia rolls over and falls off the bed, Vivian sees it but does not move to help. Ophelia's one leg is tethered to the bed, the steel cutting into her ankle.

Ophelia wakes but fails to come completely awake as she is drugged to a near-comatose state. She is crying and mumbling, falling into a pattern of self-pity. She cries out, asks for clemency and then starts to weep for him. Suddenly, resolve takes over, as though she is deciding to be strong. She positions herself better, restricting the strain on her bound leg. She stills for a moment and then starts to weep again before falling asleep. The loop of crying and mumbling goes on and on. And again and again, she loops about the same series of events, and just when she is calming down, she accidentally tugs on her foot and starts to cry some more. Vivian feels for her. She watches for over an hour until Ophelia awakes to completion.

Exhausted, chest dramatically pumping as she comes to terms. Vivian begins to leave quietly. The motion catches Ophelia by surprise. She did not realise that someone was in the room with her. "Hello?" Ophelia calls out. No answer. She turns over; places the unchained leg under the chains, protecting her leg from the pressure of the weighty chains. "I'm sorry."

Vivian turns her head at the screen on the other side of the wall n. She narrows her eyes at Ophelia.

"I'm sorry... I..." Ophelia stutters before she goes silent. A few beats later, she confesses in a whisper. "I don't know why I'm here..."

Vivian squares her shoulders. She decidedly steps forward and relieves herself of all her jewels and devices. She leaves them in the monitoring room, takes a deep breath, and then opens the door to Ophelia's room.

"Ophelia." She speaks as she walks in. The girl raises her head long enough to place a face to the voice. When she sees Vivian, she falls back, her head hits the floor painfully, dislodging a tear from the corner of her left eye. She is too exhausted to hold herself up. "How do you feel?" Vivian asks.

"Not too good."

Vivian comes about Ophelia and sits on the bed carefully as if it would break from her weight alone. She looks down at Ophelia.

Ophelia takes time to study her new visitor; apart from a nurse that cleans her up and changes her, only Bemus has come in. This face is new to her. She sees notable details that help her place this woman ―Ophelia knows the study of class. What she sees before her is class and dissonance, a

polarisation. Ophelia can tell this woman was not born this high up; she is trying to fit into a world that is not innately hers. In her body language alone, she sees the discomfort of being placed where she is, surpassing others. She finds in this reading that she can trust, maybe get this woman who does not belong to help her. She hopes they are kindred in some way, lost… in need of going home. Ophelia looks up at the lady as she speaks, "I'm sorry. I don't know why I am here. Help me understand."

"Do you know me?"

Ophelia is now more confused. She stutters, "Dd-do I Kn-ow you?"

Vivian shakes her head; she sees her error now; she should have never come into the room. She should have never made her presence known. "Ophelia... This is your doing. You made this choice."

"I didn't," Ophelia swears painfully.

Vivian leans forward. "I know it makes no sense right now… But it will soon. It will end. Soon." She reaches forth and touches the side of Ophelia's face. Though she burns hot, signs of sickness, Vivian encourages her. "You are strong."

Ophelia shakes her head at her. She fights her shaking lips to avoid crying. "I can't. I will die here." She whispers. She leans into Vivian's cajoling hand. It feels cool on her face. It comforts too. She closes her eyes and relishes the touch until it brings up memories. Ophelia feels her chest tighten as she remembers this touch… but she cannot put a face to it. "Do I know you?!" she asks Vivian.

Vivian's past comes forth, rising like a cursed phoenix.

THE PAST

"VIVIAN!" Amy and Anthony's daughter cried out as she staggered towards her; Vivian grabbed her by her elbows and pulled the girl into her hands. They stumbled to the ground, Vivian unable to hold the girl up. She wept as she spoke, "Aunty… she shot him. Ma shot him!"

They jerked roughly as a second bullet echoed to them. A deathly silence came upon them, and then the young girl's raucous wail. It shook Vivian to the core.

THE PRESENT

“LADY... do I know you?” Ophelia cranes her neck as she tries to get a better look at Vivian. Ophelia watches as the lady’s face contorts in sorrow as she looks down at Ophelia. “Do you know me?” Ophelia asks again. Vivian pulls away. She clutches her hands to her chest as tears come to her eyes. “Help me,” Ophelia begs as Vivian falls into another deep into the past.

Time past sips back in rudely epithetic flashbacks that define her guilt. She sees the will, the will that gave her, the closest living relation of Anthony’s custody, his daughter ―and all their property to hold until she turned of age.

“Please.” The girl yells out as she pushes for an answer from Vivian. Her free foot jabs at the bed. “You must help me. I will pay you... how much? Help me. Please.”

VIVIAN trips through how she kicked the girl out to the street.

She remembers how she walked into Ferthono with the hope to turn her brother’s research into a lucrative venture. As an undergraduate student of Psychology herself, she could see the prospects of the research even at its initial stages. Needing a niche like no other, she went through old paperwork from her brother’s library and found the Ophelia Theory. It was incomplete but still viable enough for further research. She laid it all before Ferthono. Ferthono was a startup that needed a toe in Silicon Valley. They found the theory interesting enough and picked it up. Vivian was rewarded with a valuable seat on the board, healthy salary and health insurance, a house in the suburbs, and a company car. In time, she acquired enough power over the years to be the deciding factor on the board.

This should have been enough, but being human meant she wanted more. Money and power clouded the girl’s ambition. She pushed harder at the Ophelia Theory, and soon the faults in the research came to light. Everything seemed okay until it was not; they found that the theory was incompatible with just any subject. The theorie's tenets and actualisation highly biassed to a specific characterisation. One difficult if not entirely impossible to acquire unless artificially. Vivian dug deeper into the research and learned that her brother groomed his daughter, her niece, into the perfect case study. After years of exploitation, either she had developed an unusual collective of traits, or they had erased her soul entirely and replaced

it with a vacuum, easy to fill and mould; maybe that was the reason. The theory must have been applied to her psych.

They needed Anthony's daughter to come in.

Finding the girl was not easy. She had fallen off the grid, but with Ferthono's resources, they managed to trace her whereabouts. She lived in Mukuru Kwa Njenga, a slum bordering Industrial Area Nairobi. She worked as a shopkeeper in a tiny hole-in-the-wall kiosk within the dingy and dark slam.

Vivian remembers her face through the tiny window of the kiosk when she saw the black SUV park before her shop. She crawled out to face Ferthono, no weapons in hand, just a scrawny little thing, cold and distant. A Ferthono attaché rushed to speak to the first onlooker, who described her as quiet, almost detached, and weird.

She was perfect.

She never asked about Vivian even when she looked her straight in the eye. It was as though she never saw Vivian or never recognised her. So, Vivian never revealed that she was the girl's aunt or that her father had started all this. She barely remembered that she had loving and caring parents; they were just a little caught up in the world's mysteries.

They dragged her back to Ferthono, forced a selected number of details down her throat about the research, and then placed papers before her to sign. She barely read the print. She was barely present enough to realise what she was signing. They asked, and she said yes, that was all that mattered. She agreed to hand them ten years of her life. She signed the paperwork without as much as a question or condition. They used her. They hid the truth in the blueprint. It would take a team of lawyers to realise that the research involved extracting the essence of who she is and replacing it with another. She would be an entirely different person for ten good years. She would be thirty-one when her contract voided.

VIVIAN is knocked out of her reminiscence when Ophelia hits the bed's edge more forcefully with her free foot. Her pain is fuelling her growing anger. "Tell me!" She screams at Vivian, who promptly stands and hustles to leave the room. Ophelia grants away her frustration by taking it out in the bed. She repeatedly bangs her free foot to the side edge of the bed, grunting like a caged animal.

Vivian can finally breathe when the door closes behind her. She draws quick breaths. She tries numbing herself again but fails to do it in time.

When she opens her eyes, Bemus is standing before her, staring.

In his hands, he holds a tray of medicine and applicators. At first, he is frozen as though caught in the light; then his head tilts a little to the side, eyes wide, lips in a tight bind. He then looks to his extreme right side, then the other as though trying to escape her glare now fixed on him, or maybe he looks to see who else is coming up behind him. “The past….” He whispers as he inches forward to her. “Tenacious little beast, huh...?”

Vivian ignores him. She eyes the contents of the tray; two syringes, one already loaded, a vile of quinine, and two bags of fluids and tubes. *She is sick! No!*

“Malaria. She has been unwell for some time. This may explain why the tests seem inconclusive. The results are conclusive when she is lucid; when she is not, the results are too scattered.”

“There are lucid and non-lucid states?!” Vivian deduces, and she takes two unsteady steps inching towards Bemus. “I’m tired. I may seem cold, but even I can’t take this anymore.” She confesses as her body lugs it in its weak state. She does not hide away in a sturdy stance. She lets him see her actual state. “She’s my niece!”

Bemus looks unfazed. He eyes her coldly. She stands too close. Thus, his gaze comes sideways, eerily. His eyes are lazy at half mast. “May I speak freely, ma’am.” She nods. “Board members belong up there. There is a reason why you and Henry are the only ones who make your way down here.”

She gets his message explicit as an image through a vignette. Pushing paper, sighing forms, and smiling, that’s her job. His job is the heavy lifting. She finds the sides of her lips twitch in anger or sheer amusement. Vivian steps back and walks at an unsteady pace to her effects before the monitor. She avoids Ophelia's image as she picks up her belongings. She rushes towards the door without a word; she opts out, leaving her blood to the mercy of a madman.

Vivian barely graces the doorknob of the outer door when Bemus steps through the inner door. Ophelia’s throaty grants strangle the air about her. She hears a ruffle as Ophelia fights off Bemus, although he is here to help her. But how would she know that he holds medicine and not toxins or worse, poison? She knows not to trust them because she woke up chained and has been probed since that day... now this.

Vivian’s chest tightens. She turns her head to look through the open door into Ophelia’s room and catches a syringe going through Ophelia’s neck. The girl’s eyes shut as she goes numb. Vivian closes her eyes. She shakes her head side to side and turns away.

She walks away from it all. This is the last time she will visit the lower floors of Ferthono.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TWO MONTHS LATER...

SADIC WHISPERS GINGERLY, afraid to offend, “We have uncovered rumours. Bemus was spotted in Murang’a.”

His words are delivered delicately; good news masquerading hard words. The man resurfacing could mean Ophelia resurfacing too; they could have let her go or released her body to him. Worse still, she could never come back, dead or alive. He is sure Sadic knows this insight very well, thus his gentle approach. Quietly, Christopher values Sadic as a trusted friend or advisor; Christopher cannot tell anymore. He has known Sadic for eight years now. He is the closest to a friend Christopher will ever know. He goes through this pain with Christopher; surely, he is more valuable than Christopher had ever thought because he cannot see himself going through this season with anyone else other than Sadic in his corner.

He and Christopher sit in his office in Nairobi. In this room, they have measured every piece of rumour and half-truth they could find concerning the ex-priest Bemus. The man is a miracle worker; despite the resources availed to them, courtesy of Christopher’s connections, the man still eludes them and the police. The nun Margret seems as clueless as they are. All she can tell them is that one day Bemus walked into their mission offices at St. Petersburg with Ophelia following close behind. She was linguistically proficient and with an unfathomable IQ bias to humanism and behaviour and filthy as a street rat; she gave them much but little that could help their investigation.

This news is the best thing they have found that could lead them to Ophelia, but Christopher is torn. This search has taken more than he had envisioned. He has unveiled cogitations of clandestine companies run by secret societies running human experiments within Nairobi. These are the makings of an infinite rabbit hole he is afraid to chase down. He knows he should stop. His eyes droop with a lack of sleep; his cursory appearance aside, he feels weak; like Ophelia took the Sun from him when she disappeared. He has been at it for three months, and they finally give him something; he fears it is too late. He feels he does not have the strength to

pursue this although he agrees to leave Nairobi, “Fine. Let’s go to Murang’a.”

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OPHELIA wakes up under a bridge on a deserted underpass. She is butt naked and freezing to the bone. The chill has her unaware of her extremities, where she begins and ends. She wakes to hoots and evening noises of revellers, half-wits, and the night’s fools. From their tongue alone, she deduces that she is not in Nairobi.

She sits up and turns her head to the closest hooting car. The sound alone rings deep in her head, working bits of her she never knew existed. She crawls smaller, folding into herself to generate some heat. Unable to actively control her shivering, she struggles to draw a whole breath.

“*Poko! Toka hapo!!!*” Someone yells and jeers in a name-calling chorus about her. They call her a whore and ask her to leave. After a few cars pile on the single-way passage, more crude epithets are thrown at her. She struggles to stand, submitting to their words, but her limbs fail her; she keeps falling back down in a lump. The hooting car goes around her, missing her by millimetres. More follow-through. One by one, the vehicles blocking the road drive off, leaving her helpless at the mercy of the night, yet onlookers build by the minute. None offer the help she needs.

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IT takes about six minutes for news to reach Christopher of a strange girl at an underpass in the outskirts of Murang’a town. The news spreads like wildfire from mouth to ear like a bad case of disease until Christopher picks up the chatter from a guest at the hotel who speaks of a nude girl blocking an underpass. Christopher approaches and solicits a location. A few notes less, he walks away, avoiding a fight; the most important thing is that he has the information he needs from the man; this girl could be Ophelia.

Christopher finds Ophelia.

His instincts are right; the girl is Ophelia. He and Tom find her sitting on the dirt road, thighs pressed to her chest, and her arms tightly wound about her legs. A crowd of unforgiving hecklers continues to insult her as she is the evening’s main attraction; they treat the mistreatment of an abused woman like a cheap tease, reducing her to merely entertainment for those who dare walk the night streets. And no one raises a finger to help her.

When Christopher gets out of his car and makes steady strides towards Ophelia, his blood is boiling like hateful lava. He stops over her, towers over his price, standing rigid —a fallen Angelo towering over his human. OPHELIA recoils, sensing a great power looming over her. This pushes her deeper into the abyss. She has come to learn about fear. She knows she should fear what she does not understand. She finds she distances herself from the force and accepts with humility that she is not strong enough to take on this power.

Sometimes, it is well enough to recognise one's strength or lack thereof. CHRISTOPHER loses his concentration on those who seem to want to harm his woman when he senses a shiver ripple through Ophelia to his sturdy legs. He looks down his body to the woman at his feet and catches her shivers. The shakes are more than shivers, more like spasms of withdrawal. Tensing tighter, he frowns. He sees the expanse of nude skin on her curved lean back as though for the first time —it is as though he is blind, tunnelled perception revealing Ophelia to him but not how exposed she was; her tiny form in a blur against the vileness about her. She cannot be exposed like this. It is about midnight Saturday night; only party-goers and those with ill intentions waltz about currently... *Filth of the earth lays eyes on my woman*. He fails to think of those working night jobs, those travelling, those stuck outside, those who may be facing circumstances such as his; all he feels is that the world is against him, and these onlookers are the instruments of this torture.

Christopher grants as he releases his coat to her. He slides it off his broad shoulders and crouches behind Ophelia, draping it over her pitiful form —he covers sundaes shifting his form quickly and envelops himself over her. The world about them disappears.

"*Chukua poko wako buda; huku tumeokoka! Rudini Kanairo!*" Take your whore man; here we are saved! Go back to Nairobi! One from the crowd yells. Others salute him in agreement, while others laugh aloud at the scene before them.

"You would know!" Christopher mutters bitterly, tightening his hold about Ophelia. *You would effing know!*

"Tom!" Christopher barks, restricting himself from going for these people's throats; it takes everything in him not to fight them.

His driver Tom draws a gun and fires a single bullet into the sky. The crowds disperse in fear with a roaring rapture of screams, invocations to

gods, threats, and abuse. These sounds echo through the night. Tom's shoes appear before Christopher. Ophelia falls back into him; she is out. Christopher holds her, hustling to correct the slipping coat. "Twende," Let's go. "We must go, now!" Tom warns, hooded eyes locked on his boss' face. Christopher nods once and then stands, bringing Ophelia up with him. He walks off towards the waiting car.

TOM lingers for a couple of beats, eyeing the crowd slowly starting to come together again. They seem furious —a little riled, so he waves his gun at them, enjoying the looks on their faces as they squirmed, folding away from them. He starts to turn to follow his boss when something shiny catches his eye on the ground where Ophelia had been sitting. He bends over to look closely, keeping his gun raised, and *shit…!* If the heavens were not laying out signs all night. There sits a tiny wedding band, Ophelia's, he presumes. He picks it up and runs to help Christopher get Ophelia into the car.

Christopher moves aside, letting Tom get to the back seat car door. Tom opens the door and stands behind it as he watches Christopher effectively fold himself into the car with his unconscious wife in his arms. When they are well seated, Tom shuts the door. The thump jars the sleeping woman. Christopher holds her closer. Tom watches as he starts to tell her something when something small and round lands on the top of the car, rousing Tom into movement as it slides down the side of the car; someone has thrown a rock at them. He runs about the vehicle, putting his gun away as he steps into the driver's seat. Seconds later, he is reversing the machine. He drives the wrong way just as the crowd hurls stones at Christopher's car; he has one goal, to get them safely back on the highway.

Minutes later, Tom glides the car into a steady cruise as they take the fast lane on the TRS. He feels his left palm moisten with nervous sweat, the weight of the small band nudging at his conscience. He is hyper-aware of the fading coldness of the wedding band as it absorbs his body heat. He steals a glance at Christopher through the mirror —just his boss; he does not dare look down at Ophelia. "Where to, sir?"

"Home," Christopher replies; he forgets about the already booked hotel room. "I will have my doctor called," Christopher adds, arranging Ophelia in his arms, ensuring his coat covers her well.

Tom nods and makes a note in his mind to cancel Christopher's room later. He slips the ring into his inner jacket pocket; it is not the time; he shall

mention it later when Christopher is calmer. Tom bites down as he begins to speed up. The night lights parallel to the road dance in his eyes as he swallows the guilt that is burning flames in his gut.

A lot stays unmentioned; Tom is sure of this much; even on the outskirts of a town where little drama happens, someone will find out that Christopher's man pulled a gun at the locals. He steals a breath through his teeth, and he abruptly shifts lanes —some idiot was cruising in the fast lane. He looks back at Christopher, expecting a reprimand, but none comes. Christopher seems a little calmer, limited ease has crept in, and the man has ghosted off… staring out the window; his eyes are alive with God's wrath. Something of the big Man's sort fires from within him. These people have gone after him mightily. Tom knows that Christopher will want answers... maybe even blood.

Tom's gaze shifts back to the road. Soon even he is calmed by the passing night lights, the steady hum of the vehicle, and the fact that his boss had his woman; she was alive and safe in his hands.

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"SHE is healthy, sir." The words float to Christopher as he stands across the room from the physician and a sleeping Ophelia; this is not his doctor. His doctor sent him an understudy claiming he has a surgery he cannot pass on, the kind that gets men Nobel prices.

They are in his house, his stone mansion in the suburbs of Nairobi. He still feels an odd vulnerability in his fortress of stone, steel, and tech. Maybe it is her presence there or the fact that they had taken her right from under his nose, and he had no way to get her back until they handed her over when they were done with her —he cursed himself for letting it happen, this was never how he had imagined his first year with Ophelia.

She is healthy… Christopher makes a beeline to the physician, who starts his step backward, unable to stand his ground at the sheer force of dominance coming at him. "You call that healthy?" His threat is shy, sublet to worry about his wife, but actively present. He cannot announce his true feelings in his words because of their proximity to the sleeping Ophelia. "Count your words…." He warns, *carefully, select them with abundance in wisdom*. A line from a book or film slithers into his mind; someone dies when those words are disregarded. Christopher's fists tighten at his sides. He throws a short gaze at Ophelia. *How could she be healthy?!* Christopher

would never use the word ‘healthy’ to describe his woman in her current state. For the lack of a better word, she looks too thin in his eyes. Surely her frame could never allow her to get much thinner, but damn if he could stuff fat and muscle in her, he would do exactly that instantly.

“She may look thin...” The physician begins but stops to rectify his approach when his words earn him a glare from Christopher. “Smaller even, but whoever had her took care of her. They even medicated her.” Christopher tilts his head in a quiet inquisition. “An anti-malarial, I found it in her blood against other drugs. Antibiotics... Pain killers, beta-blockers, and supplements.” He skips the crazy drugs.

“She was sick?”

The physician nods. “Whoever had her got her better. It must have been bad.” Christopher is quiet. He listens with a great deal of forced patience to the good doctor speak eternally. “Caloric intake is my main worry, but otherwise, she is fit as a fiddle. It’s as though she chose to be unhealthy, but they forced the nutrients in her.”

“You don’t say.”

“Only thing is...” he stalls. Christopher thins his eyes at him, a warning. “She remembers nothing of the last three months.”

The heavens are burning!

OPHELIA walks tentatively through the space. It is a small one-bedroom apartment furnished lightly. The place is warm. She finds it easy to imagine she lives here. *But still... something feels off.*

YEGO watches her measure the space. He reaches for his phone. ‘It’s not working. Something’s wrong with the theory.’ Christopher texts a Dennis with a foreign number.

A reply comes no sooner. ‘There’s nothing wrong with the theory... The human element may be lacking.’

‘I did as you asked. Supplied her life before she disappeared… I changed a few details as you instructed. Gave a sense of self.’

A minute passes, and Christopher catches Ophelia’s shadow slip into the bedroom. He calls Dennis when he believes she is beyond earshot; Dennis picks up the call within the third ring. “You should give it time. Matters such as these take time.” He refuses to salute an impatient Yego. “In her

state, she is hair-trigger ready to fall into a depression. You must be careful and patient."

"Fine. I gave her an apartment and office space in the city." He speaks softly; his voice barely resonates in the living room. "Are you sure?"

Dennis speaks confidently. "It will work."

Christopher hangs up. He feels derelict standing there and seeks out Ophelia. He finds the bedroom door slightly open. He pushes the door further open to find her sleeping in the bed. She is sound asleep. Here he thought his day was too much; he can only imagine how much of a whiplash hers must have been. She has refused to acknowledge that she remembers nothing from before, other than to his private physician. This shows how little this version trusts in him, and so be it. He has sworn he will let her be… to the best of his ability.

He watches her a moment and decides the act lacks grace. He shuts the door slightly and leaves the apartment altogether. When in the car, Christopher turns on his laptop. He works on his emails until his eyesight turns blurry. Christopher shuts his eyes. He stills for a couple of seconds, breathing deeply as though managing a panic attack. His hand hovers over the device undecidedly. Then, almost like a spell calling his fingers, he presses a software icon with a curt gothic font called 'Crow'. The desktop of the programme takes up the whole screen. It shows a grid of surveillance footage of the entrances and exits to Ophelia's apartment. His eyes repeatedly dart right and left as he studies each window and door. When satisfied, he presses the 'N' key, and a new set of surveillance windows comes on. These are of the interior of her apartment, except for the bathroom. Christopher studies his wife's apartment. It is a fortress, highly secure, and expertly surveilled. He finishes his peeking by zooming into Ophelia's bedroom with a single click. He watches her sleep.

Minutes turn to hours, and on the third, he has a grinding headache turning his brain to mush. He grants and flips the lid shut.

"Sir," Tom speaks from the front seat of the car. Christopher looks up at his driver; Tom is more a companion than an employee. Christopher knows not what he will do if Tom quits or worse, dies —it is the case of the tailor all over again. He cannot help but laugh. "You should go home," Tom suggests looking at his boss through the rear-view mirror.

"I should."

“Tomorrow is as likely a good day to get answers,” Tom adds as he turns the ignition. “It’s late, sir.”

Yego looks at his watch ―eleven-thirty in the night. Time has a way today; it feels like the clock rushes. “Let’s go home.” Christopher agrees.

With that, Tom drives. Soon they are out of the two secure perimeter walls of Ophelia’s apartment building through an automated gate. They fall into the main street that leads them into a busy Lang’ata road.

It is Friday, 11.46 PM. The night has just started for some; for Christopher, it has been a continuous slab of time since he got Ophelia back. He is withered, worked to a near pulp by each day’s events. He wants to go home, possibly sleep. Tomorrow is a big day. He swears to find a way to fix her; he has been swearing this for days. He will not have her walk about a shell unaware of vital details of her own life… unaware of her relation to him.

CHAPTER NINE

THREE MONTHS PASS; despite the passing of time, questions remain unanswered. Where was she, who had her, what did they do to her, why did they let her go... and many more.

Ophelia and Christopher play this game where Ophelia pretends all is well, and Christopher pretends he does not care. Ophelia lives like the past does not touch her, and Christopher manages her, waiting for her memories to return. Somehow, some things fall into play, and all seems well enough.

THROUGH Ophelia's eyes, she lives as she did before that night that no one talks about. Her mind maintains a decorum of perceived sanity, a perception told to her by those about her. She has two friends, Eleanor and Stacy. They were reintroduced to her by Christopher; though she does not remember them, she pretends that she does; this way, her friend Christopher Yego does not look at her like she is a lost puppy in need of saving.

She remembers aspects of her life such as her education and personal likes and dislikes. That about sums it up. Everything else is a blur.

Ophelia works at her office in the city; she spends some days there where she practises psychology in a limited capacity. Most of her practical office hours are given to the city's Catholic Church, where she levies her expertise. She also counsels at the mission, St. Petersburg, every Thursday; a return on a paid forward —apparently, she grew up at the mission, she had no idea. She feels she should return a favour amply given.

With a packed itinerary, her days are not spent moping over the missing details of her life. Safe to say, blocked pasts can be forgotten for new beginnings. She chooses to try to live without her memories.

Then there is Christopher; she likes to pretend that he is the ideal client, despite their unprofessional relationship. He is her only client that is not church-provided, and he sure does bring the spice. She should not be counselling him in any capacity, but the man insists on it, and he pays well. So, she agrees to see him. Using him to fill the colour is her all so dull and routine existence.

OPHELIA and Christopher sit in her office. He plays the patient in a need of an ear, and Ophelia plays the guide, ready to escort him to the light, the irony.

“Looking at her at this moment... I guess I see the appeal.” Christopher speaks as he tilts his head, his eyes fixed on Ophelia.

She breaks eye contact and records her feelings on his words in her notebook. ‘Lust… curiosity…’ she writes what she thinks he feels about this girl from his dreams. She looks up to find his gaze, those ravenously piercing eyes still watching her; she starts to feel uneasy. Looking away, she turns the page… ‘The appeal in a broken girl?!’ She writes, feeling the tingle of a shiver struggle to come forth from her core, but she suppresses it, barely. She takes a quiet deeper breath. “The appeal in what exactly?” she asks.

“In her state. Me being me… her being weak, needing me. It’s the state of the sexes. According to Christians, as you know,” he hints at her connection with the Catholic church. “She is of me, born of my rib. It is fitting that she should need me, of my rib and all.”

“And do you believe in this faith enough to base your logic on it?”

“Maybe. It is hard to think independently when I am accosted by the belief daily; in reality and my memories.”

“That does not mean you have to believe in it.”

“It rubs off in time.” He looks away, draws a deep breath, slouching in the chair, “And, I was raised, Christian. Some of what I learnt has not left me.”

She writes some more.

Christopher moves, calling her attention by suddenly sitting upright, even leaning forward, “So, have you ever thought of being Catholic?” he asks.

Ophelia looks up, “Why would you ask me that?”

“They raised you,” He runs a gaze about the room, “given your work; why not convert into Catholicism.”

“Well, aren’t you curious this morning?” she comments.

He smiles, leaning back. “It would make sense to me if you were Catholic; I do not understand why your life revolves about faith you do not even practice.”

“And...?” She asks him, arching her neck defiantly.

“And what?”

“Your girl.” She says, at which he raises his brow, “The girl in your dreams.” She supplies, urging him on by rolling her pen in the air.

Christopher’s eyes shine in amusement, which quickly dissipates into subtle concern. “I see her spine; it is bony like it threatens to cut through

her skin. It's the curve of her back as she is hunched over... it makes me... I want to curve myself over her... to protect her from the elements."

He describes the requiem of the events in a romanticised recollection that curves harshly out his lips, making Ophelia jealous. She swallows hard. The top of her pen makes an unconscious trip to the column of her throat; she glides it down an erogenous trail; the smooth top makes her skin tingle. Her fingers shake, almost dropping. She takes a deep breath and tightens her crossed legs as a familiar throb attacks her middle. "What elements?" she must ask.

"It's raining, and the wind blows hard." He raises his left hand, elaborating the elements in rhythmic movements. Her eyes dart to this signifying hand. Her eyes move back to his face; his forehead crinkles as she tightens her gaze on his features. She studies the shape of his face, bone structure and the cheekbones, the brows and those deep-set eyes, the nose bridge, and the nudge of his nose, lips, and chin. His… "The wind, it blows soil and fragments on her." She takes another deep breath, shifting her crossed legs to the side. Pen still in hand, she brings this hand up and slides her index over the slit of her lips. She must admit it; she feels a more profound empathy for Christopher today than ever. She sees his pain, and it manifests in her in crude calibrations. She suffers with him. Unable to fully understand this new emotion. "There is also a sound. A hitting sound. The earth gives in to forces beyond its grasp… I feel she is too vulnerable here. I want to keep her safe. I want to save her." He flexes his muscles unconsciously.

Intoxicated by the allure of his strong arms, she pauses a beat before asking, "And do you?"

He gets distracted by something outside, and his gaze shifts to the side window of the little office space. From his position, he should be able to see just a sliver of the back end of the city. Moving away from his revelations, he asks, "Why does your office face the alley and not the glorious front of this building?" She hears him but does not perceive the words as her eyes have wondered lower on his form. He turns back to her and huffs a tiny laugh. She looks up. "O…" he begins but stops before saying what is on his mind.

What has her lost in his body and mannerisms is how they seem oddly novel yet exceedingly familiar. She wants to feel on his pecs and upper arms. She wants to know whether it is just her mind or do her muscles have

a memory of this man. She wants him to touch her, see if her body remembers this man. She wants to feel the power of his grip against her flesh.

She suddenly squints at him, scrunching her face when she realises that her thoughts have veered away from her work and into outstandingly unprofessional depths; his presence coaxes her inner freak to come out and play. She escapes his gaze by placing her pen to paper. She writes, 'Only a mad man would know how to handle a mad man… only a freak would know how to handle another.' She can feel the heat rise as her juices pool to provide for barrelling through. She can almost feel him, this feeling threatening to overwhelm her. What scares her is how familiar this feeling is.

Desire, she names it. Raw lust burns through her.

"OPHELIA?" Christopher calls her, "Are you okay?" She does not answer. He inches forward and scrutinises every inch of her face. He knows she remembers something, 'what' is the inquisition he wishes to push forward, "O?!" He inches closer, angling to touch her. Her reactions to him have been surprisingly entertaining, but this trance is daunting. He does not know how to deal with it, which scares him. He is close to pulling out his phone and calling Dennis for guidance.

He notes to himself the side effects of their topic of discussion. *Vulnerability*, defencelessness on her part. She finds this radish. He should find this enticing, seeing that he brings out this side of her, but she should know; a man sees weakness and can fall prey to the powerful woman guising as a weakling. He remembers Sadic's theory on how Ophelia was being used. *What does she remember? Does she share his fate? Does she remember that she should share this cup?* Christopher wonders. His movements as he almost touches her face pull her out of the trance. She jumps a little seeing how close he is to her.

"O, are you okay? What just happened?" He asks again, forgetting his role here.

She shakes her head at him but, all the same, smiles at him. "Who's the one therapising here? Me or you?" She asks irately, then escapes by scribbling nonsense into her book.

"You make me wonder." He answers honestly.

"I remembered something." She speaks innocently, unaware that this is the answer he has been waiting for. Christopher had dawdled about her

tentatively for three months, waiting for her to remember him, and she had just admitted to placing something from her past. She looks up, her eyes meet his. He remains perched forward, his eyes seeking out answers from her. “Care to share?”

“Please, this is your time.” She shakes her head and forbids herself from exposing her weaknesses to him. “This arrangement is already…” she goes quiet; her veil goes up in steel.

Christopher leans back. Just like that, he has lost her again. He curses quietly, and she shifts; the swearing makes her uneasy. At least he sees something new there. Before Ferthono took her, she did not mind him swearing. She hated him yelling, but she never really cared about his swearing.

He jabs one hand forth to free himself from the tightness in his sleeve before speaking; he accompanies his words with elaborate gestures using that hand. “Yes, you are my shrink but also my friend. I believe I have a right to ask if you are okay.”

She smiles. “You are not ready for that...” She concludes in a whisper. “It’s nothing.” She speaks to him, “Just a long day.”

“Maybe we should reschedule.” He suggests. Her face falls, and he is sure she is not ready to let him go. Christopher starts to reach for his coat slung over his backrest “One last thing,” *Nice*... he stands up, puts on his coat, and even goes as far as to button it up. “Did you protect her?” She asks him.

He stills a second and tilts his head to the roof of the minuscule office for answers. He studies the flaking paint for a few beats. “Hurt like a mother, but I did.” He flexes his back as though it hurts even now. He looks down at her to gauge her satisfaction with his answer, only to find himself staring down into another deathly flinty gaze.

OPHELIA looks up at Christopher, all man high above, and unconsciously —with the help of the building tension about them— identifies what she would dim a weakness; his suits are ever slim fit, dark black, at times in the darker shades of grey. Perfect white and black shirts and almost identical leather shoes. The shoes come in black, brown and grey; his shoes always match his ties. At times, he laces a handkerchief in a triangle fold at his jacket’s breast pocket. Sometimes he comes without the coat entirely. Every day he comes to her, he comes stellar in perfection, every freaking time. He must own the whole series of slim-fit suits, all tailored in the same hand.

She sees a pre-emptive problem; the death of his tailor. Like a baited hound, she turns the page and scribbles it down.

'Death of the tailor.'

Christopher catches a glimpse of the writing. He must know these words all too well… his suits are exquisitely fitted to his form. His lips twitch as he almost smiles, but he contracts his face in a severe frown to hide it.

She catches the smile, then the frown that follows. She feels pressed to keep her questions to herself but forges on in a moment of rare resilience. "Why do you feel protective over her? Is she real? A memory, perhaps. A face from your past resurfacing in your subconscious, or is she entirely a figment of your imagination?"

"You tell me? Is hurt real. Is the pain you feel when you are hurt real?"

She remembers her moon pains. "I guess..."

"No," he abruptly cuts her short. "Do you feel pain or not? It's a simple question. It requires a simple answer." He angles for polarity; acceptance or denial; 'Yes' or 'no'.

She remembers why she finds him so difficult. "Yes." Her tone is defiant; she feels her head cock as she channels an improper teen.

He nods firmly, then moves on to set his coat right. He has her cornered; he transforms her office into his dressing room. Christopher takes his time to square the fabric right. A wicked satisfaction mars his face.

She is real... Ophelia concludes. She feels jealousy flare in her chest. She hides her face, lest it show by jotting down random words in her book. The moment the last word hits the paper, she stands up and places her notebook on the seat to capture the warmth of her bottom within the open pages of the book. When she turns to him, Christopher closes the space between them in two confident strides. With nowhere to go, she holds her ground as he stops right before her, dwarfing her, taking up the air in the room.

His scent masks her perfume. All she can smell is Christopher's exclusive scent. She turns her head to the side as though running away from the scent, but he turns his head with her, meeting her gaze.

Up close, he seems shorter than she had perceived him. His clothes make him look much taller and leaner despite his broad chest, wide shoulders, and strong legs. Gauging by her height, he must be about 5'9. Again she thinks of this magical tailor. Honestly, she may seem apprehensive, but she likes this look on him; it suits him.

“O,” Christopher speaks softly; she feels like she could melt to nothingness, if not a gooey and disgusting pile of human bits. He hugs her. A sound of appreciation rumbles in his chest, vibrating through her.

“Mhmm.” She replies unconsciously.

“Go home, get some rest. We will talk next Tuesday.”

“Mhmm”

He pulls back, holds her by her upper arms, and studies her for a moment, panning and tilting his gaze across her face. She smiles shyly as her ease fizzles into a jittery dance within her. She grows more restless by the moment. She tries to get away by pulling out of his hands but finds he has her boxed between the chair and himself. She breathes deeply, realising that he knows what he is doing.

“This is highly improper.” She whispers. He barely nudges, not even a twitch.

“Get out tonight, do something for you this once.” He says, then lets her go. Christopher walks towards the door, and Ophelia has nothing for him. At the door, he turns back and says, “I don’t like it.”

“What?”

“The hole in the wall office in the back of the building.”

She smiles sadly. “You and me both.”

With that, he leaves. As the tension begins to dissipate, Ophelia realises she forgot to give him a list of psychologists for him to select from; this session just proved she could not counsel him anymore.

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“MOST powerful man in Nairobi, and your girl is closed off in a clock room for an office.” This is Sadic’s voice through the receiver; he speaks out of order. He has grown horns this one. Shaving them now is impossible —he gained status when he stopped being an employee and became a friend.

“It is necessary. She must remember on her own terms. If we rush her, she may be shattered forever... I will not risk it.”

“Who took her? Does she remember?”

“I don’t think so,” Christopher says.

“Does she remember the night you found her?”

“Nothing. She truly awakened days after we found her.”

“Is the illusion working?”

"Yes." *She wants me... and she remembers her thoughts on my tailor.* "She is slowly discovering things about herself and the world about her. She is mystified by everything but will not admit her actual status to herself, me, or the girls.

Honestly, I don't think she knows what's happening. And I'm not sure what to do now."

Silence.

"How long do you plan to maintain this charade?" Sadic sounds vaguely amused. What Christopher is attempting is unheard of.

Christopher looks at the CCTV surveillance footage from Ophelia's office. He has monitors showing real-time coverage of the inside and outside her office, including any possible paths she may take, just as he has her home. "As long as it takes." He undoes his cufflinks and places them on the desk. He squares in on Ophelia. She is leaving the office. He follows her image as it disappears from one grid potion to the next while folding his sleeves just under his elbows. He follows Ophelia from screen to screen, keen on every detail. He pays attention to her walk, the way her hips sway in a sultry manner as she saunters from screen to screen. Then there is the way she moves her head, making her braids bounce as she walks. She was the embodiment of a goddess. One thing is for sure no one could accuse her of being poor; she wears faux wealth well *for a bloody street rat*.

Christopher finally understands Sadic's position concerning Ophelia; this woman could be a fraud.

HE wanted to protect her... the girl in his dreams, Ophelia remembers as she sits in the living room of her one-bedroom apartment. She has showered, and her face is cleansed off all makeup. Dressed in a thin pair of boy shorts coupled with a tank top, she sits on her living room floor, with her laptop ready for her nightly routine, searching for her life on the internet. Tonight she has liquid company, a fine bottle of wine courtesy of her friend Christopher Yego. He must have sent it over earlier that day; she found it waiting at her door.

The state recognises her as Ophelia Mambo; the name Mambo was given to her at the mission as it ties her to no one other than an elderly nun at St. Petersburg. Every day for about two months, she has gone over every site she can, trying to trace her past. The searches have not yielded anything

other than the insecurity of knowing that she is alone. She reaches another dead end minutes after searching for a study that she thought was associated with the name ‘Ophelia’. She came across the study through a psychological paper that mentioned the theory in passing. It is nothing more than a speculatory hypothesis on memory, half-baked and inconclusive; either it was a fail study or was discontinued. The scientist who wrote the theory was killed in a murder-suicide by his wife. The yield of this search is bleak enough to end Ophelia’s night of research. She reaches for her wine bottle. This tangent is as disappointing as every previous one; worse, now she has thoughts of the murder-suicide in her head. She raises the bottle to her lips too enthusiastically and overfires.

The bottled elixir turns weapon too easily; the rim slides down her teeth, hitting her gums as the wine goes up into her nose. She bends forward quickly, and the sweet-smelling liquid pours down the front of her shirt. She chokes on the vintage still stuck in her air passage as it mixes with air confusing her lungs. She hacks it out in painful spasms between laboured breaths learning a few lessons this night. One; expensive stuff is not for her. It is about the shape of the bottle designed to lure in the moneyed; the second teaching, wine may never always be your friend.

Caught up on breathing, she settles and can now feel the wine all over her shirt front, down to her navel. She quickly resets the bottle on the table and gets up to shake off her shirt. She accidentally knocks the bottle to its side, right onto her laptop keyboard. “No, no, no!” She picks the device up and turns it upside down, shaking out.

Maybe he’s right. I should get out. A feral thinker, she goes on to actively go through the decision-making process. *What harm could it do?* She turns to go to her bedroom, laptop in hand. She returns to the kitchen to collect some rice halfway down the hall. Then to the living room to get the wine. She grabs the bottle.

What harm could it do?

IN a bar in downtown Nairobi, Christopher’s nostalgia works hard at eating into the slightest cheer in the air. He sits at the bar; proximity to the supply felt like a good idea when he walked in thirty minutes ago. He is on his second glass and going strong.

Ophelia runs ridges in his mind, but there are instances where he has control. Moments when he has his brain all to himself.

A man is sitting next to Christopher, the man's polarity from him singularly evident. The man's a little heavy in the middle, with rounded cheeks. He is easily dressed in a t-shirt and jeans, despite it being a weekday. He has half a beer sweating before him. He seems more interested in the TV above the bar than his drink until his sweeping gaze falls on Christopher. "Hey." He salutes the brooding Christopher Yego. He then eyes Yego's suit and concludes that he looks so without himself because he works corporate. He is happy that he quit his job for more personal exploits years ago.

CHRISTOPHER turns to the man belatedly, his mind much slower than expected. "Hey," he says unenthusiastically, then grabs his drink and takes half the remains of the burning fluid in one swig.

The man frowns at Christopher, "That bad...."

In a stranger, Christopher finds words he would never utter out loud. "I lost my girl." Sometimes, strangers give the best consolation.

"Condolences." The man says sincerely. He misjudges Christopher's words. Christopher lets Ophelia's death sit unverified for a minute or so. He even sips his liquor in the prelude. He looks to the man by him, who offered him condolences —a stranger. They could have met before, here. They could both be regulars but had never come to know each other. Maybe they have brushed their shoulders and cannot remember, perhaps even exchanged salutations or picked from the same peanut bowl... they will never know.

The club is filling up quickly as the midnight crowd comes in. The gentle rumble of human noise snatches Yego's attention. The music is craftily mixed, and in the right DB —decibels— to advocate if not accommodate for human interaction. For a moment, he forgets to correct the stranger. It is easier to think that Ophelia is dead. He raises his glass, and the stranger presents his bottle; they clink glass and bottle as the noise of empty cutlery and plates knocking carries as a waiter passes with empty dishes behind the pair.

She loved this place; she loved their food and cocktails. He cannot imagine how much money he left behind every night he brought her here.

If I lost her, forever... he wonders if she had died, how much worse would he be feeling, much worse than he feels now for sure. He looks at the

stranger and thinks that maybe it is not right for him to think so of one that still lives and breathes. “I lost her differently.”

“Ah, to another.”

“In a way.” Christopher chuckles at this man’s ability to draw the most extreme conclusions, though seeing the amusement in the matter is something he never anticipated.

How much does he feel he can devolve to this stranger? “She went away and came back... changed.”

The man takes a moment to think about Christopher’s situation. “How much change are we talking about?” He puts his bottle down and values some space between his open palms; he is thinking about weight and mass. The man feels that Ophelia must have come back heavier. Looking at Christopher, he most certainly judges him to have a certain level of vanity. Christopher laughs.

“You look too sharp for Nairobi.”

Christopher decides it best to be clear with his new companion, “She does not know who I am. Technically, she knows me but doesn’t remember who I am to her...” The man looks lost. “Her husband.” In an instant, Christopher is rewarded with the most honest reaction. The man’s head pans to him so sharply that his neck makes a sound. He levies sharp eyes on Christopher, who does not react so elaborately to acknowledge his reaction. The man huffs in a harsh breath. “That’s tough.”

“Tell me about it.”

The man calls on their bartender to wait on them as he ponders Christopher’s fate. He has nothing to tell him. “I’m Jon by the way.”

“Christopher.”

The man suddenly laughs. “Strong name; you ever go by Chris?” He turns to Christopher. A radish grin on his face. So boyish. Even from the corner of his eye, Christopher knows this man is easy as they come; easy to read, easily amused, and easily hurt... a clean soul.

“No. I’m simply Christopher.” Christopher sees the way Jon looks at him; he is sure the man sees the pretentiousness of the name and that he used it whole, with no short forms.

“Names say a lot about people... you are named after a Christian martyr. A saint. Died in the 3rd Century AD. The Patron saint of Travelers.”

Christopher has never thought about his name so deeply before, until now.

Jon feels compelled to explain how he came by this knowledge. “My wife made me learn the meanings behind any name I selected for my children.”

“Ah,” Christopher is intrigued. “So, you have a son named Christopher?”

“No, she hated it. She said it was too much for the kid to live up to.”

Christopher laughs again. He wants to hear more of this woman. “Tell me about her. Your wife.” Christopher finds that a man who speaks of his wife to a stranger truly loves her or loathes her to the point of loving that about her. He feels the former is the case between Jon and his wife.

“Janet is her name. She is smart, an English-Lit grad. She is beautiful and very round.” he speaks with a constant ghost smile. “She was smaller, but three kids in...” he shrugs his shoulders, “She couldn’t keep the weight away.” He smiles; there is a twinkle in his eye. Christopher raises his glass at Jon, and then sips.

“Do you want children?” Jon forgoes asking if Christopher has children.

Again, Christopher feels judged by his appearance, “A few, I guess.” He sips his drink; he barely reacts to the burn it offers as it glides down his gut.

“The worst and best thing that could happen to a man,” he speaks so subtly. Christopher laughs but soon goes quiet when he realises he is laughing alone. Silence washes over the bar area as the rest of the bar continues a constant hum of music and true living. “My wife, she has her chama over at the house. I knew to flee the moment I heard chama!” Jon’s confession cuts into his moment of self-pity.

Christopher laughs again. In one night, he finds he has laughed more than his whole life combined... well, apart from one short period, he cares not to think of now. When the waiter comes and exchanges Jon’s bottle for another, Jon reaches for his wallet, but Christopher stops him. “Please.” He says to Jon and requests the waiter to put it on his tab.

He has a tab. “Well...” Jon is amused. “Here’s to a brewing friendship, need I say *bro-mance,* because right there,” he points at the space between the waiter and Christopher when he said he would cater Jon’s bills. “That right there is the way to a man’s heart.”

“Then,” Christopher raises his glass. “Here to friendships.”

“And to more nights like this.” They toast and drink like they have known each other all their lives.

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CHRISTOPHER is on his eighth glass of pure well-refined whiskey. A bottle sits between them on the bar, more than three-quarters-way done. They talk away like old friends on matters of politics. It has been about an hour, and he feels too chatty with the stranger. He tries to find ways to filter himself when familiarity catches his eye.

Just as he turns away in a moment of laughter, he notices Ophelia at the club entrance. Christopher turns pale in an instant. She is seraphim, elegant in white and gold. She is looking at her phone screen. She is here to meet someone.

"What is it?" His *compadre* of sorts asks.

"She's here!" He whispers. Suddenly, all about them stills, and he is caught like a deer in the headlights.

JON turns and follows his gaze. He can easily pick the exact girl Christopher is hurting for. She stands at the main entrance dressed in white. A loosely fitting silk top, a pair of slim-fit white pants, and strapped delicate golden heels. She has a small gold pouch and a phone in her other hand. Nothing more. Barefaced with a mane of braided hair.

They watch as she scans the club for a place to sit, and Christopher is suddenly on his feet. He sways to the side but catches himself on the bar surface. The commotion has Jon turn to face him. "Hey, slow your... are you okay?" Jon asks.

Christopher waves him off with his free hand as a wave of nausea passes not so swiftly through him. "I can't... let her... she can't be alone." He manages, shaking off the fuzziness.

Jon turns back and sees that the girl is not by the door. "She is not alone." He reports when he sees Christopher's girl sitting at a table with two other girls. They look like they are cut from the same cloth; same braided hair, smooth skin with soft bodies draped in whites and off-whites. They were feminine, pretty, and almost too fragile. One was extremely thin. Lifestyle choice over form, he could tell. She has serious airs chewing on a vegetable salad. A *Dawa* liquor cocktail sits untouched beside her salad bowl. The other girl has an untouched burger before her. They share pleasantries, and Jon sees that Christopher's wife and the other are fuller. Their cheeks filled out blissfully. He smiles; the thought reminds him of his wife —she was smaller when they started, but three kids in, losing her job, and dealing with his boyishness make her about six points overweight on the BMI counter. He thought he would hate it, but he adores her love handles. "Uhhhh!" he

sighs at Christopher. “I think I understand your issue. That is one fine woman.”

Christopher chuckles even as he stands hunched over, resting his head on his supporting forearm. “You have no idea.”

“Deni. Some water, please.” Jon orders their waiter. In time, she steals a second from serving her other clients to place a cold bottle on the bar before Christopher.

“Sit.” Jon admonishes. Christopher heeds. Jon gets the cap off the bottle for his new friend. When clear, he hands him the bottle, turns about on his stool, and faces the direction the girls are sitting in. “Drink. I will watch over your girl.”

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THEY make her cry; Ophelia’s new friends make her cry.

To be fair, it is never so much their fault as the booze and an emotional Ophelia. It starts with a simple disagreement. They push too hard, and before she knows it, tears fill her eyes, she struggles to breathe, and her lips are trembling; the symptoms of an impending cry. She escapes in time.

Her companions blame her quick exit on alcohol and laugh away at her reaction.

Ophelia feels a strain on her heart. She knows there is truth in their words, but lately, she cannot place herself as much as anyone else, especially Christopher. She stopped all her clients about a week before, and she was about to drop him too, maybe even stop her visits to St. Petersburg. Notably, beyond Christopher is a blur. She knows the line between madness and sanity is thin and can be crossed as easily as a sneeze or a waltz to the dark side.

Ophelia knows she is missing something. She investigates herself for answers that seem unlikely to come. Despite being a practising psychologist, she does feel definitively inadequate. How does one define madness when contextualising themselves? She knows what it means, down to the quotation and reference from text she read to acquire her place in the industry, but she remembers nothing else. She feels that Ophelia is a persona selected to be a Psychologist because she knows and remembers nothing else beyond that. She is relearning her favourite things because she has no one to ask. No childhood, no relatives, anyone who knew her. She does not even know what she does to pass the time! Then occasionally, Mr.

Yego mentions something, and it falls into place in her life. She is living life through new eyes, yet she is a woman in her twenties, a prodigy in her field. As illustrated by the papers in her home and office. But still, she wonders, is she not too young to be practising

Ophelia feels she never knew the ladies who just made her cry because she does not remember meeting them. Yet they are the only numbers in her cell, other than Mr. Yego, his driver Tom, her landlady Grace, her building foreman Piko, and a taxi company number.

She cries because she never felt the tide change.

When the switch flips, does one notice it? Is the change significant enough to be seen by the one experiencing it? She wonders. Madness: what defines madness? The word itself is simply vocabulary, merely a bunch of letters thrown together craftily. Ancient for 'fury' or 'rage'. She analyses her symptoms. *No, she is not angry*. 'Great folly'... 'A derangement of sorts. *Maybe*. 'An enthusiasm... excitement'. *For what?!* It is unbelievable; none defines losing memories of her life three months ago. None describe feeling an unnatural connection to Christopher Yego and only him. Nothing defines her state of loony.

Ophelia stands in a hallway that leads to a back exit; it is dimly lit with burgundy walls and a black ceiling. This is the only place empty enough to cater to an emotional breakdown. A few tears betray her; they come out and roll down her cheeks in a rush. Then the rest sit there waiting for the right motivation. She feels a need to smoke. The need pulls from deep within. She feels restless. Her hands twitch as she reaches into her pouch and ravages for the pack. The pack is still new; she found it in her apartment. She has been able to fend herself from smoking for three months, but she gives up this night.

She rips the pack open and puts one stick between her lips with shaky fingers. She searches for a light. A shuffle at the hall entrance catches her attention, and she looks up to see Christopher Yego down the hallway. He is already walking towards her. *How?*

Ophelia feels the building anxiety as her hands shake harder, the cigarette slips, and she has to hold it between her teeth. Her brows come together as frustration riles her the more. She feels denied by fate, after what feels like forever, she finally has the lighter.

Christopher stands before her. He watches as she flips the lighter and flicks the fire alive. The damn thing goes off before she lights her tobacco

stick. She tries again. She manages to lose the spark four times without lighting the cigarette. Frustration captures the features of her face. At this point, he decides to help her.

CHRISTOPHER hates that she smokes. This will be the first time since coming back. He wants to deny her, but he is convinced otherwise by the tears still in her eyes on the verge of slipping, the stains on her face from the already shed tears. She looks so sad and pitiful. All these combine to have him feeling gifting. He takes the lighter and lights the cigarette for her; she draws a deep breath through the cigarette. The notch in her neck hollows out deeply until it lights. She quickly releases that exhale and draws another deep pull of the cigarette. She puffs this even faster, a little too quickly for Christopher's tastes. On the fourth draw, he yanks the cigarette out of her puckered lips, throws it to the ground, and crushes it with the front bottom tip of his sole. "That's enough." His actions shock her. "You should quit." He instructs. Her release comes quickly, followed by a severe jaw fall.

"You know I smoke." She whispers, her voice cracking painfully. *Fuck,* even she was not sure she smoked. That first swig was experimental, the next one must have been utter bliss. By the fourth, her pulsing heart beating at the side of her neck was slower. Smoking helped calm her. She just realised that she was a smoker. The question sits unanswered between them, how does he know?

Christopher notes her voice. "What's wrong with your throat?" he asks. She cringes, pulling away. He has masked his intoxication too well, assuming power as he had in her office. She seems scared but turns pink with embarrassment over her impending confession, "I choked on wine earlier." He holds the bridge of his nose between his right index and thumb and shuts his eyes. He tries to breathe through his anger. "Ophelia, I gave you wine to relax you..." He laughs a little, then drops his hand and opens his eyes, staring daggers into her tear laces eyes; he qualifies, "Only you, Ophelia, could manage to turn wine into a hazardous weapon."

She smiles meekly. A restrained tear falls out; she rushes to wipe it. "It was a nice bottle. I really like..."

"Shhh..." He places a finger over her lips, revealing to her that he is very drunk, well beyond his limits. "No more wine." He shakes his head. She looks confused. "And cigarettes."

“Christopher, what makes you think….” He cuts her reproach with his interrupting finger. She pushes it away forcefully.

“Shhh. No more talking. Come. I have someone you must meet. My new friend... Jon. He is here because of a *chama*.” He laughs as he drags her back into the now raging space, to the counter.

TEN minutes later, Ophelia has Christopher and Jon, and their drinks, back at her table. She introduces them to her companions. Jon is anxious to meet this young lot; he feels he can learn *a lot* from this interaction. He has a few years on Christopher. They are all kids ―privileged Nairobi kids.

Ophelia speaks for the girls, “My friends… Stacy and Eleanor.”

To Jon, they are *Burger* and *Salad*.

“Eleanor with an ‘H’.” Salad clarifies in a thoroughly cultured Eurocentric accent.

Jon grins broadly, “Where?!” he cannot help himself.

“After the…” She starts to explain when Christopher the drunk interrupter rears his ugly head again. “Oh, shut up, Eleanor! Jon sit.” Christopher insists as he squeezes into the booth next to Stacy. He pulls Ophelia down with him. Jon has to sit by *Salad*... Eleanor... Rather *Eleanoh*. Strange, but someone thought that was a good idea. He sits frigid, afraid to breathe.

OPHELIA too sits very still. She has become aware of something rather strange; Stacy, Eleanor, and Christopher all know each other.

He knows them… how?! When?!

Christopher raises his glass, oblivious to the awkward tension about the table. “To the liars and the cheats.”

Confused, the ladies raise their glasses, seemingly unappreciative of his toast. However, Jon, Christopher’s new friend, seems delighted. He has no objections. “To them!” He echoes Christopher and raises his glass.

They drink.

MAY I live to know the secrets behind the name Ophelia… Christopher.

CHAPTER TEN

CHRISTOPHER LOVES to do things his way. Sometimes, he forges lives about him, chisel in hand, unwilling to relent and accept that all men and women have free will. He appears at Ophelia's office unannounced late in the day and offers to drive her home. Tired and ill-tempered, Ophelia chooses to come along rather than start an arguement She had hoped for some time to herself, but why should he care about her needs? He says he and Tom will drop her right off at her place, no shenanigans, and she agrees.

The ride is quiet, weirdly so; they both seem like they have a lot to say to each other.

Ophelia has been experiencing stirrings. These stimulations stem from emotional surges that come about whenever she sees, hears, feels or even thinks about Christopher. Her dreams have taken a bolder turn; she dreams of him almost every night. Their raunchy affairs never leave her long after she wakes from her sleeping state.

She dreamt that he had married her in a small wedding dedicated by a judge at his mansion in Solei, Muthaiga. Their guests were Stacy, Eleanor, a faceless and genderless friend, and his staff from home; those were the people who witnessed her union with Christopher. Oh, and the nun Margret. This dream feels the most vivid. It plagues her the most.

CHRISTOPHER'S problem is quite different from Ophelia's because it surpasses lust. He has been watching her recordings; she searches herself every night on the internet and breaks down into tears when the results yielded are poor. This happens every night before she goes to bed. She has been drinking a lot of wine; the brand he got her seems to be a favourite. A lightweight, she finishes a bottle every other night. She goes to bed drunk only to have fitful sleep, where she thrushes about the bed and talks about 'Keys' and 'Yoke'. She screams and cries out to her father. A father he has never met nor heard her talk of since the day he met her. Occasionally, she cries out his name, 'Christopher'. This gives him little consolation as he finds he does not trust her anymore.

His mistrust builds from a lack of understanding of her plight. For some reason, his suspicions truly manifested the night they went out with Stacy

and Eleanor. Christopher feels that Ophelia hides something from him. It reads about her like an aura. He wants to know what.

"I want you to meet someone, my friend. The closest thing I have to family." Christopher confesses, breaking the quiet within the car. With his invitation, he tests her. He wants to see whether she remembers anything from before. She had interacted with Sadic a few times; it would be logical for her to remember him.

These little tests have been going on for some time now. Now and then, he pushes her to see if she is hiding anything.

He has learned something new about Ophelia; she lies a lot on the ninety-second percentile. She lies mainly about her wellness. Her secrets surround her state of being, her insecurities, and her wellness. When she is sick, she will lie about it, and when she is well, she will say she is sick. When scared, she will pucker up and forge on feigning bravery only to scare all too easily on a different day. She will deny the pain but fist her hands to revert her body's attention when in pain. He knows her pretty well, or rather, he knew her too well, to the eightieth percentile. The remaining ten are what makes him bound as a hellhound on the task because it feels like she is the opposite of the woman he knew before. When married, he had learned her tells, but even those have changed. She is not the same woman. Something has changed. So he can tell when she is lying, sometimes, most times. *Fuck,* he does not know anymore.

Christopher reads her face, trying to learn her new tells and mannerisms. He listens keenly as she speaks, just about to crack at the pressure of it all. "That would be lovely." *Ophelia would never say those words.* "If I may ask, what would prompt this invitation?" She plays the shrink again, playing with his mind.

"I felt you needed more." That is all he says.

"What's your friend's name?" She does not specify gender, he notices.

"Sadic Ano."

"Is he Muslim?"

Christopher comes alive at this juncture, "Why would you assume he is?"

"His name. If he is, I would be surprised."

"And why is that?"

"You do not seem the type." He turns slightly to her. His sweeping gaze observes Tom's lip's slight twitch through the rear-view mirror. The man

can barely contain himself. He levies a weighty eye on Ophelia, “And what type am I?”

“That would be a pre-emptive conclusion; I am still trying to understand you, Mr. Yego.” She mocks him by using his surname even though she knows they are beyond such salutations. “I need to learn you before I conclude what your folly is, Mr. Yego.” She nods at the mention of his surname. *Again!* “I will give you this; you are too tuned into yourself. You select your affiliates well; ensure they are different but not too far against the grain to cause a problem… But, even within the grain, you have limitations to your associations. You find this existence free-flowing in terms of functionality, and the limitations that present themselves offer a manner of discipline, which you relish. You would let a particular few make decisions for you to give life a loose snare.”

Tom is full-on smiling now.

“I could be friends with a Muslim.” Christopher offers softly, “The opposite of a Muslim is not a Christian, and I am neither.” He studies her reaction keenly as he speaks. “There are far worse places to be in.”

She laughs. An unhinged, utterly raw laugh. It is a glorious thing to watch. “Oh, my Christopher,” She sounds without herself. This whole conversation feels somewhat doctored. These are not Ophelia’s words. “You will find your path one way or another. Spending millions on stray cats is one way for sure.”

“What did you say?” Christopher asks with a sudden austerity; he catches the indifference in her words but fails to believe his ears. Did she just call him out? Tom clears his throat when he senses a shift in Christopher’s tone. Christopher deepens his breaths, eyes her obscenely. He remembers one phase, one that is most affecting, “You called me mad?!” He whispers harshly.

“We are all a little Koo-Koo.” She whispers back, her face tight as she tries hard not to laugh. Christopher does not like being called crazy. It is written all over his face. “Date and time?” she asks, reverting to their earlier conversation.

“6 PM. Monday. A fortnight from today.”

“Strange day to meet your friend.”

He smiles stiffly, “I’m leaving for a week or so; I have to see a man about a woman.”

Ophelia's brain works well; she connects the dots fast. "This is the girl from the sessions. Is she okay?"

"As can be." He puts it so simply she feels denied. She parts her lips to speak but Tom cuts before her.

"Excuse me sir. We are here," Tom raises his voice, cutting into their conversation, saving Christopher from a torrent of inquisitions. Christopher's eyes glister with relief. He rushes out and about the car. He gets her door.

"Don't spoil me, Mr. Yego," She speaks so cavalierly as she steps out, "I wouldn't want to fall for a man of your calibre."

She has him riled now. "Oph…!" he starts to yell when she shushes him by placing a finger on his lips, as he had done the night she lost his trust. "Don't make me beg." He has no idea what just happened. He watches her walk away into her building block, then lets out a half-fulfilling huff. Slipping back in the car, he frowns when he finds the interior smells like Ophelia, plunging him into annoyance.

Tom looks at his boss through the mirror. Mocking him with how he can barely contain himself. "What!" Christopher barks at Tom.

"You should skip to the part where you marry her again. I have never seen a woman work you the way she does."

"Oh, shut up!" He scolds his driver. Tom starts to drive off.

"Where to, sir?"

"Home." He speaks stiffly, relieving himself of his coat and tie. "I need the coldest shower a man can get."

A short laugh leaves Tom's tight lips. "May I speak frankly?" the man asks, his tenor darkening almost instantly. Christopher juts his chin at him, "She has changed, not the same woman. Are you sure about this?"

"I made a vow."

"It can be broken."

Christopher sighs sadly, "I don't think I can do it."

Tom nods understandably. He reaches into his inner jacket pocket and pulls out Ophelia's ring. "All my best, boss. I hope it's all worth it." He hands Christopher the ring.

AFTER his shower, Christopher takes a taxi back to Ophelia's. This night he attempts to remind Ophelia of their vow.

Ophelia welcomes him home with the humility of a loving wife, all the sass from before long gone. She lets him hold her and even moans when he

squeezes her body to himself. They both savour the contact, slowly coming into a space of mutual remembrance. He feeds his longing while fulfilling Ophelia's unsaid desires. She is willing and giving in the act, letting Christopher know that their feelings are mutual. He feels unwise for waiting this long, but he is happy that they get to rekindle a connection he thought was lost.

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BUDAPEST is hot this time of the year. It is summer, and the land of hot springs comes alive. Though the weather is nice and warm, Christopher's body does not take to the climate too well, he can let his sentiments on the environment and his discomfort rip unhindered from his throat, but he is alone with no one to share these thoughts with. Soon, he is distracted from the heat by the cosmopolitan city that is Hungary's capital. He would define Budapest as complex yet holding a subtle charm that seems ageless. The city is culturally skewed but still teeming with modern pleasures. Of the people, he would define them as spicy and eclectic. Marvellous people never to be forgotten.

He is here to meet a Dr. Bien Jared at a coffee house down the Museum District, a few blocks down from the Old War Museum ―the email that lured him to Europe was short and precise, cryptic. It came from Dennis via a proxy, or so he hoped. It said nothing about its author or the theme of the meeting. He came to Budapest because he assumed that the discussion was about Ophelia.

Christopher travels thousands of miles to meet a faceless man whom he hopes has an idea about what is going on with Ophelia; she may be right; he may be mad after all.

An elderly Caucasian man in a brown suit approaches his table from the east. He is disabled and walks with a cane. The tool's handle is in a silver mould of a lion's torso and head. *Magnificent craftsmanship,* Christopher assesses. "You must be the young man I have been asked to speak to," he offers his hand for a shake as he speaks with a strong French accent. He has not heard the classic ignoring of the 'h', though he pronounced the 'th' sound with a soft 'z'. Christopher expects to hear the weight of his infliction throughout their conversation. "Welcome to Budapest. I'm Dr. Jared Bien. Most call me Professor Bien." He smiles reservedly, making Christopher smile.

Christopher takes his hand in a powerful grip. “Christopher Yego.”

They shake hands, each taking a few moments to read the other.

When Professor Bien is settled and has ordered a cup of tea, he leans forward on his cane, studying Christopher curiously. A few significant beats later, he asks, “So, what brings you to Budapest, Mr. Yego?”

“Behaviourism.”

The older man laughs. “You and me both. I came here looking for culture. A sense of dissimilarity.” He leans back and breathes the warm air, enjoying it.

Yego watches the man’s relaxed nature, feeling a little jealous. “Did you find it?” he asks.

“In a way, I had to look closely to find it.” He points to the street. “Look at them.” Yego turns to the street. He watches the people walking around in their summer clothes. Some are laughing; some are quiet. Some huddle close with affection. Some skip to the bliss of the season. “What do you see?” the professor asks.

“People.”

“Closer, my boy.” He speaks as though he sees humanity as more than just a fleeting entity.

“Smiles, frowns… love. Expression. Emotion… depth.”

“Good. What’s constant in most humans is their ability to express themselves; those who cannot do so will act somehow or say something to express their emotions.

People are similar in every culture; these expressions going and coming are coded and decoded, feeding our humanity or the lack thereof.”

“But how could you say that when crying could mean joy… with some people laughing could mean a sense of shock.”

“Emotions are not depicted by our actions… or words. Do you know how to lie properly?” The man asks.

Christopher cannot help smile. “Of course, I can lie.”

“Properly. I will teach you. Start with an outrageous lie. Something massive. Too massive to be true, too big to be common knowledge. Too big to confirm, and if confirmed to be untruthful, blame it on the internet.” Christopher laughs. “Then lie your teeth dry.” They laugh like old friends. “I came to find culture, but I found so much more. For instance, I found the remnants of war. War defines all our histories... Defines our present. We find peace because we know the effects of war.”

“But was peace not the initial state?” Christopher asks.

Bien smiles, “Was that peace not cultured about an unrest of sorts.”

Christopher ponders this revelation. *It’s the chicken and the egg, again…*

Bien points down the street and speaks of a square just before the military museum, “Man may have known peace, in the beginning... But his creation was the result of discontent.” He moves on swiftly to the matter at hand. “I hear of a progressive company in Kenya making considerable headway in human studies. What is the name of this company?”

“Ferthono, they study Psychology and Sociology… they touch on all aspects of life. It’s a little daunting the things they can do.”

“A baby corporation… Yes… yes.” He sounds a little impatient but settles and asks Christopher why he came to Budapest. “Hungary is a long way from home. Be honest, why did you come here?”

“I came to find answers, find someone to hand Ferthono’s research to. I want to end them.” He speaks frankly.

“What’s the catch?”

“Nothing. Call it a paid forward. I am in the habit of handing out grants after all.”

“What’s her name?” Professor Bien asks even though Christopher knows that he knows her name. He has the recordings and every bit of information he could gather on Ophelia, Bemus Manange and Ferthono.

Christopher laughs, coming to understand the truth, “Would you believe it? I have no idea.” If he asked because he wanted to gauge Christopher’s state of mind, he sure thinks Christopher is crazy by now.

The professor smiles sadly at Christopher, “Is it worth it?”

“Yes.”

“Then, my boy, that is all that matters.”

They finish their beverages in relative quiet and decide to change venue. Professor Bien suggests finding a restaurant. Christopher follows his lead. They have to walk across a square, down an alleyway to another bustling street in the district. Taking time to read their surroundings, they enjoy the short stroll.

Christopher likes the older man; Jared Bien is an exquisite man. His nature alone has Christopher sated and willing to speak; the man has as much charm as a bottled elixir. “She goes by the name Ophelia.”

Relative silence follows as Christopher breaks at just her name. After a bout of reading Christopher’s mind, the older man speaks. “You may ask.”

“What can you tell me of mind control?” This troubles him most.

“It’s rare, near nonexistent. Almost fiction. But still, the will of masses can be folded by a powerful puppeteer.”

Religion in Kenya… in Africa… But… Christopher pulls into an abrupt stop. He turns to face Bien. “I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Are you sure it was not hysteria?” The doctor asks. This confuses Christopher. He never stopped to think it could be. “What did you see?” Bien asks.

Christopher has a narc for romanticising the past, “She was in a frozen state. Her eyes traced after her capture, hounded him for freedom. Even my presence there was not enough. The only way she saw me was when I fell into her line of sight. She was scared… I could read it in her eyes ―the worst kind of fear. I called out to her, but nothing. She was gone; the girl I knew was gone, and had fallen into some abysmal pit. For about a minute, I just stared… called her. Nothing!”

“How did you get her out?”

“I didn’t. My phone rang.”

“It could be psychoacoustics.” Christopher raises a brow at the man, “the physical qualities of sound ―sound pressure, frequency, and depth modulation can be used to control how we react to sound. Loudness, sharpness… or even just the existence of the sound in a quiet room could have triggered her.

Could I hear this ring tone?” Christopher reaches for his phone and plays the generic ringtone from the device. It is high pitched and repetitive, stinging. Professor Bien listens keenly, reading the sound as though it was a hidden note in Ayub Ogada. “How quiet was the place you found her?” he asks.

“Very,” Christopher says. The tone plays on, somehow taking precedence over the buzzing city about them, unsettling Christopher.

The doctor nods knowingly. “I can’t tell you the exact qualities of this sound that rose her from her hypnosis, but the sound is clear, noticeable, and sharp, easy to pick out from background noise. It could be rather loud in a quiet room and so suddenly, effectively obtrusive enough to shock one out of the conditioning.

I believe this high-pitched frequency got her out of the state. It sounds like hypnosis.”

Christopher feels pressure build in his head. He eyes the good professor incredulously, as though the man has a third eye, “How was it that my phone got her out of the state?” He is becoming paranoid.

The professor pulls Christopher to the side, letting an elderly couple pass. “Hypnosis is a state of reduced peripheral awareness. What hypnosis does is enhance one’s ability to respond to suggestions. What your phone’s ring tone did was break that focussed attention. I believe any new sound could have worked; it is not just your phone.”

“But I was speaking to her; why did she not hear me?”

“Maybe she was being spoken to by someone whose voice shared your tenor and thus could not differentiate your voice from the other.” The man looks down the street, “I am not as young as I used to be. There is a restaurant just down that street,” he suggests a new restaurant. He points to an adjacent lane to the main they stand on. “Let us sit for a proper meal. I feel you need a chance to sample some Magyar cuisine.”

Christopher nods. He could eat. All this talk has him famished.

“Good.”

They walk in silence down and across the main avenue to the destined street. Christopher walks cautiously as he looks out for the professor. Bien strides in his unsteady gait, leaning too heavily on his cane; though he has a way with the cane ―the way he manoeuvres it as he takes every novel step pulls Christopher’s eyes in― it is still a struggle. Christopher feels for the man. His gaze runs up the professor’s suit; Christopher notices its vintage and subtle brown barberry print. The man takes pride in his appearance. He grooms like he has a name to protect, better yet, self-pride to feed. He feels like a kind soul, a man that would make a fine grandfather. Christopher thinks of the man’s life; he considers the last hour with him. Professor Bien has not spoken of his family even once. They could be estranged or dead; he could have nobody left to talk about. He may also be cautious not to share personal details with a stranger.

Christopher notes that the professor is in tune with the world’s forces; he does not hate the world. He seems to understand it all; birth, life, suffering, even death. Maybe he knows the answers to life and has accepted them.

By the time they reach the restaurant, Professor Bien is breathing heavily and has a shiny streak of sweat that is slipping from his hairline down his temple. Christopher rushes to get him seated. He genuinely cares about the

man's comfort. He has come to like this man. "We could have taken an Uber or a taxi."

As Professor Bien wipes the sweat off his face with a branded handkerchief, he laughs, "Do I look like a man who knows how to work an app?"

"Fair." Christopher could have rented one for them…

"Sit." Christopher heeds. "This meal is on me."

The waiter comes at them smiling. She hands them menus. "Good afternoon. Welcome. May I get you drinks before you order?" She is young, perky; she may just be done with her teenage years. There is coming-of-age freedom about her; she goes about her duty happily, bubbling like summer bliss. She has a strong inflection even as she speaks English. Only Bien understands the origin of this variation. Christopher hears another accent foreign to his origin. He cannot for the life of him place it.

"We will order with the meal. Thank you. Give us a minute." Bien speaks softly and is gifted a sweet smile. The young lady saunters away. "I love the women here. Very beautiful…" Christopher laughs. "Did you notice anything about her accent?" Christopher shakes his head. "She is not a local. Like me, she came here to find something… she has not been here long —heavy accent." Bien supplies as they both turn to watch the girl.

Christopher watches as she walks to the next table with guests. She has a skip in her step, making her generous dark black ponytail bounce about. She beams at the group of four sitting there and so easily, flirting with the men and the women. She arches her back, thrusting her chest forward as she receives their orders. It seems a natural reaction, something in her psyche; it could be cultured to seem natural. Christopher turns his attention back to the professor when he speaks. "Do you think that very perky girl grew up in a home with a mummy and a daddy, a boatload of money, and let's say, a dog? Pepe. Her dog, we will call her Pepe."

"I wouldn't know." *She knows no sadness.*

"Money corrupts." He states. Christopher's eyes turn critical. "Her name is Mira. She is originally from East Russia. She grew up in a small town in rural Russia. She was raised dirt poor by her grandmother, and when the woman died, Mira ran away to chase a better life. She had a dog, Tepe. He was run over by a logging truck when she was seven, the year before her grandmother died.

I think she found what she is looking for. Don't you think?"

“Maybe.” They watch the girl get around collecting dishes, passing about cheques and straightening upholstery and condiment containers. “Let me pay for this meal.” Christopher interrupts their reading.

“Yego.” He pulls Christopher’s name in a singsong manner, offended by Yego’s offer. You came all the way from Africa. That kind of attention, I am not used to. I am an old man on his last leg. I will pay for this meal. This is the most I have done in a while. I have to say, you and Denis have brought me back to life.”

“What ails you?”

“It’s started with my hip. A little pain, right here,” he points at his side, about where the hip bone sits. “I fell down a flight of stairs and had to get a hip replacement. Then the back started to ache. Later, my legs began to fail.” The man looks solemnly at the table. “I was healthy as a bull before… then suddenly one thing after another. I have lost count.” Christopher feels contrite; maybe he should not have asked. The man looks up, “It’s simply old age. If you are lucky, my boy, you will live to be this old.” He studies Christopher’s form. He gauges him as the epitome of pure health.

“How old are you?”

“Nighty two.” Christopher’s reaction is not subtle; he loses his usual cool for an erratic exposure of his authentic self. This makes Bien laugh. “Isn’t that something?” he comments. “You should learn to relax.”

Their waitress circles back and takes their order. Professor Bien asks if Christopher has any allergies or dislikes, then orders for both. When the waiter leaves, the professor goes on about Hungary in an endless litany on culture and the arts. He places the people of Hungary on a pedestal. It is a passionate account. Christopher cannot help find his bias refreshing. He rarely hears good things about countries from expatriates. In his travels, he never made his way to Hungary. It is interesting that Ophelia would lead him there even when he feels a disconnection from her. Their Magyar cuisine is delivered as dictated by Bien; cold egg appetisers come first. The main meal includes a form of ragù called Pörkölt made of meat, vegetables, and paprika, and a side dish of Nokedli. They skip sweet desserts for fruit.

Christopher enjoys his first Magyar meal. He cannot help thinking he would have loved to share this experience with Ophelia.

Bien speaks freely, “I have read write-ups on your woman. It may seem impossible, but the possibility of such a science is highly likely in this age. I may not be able to deduce the methods they use to guide her thoughts and

actions, but as far as I can tell, from what my friend Dennis told me, they discern her being by controlling her memories.

A person is the collective of their memories. If you only remember the sad memories, you will likely form a personality about that sadness. She was fed memories, and these determine her —self. The rest were extracted or blocked away. Ophelia seems to be the second, the one cultured. The product of psychological grooming.

Mr. Yego, your woman was not born that way. Her history, what she says about herself may all be a ruse by this company…."

"Ferthono."

"Ferthono." He echoes Christopher, "They made her that way for a reason. They could have stumbled into it. I could tell you more if I met Ophelia, but I am forbidden from flying. My ticker may give in if I do, and I guess you cannot easily get her out of the country."

"It's more than I had hoped for; thank you for meeting me." Bien smiles. Christopher looks out at the streets, at the people walking about the old city, seemingly too accustomed to the beauty before them. "What do I do now?"

"I could tell you what to do, but you will need to figure this out on your own." Christopher turns back to Professor Bien, unsure of what to say. "You have conflicting personalities that express themselves in your actions, my boy, which may be why she was placed in your path. Someone is trying to read you."

"I…I… it…." Christopher stammers for the first time since he was a lad.

"You seem reclusive but possess a livewire; gregarious behaviour without your projected character traits. They burst the seams often, as though you are *polar-ed* somehow.

My guess is the decisions you make expose this imbalance. Someone has been watching you. Reading you. The reasons behind it may be in your state… but I believe otherwise." Christopher tightens his gaze on Bien, "You let others make decisions for you." Christopher bites down. *I'll be damned!* He has not just quoted Ophelia; Christopher cannot believe that. "You have a close companion making decisions for you. A friend, someone you trust is making critical decisions, important pronouncements attracting attention to you." Bien smiles. He sees how right he is on Christopher's face; he must look how he feels, sick. "Your way out of such a spotlight is to stop being so damn inconsistent. You should make your own decisions at all times. Your pot is leaking, and someone has noticed."

Silence. Christopher does not agree or disagree.

"Why do you let others decide for you?"

"I don't know."

"I led you here. You knew me less than an hour, and you let me guide you here. You should take charge consistently. You think you are in control, but you are not. Life should not push you through it while you follow without any questions. You plan meticulously but still let others take that final leap for you. Not always, which is good, but enough times to illustrate divergences. Remember that part of you that takes those independent steps. Don't follow blindly; think, my boy. This is the first step towards fixing your problem.

About the woman, Ophelia. She will remember with the right trigger. It is all about the emotions, tapping the correct emotion may bring her back. Unless you want to go to Ferthono and face them head-on, you may want to let this sit for a while. As incredible as it may be, the human brain has its limits. I imagine this experiment has a natural ending, delimited by psychological and physiological limitations. We can be fragile, you know. Her body and mind are working overtime through the layers of memories, her own and those fed to her. Soon she will tire if she has not already. Forcing her out of this self may not be best.

What you need to worry about is how she leaves the programme. Do they let her walk away or do they end her life, thus protecting the experiment and covering their backs for human right infringement…? You need to find the contract, her participation details, and the timeline. If there is one, did she sign it willingly or was she forced?" A chill brings goose bumps all over Christopher's forearms. Professor Bien tilts his head, seeing through Christopher. "You gave her a life as you were asked to by Dennis?" Christopher nods. "Let the chips fall. You may be surprised. Someone may have the key at the tip of their tongue.

Be patient with Ophelia; remember that you met and liked Ophelia. Who's to say you will like the original."

"Took you three hours to figure me out." Christopher laughs to himself mostly, "Ophelia claims to be still 'learning' me."

"You could be guarded about her, subconsciously. Maybe you lock her out, sensing her authenticity flawed, or she could be conditioned never to figure you out."

"I wait?" Christopher asked quietly.

“Yes, but remember, this may last as long as the people who control her want it.” Bien sighs, “You are like a sad wet dog.” Christopher chuckles, “I will take your data and study it. Who knows, this ‘Key’ and ‘York’ could be right under our noses.” Christopher repeatedly nods in gratitude. His eyesight turns blurry, limiting sight. “It has been a pleasure. Thank you for bringing me this research.

Do you wish any part in the publication?”

“No.”

“Very well.” The older man raises a hand to call Mira; she rushes over, the bill in hand. Christopher watches the professor retrieve his wallet from his inner jacket pocket and pay the waiter, giving a hefty tip. “Have you been to the war museum?”

“No, I came straight to the café,” Christopher says, helping the professor get up. They stroll towards the door.

“Good, come. I want to show you something interesting. Did you know that Budapest came to be when the cities of Pest, Buda and Óbuda merged in 1873? This new city was called by different names….” He stops abruptly when they cross the threshold. He raises his hand and beckons Christopher to lower his ear. Christopher heeds, “I made up Mira,” Christopher turns his head, looking at the shorter old man in the eye. He wonders why. The older man points back to the girl at the counter, sorting receipts for clients.

“Observe, the embroidered tag on her blouse reads Tepe.” Christopher looks back to Mira —Tepe— She walks across the doorway, sparing them a glance and a smile. Christopher’s eyes fall to her chest area. He sees her tag for the first time, her name, Tepe. His jaw drops incredulously and humour dances in his eyes as he rights himself, looking at the professor as though he had just performed a magic trick. Christopher cannot help laugh at himself. He agrees with the professor; he has to do better. The professor smiles, restricting his teeth from showing, “She is German. Tepe is a North German and Frisian.” Christopher let the man jabber, seeming more of a historian than a psychologist. But his interaction with the man proved as much; Bien is a brilliant man who may be a polymath, and Christopher is not as intelligent as he thought he was.

Professor Bien has highlighted the cracks in Christopher’s preserved character. He is weak and lacking in observation skills. Things Sadic had mentioned repeatedly —Sadic saw fault in Ophelia long before Christopher.

And he called her out, but Christopher ignored his friend, feeling the brighter man, how he regrets that now.

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MONDAY comes too quickly. Christopher picks Ophelia up early. They arrive at the restaurant well before the agreed meeting time. They wait at the bar for their table to be readied as Christopher listens to her guarded account of her days while he was away. He sips his *Gablo*, listening to her speak as her fingers repeatedly run over the rim of her wineglass. She cannot look at him, and her breath hitches as she sprouts unnecessary details, excluding the truth. She is lying again. She speaks of details of work, however, has been home throughout. He has gone through the recordings. She has been home all week, going through something emotional.

She says she ate a lot in his absence, even exercised. She ate a meal a day, sometimes nothing. At times she just drank in the calories. Her trash is largely empty wine bottles. She is thinner, and even makeup cannot hide the tire in her eyes. In the recordings, she cried a lot and barely slept. She is buckling to stress and unhealthy habits.

His sundae is withering.

When she is not wallowing; she is lashing out physically; she has spent considerable time cleaning and replacing broken things within her house. It seems she notices the broken elements later, sometimes hours later, sometimes days. She cut her leg once from broken glass and was surprised to find the pieces of glass. As though the person cleaning is not the one breaking. Indeed, this must be a sign that things are changing within her. Also, according to the new recordings, it seems that with her, there are two states, the calmer state and the chaotic one. He is willing to bet that the chaotic is his wife, Ophelia.

Whatever she is fighting is raw enough to sip into her declared persona. She is humble, again. She is willing to heed his words. She does not fight him as before. This he finds remarkable, enough to wait on the switch. Her changes in character come and go, it seems, and it is beginning to give him whiplash. But he is still ready to wait. Dennis says to wait. Professor Jared Bien —Dennis Bean's mentor in psychological studies, a tenured professor with years of theoretical and practical experience— says to wait. He would be a fool not to. It is the most challenging thing he has to do, but he will do

it if only to look into eyes that know him one more time. Christopher does not believe that he will wait long; the tension in Ophelia is building like a typhoon.

Christopher huffs quietly when a waiter walks up and tells them their table is ready. He leaves his drink. The barman takes away his half-drank glass and Ophelia's untouched wine. Christopher offers her his hand. She takes it and smiles cautiously in gratitude, still avoiding his gaze. He leads and she follows, her high heeled shoes restricting her steps. He leads her slowly, aware that this woman is not confident in her heels; *Ophelia was.*

At the table, Ophelia replaces the rim of the wine glass with the napkin on her plate. She sits too still, her fingers rolling the folded edge of the napkin on her plate. She is unaware of his gaze. Christopher thinks that she felt so tiny and precious. A new fear rises; he fears they are too late. There may be no helping his woman. As much as they would not want to admit it, they may need Ferthono to right what is wrong with her, put back what they extracted when they left her half-souled on the verge of insanity.

Something pulls his attention into his peripheral. Christopher looks away towards the bar to the dining hall, wondering why he feels so pert and alert. He turns to view the dining hall entrance, sensing a new presence in the expansive eating place. Ophelia follows his gaze, feeding into his alertness. Sadic walks in with a lady by his side.

The lady has an arm draped lightly on Sadic's forearm. Sadic guides his lady at a slow pace, slower than he had Ophelia earlier. He raises no alarm that the woman is visually impaired. The way they move together is impressive; one guides and the other with such precision. It is as though they perform a practised rumba dance. They are in sync with each other, of one body and mind. Christopher can see now how Sadic and Cecilia could be a thing. He had his doubts but seeing this just warms his heart. For sure, he knows that they have shared a bed.

So, this is Cecilia, Christopher thinks as his gaze runs over the lady. *Sadic's blind girl.*

CECILIA follows Sadic. He has grown accustomed to measure his tread as he guides her to accommodate her shorter steps; she is 5'5 and he, over 6 feet tall. He has grown to know when she needs him to slow down or stop and when to move or fasten their pace. With him, she does not rely much on her secret weapon, a biometric bracelet that vibrates when in the proximity

of an obstacle —twice for living, once for non-living. She rarely leaves the house with her cane anymore.

She reads the place she is in. Cecilia takes great care to learn all she can from her surroundings. It is a defensive act she has come to accept as second nature. All he told her was that the restaurant was in Westlands, Nairobi. Now, she fills in her gaps in knowledge using her heightened senses. The tables are spaced. There is enough room for Sadic to walk by her. Otherwise, he would step back and place a guiding hand on the small of her back. She steps to the left, closer to where she believes the line of table limits are. Cecilia raises her hand, approximates its average height, and spreads her fingers tentatively on the table's surface. The table is square or rectangular. If she had to pick one, she would say it is square shaped. It has a smooth but heavy cotton covering with woven details She imagines the raised details are in the same colour as the cloth.

They make a turn to the right. Sadic walks on as Cecilia places more emphasis on listening. She hears the light clutter of cutlery on a plate and jazz. The music is a well-balanced hum that provides just the right atmosphere for relaxation. She also hears soft voices roam about the space; a few disappear as they pass. They are judging them, probably shocked that a man like Sadic has a visually impaired girl by his side. She smiles sadly and looks to the ground. She tries to make it less obvious that she is blind. She runs her free hand over the front of her dress.

Sadic notices this act of self-cautiousness. This is the first time he sees her uncomfortable in her skin. He squeezes her hand slightly. She blushes lightly.

The restaurant smells nice —the flavour richly marked by scents of old spice and elegance. The whole place has the aroma of fresh herbs and heritage food. Cecelia assume that they have an old menu sustained consistently over generations. She smells a garlic-grilled poultry-based meal on a passing table… *chicken, maybe?* It is grilled duck. On the following table, she smells cooked fish. She smells the ting of lemon floating around the table. The scent of wine wafts to her sensitive nose. She can almost see the glass of the alluring liquid. She swallows hard.

She must order some wine tonight, or else she will not be able to let go of the thought. Cecilia can almost see the décor; deep dark rich drapery, and upholstery. She can imagine tall windows, high ceilings, and thick beams running across the ceiling. She imagines plants in the room, small trees of

big leafed beautiful plants at the windows, so they can get some light. She smiles. “Your friend thought to impress me. An African restaurant would be fine.”

Sadic tightens his hand over hers, “This is nothing.”

She laughs.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

He does not push for more. When they arrive at the table, Christopher stands and introduces himself, and then offers to take Cecilia’s coat. He mentions the heat rising as they plan to eat and drink like kings and queens. She laughs and lets him have it.

CHRISTOPHER burns those precious seconds talking to Cecilia to see if Ophelia will recognise Sadic. She does not seem to. He shares a look with Sadic. “This is Ophelia, my... ah friend.” He hesitates.

Sadic rushes to help. “Finally, Ophelia. It’s a pleasure.” He speaks enthusiastically while he takes and shakes her hand. Christopher watches for any sign of recognition and finds none. She does not remember him.

“Pleasure is all mine,” Ophelia says with impressive maturity, feeding Christopher’s theory. His Ophelia is dissipating.

The men watch as Ophelia moves closer to Cecilia to shake her hand. Cecelia already has her hand in a steeple for a shake and waits for Ophelia to take it. When she is close enough, Ophelia takes it; their air mixes. Cecilia catches a whiff of Ophelia’s scent. She takes a deep swig of the air about her and frowns slightly, “Ophelia?” She suddenly asks in a panicked tone.

Ophelia turns back to Christopher with a questioning gaze. He holds no answers. “Yes...” she speaks uncertainly.

Cecelia smiles suddenly. “I knew an Ophelia once. She was a nice person.”

“Oh,” Ophelia laughs nervously. “Well, I shall try to beat that.”

A waiter comes along as they settle and offers them drink menus. Off the top of her head… without much thought, Cecilia requests chilled Sangria. She even goes ahead to request the bottle if they could manage. Ophelia decides to share in the wine, while Christopher and Sadic order glasses of whiskey, Gablo and Pavilion. Quiet dinner will quickly turn lively considering their orders.

“Is it me?” Sadic jests to Cecilia in a whisper, “I toned the cologne down a notch. Do I stink?”

“No, you smell just right.” She tells him with a smile, “I know your friend’s ‘Ophelia’. She doesn’t seem to remember me, which is not surprising.”

Sadic looks up to see Christopher eavesdropping. They share a quiet moment before Sadic turns back to Cecilia. “We should talk about this later.” She nods and turns back to their company.

Hors d’oeuvre offers a bit of a challenge seeing that Christopher and Sadic are the only ones who know each other, technically… but by the main course, they find ease with each other and are laughing like old friends. Christopher, Sadic and Cecilia are interacting. Ophelia is reacting. She laughs when the table laughs and nods at conversation, barely participating.

Dinner comes swiftly. The ladies have chicken while the men have steak. By desert, the three most talkative have internal jokes; even Christopher is laughing. Ophelia’s dark cloud begins to lift slowly but not fast enough.

Sadic likes his woman. He cannot help praise her, which makes him happy, and she blushes extensively, which pleases Sadic. He goes on about his woman even as they settle in for their second round of drinks for the night. He goes through the day he met her. Christopher and Ophelia have heard this story before, but Christopher does not mind hearing it again, and Ophelia does not remember. Once more will not kill.

“... so I’m walking softly, landing my feet gracefully on the carpet… praying she doesn’t hear. But, she has ears like a bat’s, I swear! She heard me coming, even gave me a thrashing for testing her blindness. I swear never gon’ wave my hand in front of anyone’s face again.”

They all laugh boldly.

“Want to know a secret?” Cecilia asks him. “Yeah,” he says with a ring of curiosity. This has Ophelia smiling broadly. “It’s not just my ears. It’s this,” She raises her arm, and points to a bracelet on her left wrist. “It’s a biometric bracelet engineered at Ferthono. It’s coded to me. Sometimes, I even wear an earpiece and a scanner at the company, it describes things into my ear.

Every time the door opens, it vibrates continuously for about ten seconds. That’s how I know.”

“Nifty,” Christopher comments. “May I?” She pushes her hand towards where she has heard his voice project from all night. He takes her hand, and

his other holds beyond the band at her wrist. He studies the bracelet for a cool minute, wiggling her wrist and poking at it, subconsciously expressing a young boy's enthusiasm after acquiring a new shiny toy.

"What else does it do?" Ophelia asks.

"Marks distance to objects and speed in terms of approaching objects. I have it sync it to my devices; phone and computer. I know of alerts through this. Best of all, it does not need charging; it is mechanical, water-resistant, and high impact proof. Without this, I cannot make out there." She says sadly.

"May I?" Christopher asks. She does not understand. So he clarifies, "Take photos." She lets him.

Christopher gets his phone and presses the screen a few times before a flash comes on. The shutter works numerous times, telling the group that he has taken not less than ten pictures of the device. The rest look unsettled, as though they all know this is more than just innocent curiousity.

He looks up at Cecilia and sees it in her eyes, the look of guilt in a woman who knows she has messed up. "That's it. Thank you." Cecilia pulls her hand away and cradles it in the other. She feels cautious again. This earns him a stink eye from his friend Sadic.

If only to quell the spirits, Christopher speaks kindly, "Cecilia, I watched you when you walked in. I bet you know more about this place than any other guest here. I saw you read the place without the bracelet." Christopher reveals to the table.

Sadic bursts out laughing. "Yeah?" he doubts.

"Challenge accepted!" Cecilia suddenly speaks, a little amused.

"How many open windows are there in this restaurant wing?"

"Six."

Sadic counts them, "She's right. Six." He huffs in disbelief.

"How many people were in this wing when you came in?" Ophelia asks.

"Eight to ten guests, three waiters." Cecilia answers. All except Christopher turn to Ophelia to confirm. She smiles sheepishly, "I'm sorry; I didn't count." Ophelia confesses.

"Three waiters… Eight guests." Christopher says.

Sadic, "*Waaah,* that's creepy, CC." She shrugs her shoulders at him, beaming with triumph.

"You forget, you lived before Ferthono gave you that."

The others smile in agreement.

Almost immediately after, Cecilia asks Ophelia to help her to the bathroom and they leave for the ladies.

"She doesn't remember you," Christopher says as he puts away his phone.

Sadic slightly distrusts as he sits back, staring at his friend. "What did you do?"

"When?" he feigns cluelessness.

"With the bracelet."

"I hacked it." He is forthcoming, signs that he is up to no good.

Sadic falls into a laugh that suddenly fades when he thinks about Christopher's words. "Oh my god! Ngai! You!" He points the finger at Christopher, then retracts it when he sees he draws attention to them. "I need a minute," he abruptly stands up and leaves the table.

Yego sits back and sips his drink, seemingly unfazed by Sadic's reaction to his confession. He waits patiently for his company to return,

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OPHELIA waits for Cecilia in the extensive restroom with mirrors, sinks, and a diaper changing surface. She lacks what to do with herself. She has washed her hands, dried them, and now studies herself in the full-length mirror to the sidewall of the space, all before Cecilia leaves her stall. Ophelia likes her dress. She likes the colour emerald green. It fits a bit off, but still, she looks divine. She sees it is old and realises that she must have had it a while. She cannot remember exactly where she got it from. Sadness overcomes her as her demons begin to rear their heads. *You are not Ophelia; this is not your life. This is not you here….*

She hears a flash and straightens herself. Ophelia leans to the stall door frame.

Cecelia walks out, "I'm sorry, pesky *mashiroz*." She confesses about her periods.

"Oh, don't worry, I understand!" Ophelia speaks in an enthusiastic high pitch, her tone courtesy of the wine. She shakes her head and then settles with her back on the door frame. She crosses her legs at the ankles stylishly and folds her hand cover to her chest. *Get it together!* She reprimands herself as she feels she is acting childishly.

Ophelia watches Cecilia in silence in the quiet that follows; she traces the faucet of the tap and wets one hand. She glides her dry open palm along the

wall before the sink, fingers searching. She finds the soap. After a few squirts she places her hands together and scrubs. Ophelia stares shamelessly. She is fascinated by the movement of her fingers. There is something rather sensual in the way that Cecilia uses her hands. She has heart-warmingly graceful, like a princess or queen. Ophelia imagined that she does things this way because she has to approach things cautiously not to get hurt. When her hands are rinsed, she does the strangest of things throwing her grace from before away; she wipes her inner palms over the front of her skirt and the outer parts of her hands to the sides of the skirt. This makes Ophelia burst into laughter. She controls it faster than Cecelia would have projected when Cecilia turns to face her.
THIS laugh is what confirms Cecilia's speculation. She leans her bottom on the edge of the sink. "You know, I never forget laughs.

They act as markers.

You have a distinctive laugh, Ophelia. I have heard that laugh before. I know you."

Ophelia stills. This must be the first person she has met who swears to know her. Her hands fall as she uncrosses her legs and steps towards Cecilia, "How do you know me?"

"I work at a company called Ferthono. You came to Ferthono almost ten years ago. You were there one year. I met you while you were smoking in a bamboo tree garden." She is tempted to spill more details but holds her tongue.

"You know I smoke." Ophelia's voice comes strained. She is about to cry, the gush of catharsis too much to bear.

"Yes…" She confesses. "But you never used to." She adds. "They made you start to."

"Who?"

Cecelia feels anxiety build about her. "You really don't know?" Cecilia asks, disbelieving her ears. Before Ophelia speaks, the main door falls open. A woman walks in. She senses she is not welcome at that moment and chooses to wash her hands and leave. Cecilia speaks as the door touches the frame, even before the lock clicks, "I can help you remember."

Ophelia's eyes fill with tears. She steps back unsteadily, leaning heavily on the stall door. "I don't know what to do." She takes unsteady rushed breaths, fanning her hand to the side of her face as though to manually push the air into her lungs.

Cecilia's brows come together in sympathy.
"I…" she struggles to breathe, "At times, I remember stuff… smells. Feelings, touch. Little bits, but I cannot place them." She sobs. "I dream of people I never met… I don't know. I… its… I'm going crazy." The tears spill as she looks to Cecilia for answers.

"They call those residuals.

It is bits of the old personae coming through. See, my dear," she steps forward and holds her hands before Ophelia. Ophelia takes them as her tears flow freely. "Nature will always triumph. Even with the science, one way or another, even without my help, you would find a way to remember." She smiles at Ophelia.

"How?"

"You will love this part… words. A phrase." She leans in, pulls away one hand, and pushes it forth to cradle the back of Ophelia's head. She leans forward and places her lips near Ophelia's ear. She then whispers a phrase into Ophelia's ear.

Cecilia leans back and looks up at Ophelia, who feels like she truly sees her. They wait for something to happen. A minute passes and nothing happens.

"Do the words work?"

"Give it time," Cecelia says, rushes to pat her hair, suddenly threatened by the thought of her gravity defiant locks. "How do I look?"

"Good."

"I imagine you look terrible," Ophelia shuffles past Cecilia to the mirror, "Oh, my God." She turns on the water, rushes to the side, and grabs some tissues. She cleans her face up, "Christopher will go nuts if he knows I have been crying." She confesses making quick work of cleaning up.

"I am sure. He likes you."

"We are," Cecilia feels the air still in charge of uncertainty, "strange…." Ophelia turns on her heels. "How do I look?"

Cecilia laughs. "Uh, I am visually challenged here. You may have to take charge."

"Oh, so sorry." Ophelia takes Cecilia's hand. "You look amazing. "Let's go." She says and they giggle like children as they leave the bathroom.

Cecilia cannot help think Ophelia a little strange.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"CECILIA," VIVIAN CALLS OUT from beyond the reception area at Ferthono. Her heels tap on the tile in an angry patter that calls attention to her impending arrival. Cecilia looks up. She has new sensors on her temples. These feed her brain with images of what she should see if her eyes worked. The images are unclear, largely red dancing dots that illustrate solid objects. She cannot discern faces, but objects such as walls, doors, and furniture no longer require her bracelet. It is tech that is in its trial phase. It gives her a headache, but luckily, she has to test it for only two hours every day. "Cecilia!" Vivian calls out again and Cecilia bites her lip, afraid to heed the call. The woman appears from about the edge of the wall to the reception and Cecilia's breath hitches. Vivian steps heavy with emotion; she is fuming to the high heavens. Villainous energy seethes off her tiny frame in a sheath of elevation; she can see a red flame floating about Vivian's form.

Cecilia pulls off the sensors roughly, drawing blood from her left temple. Her head knocks like earth breaking —it feels like Armageddon inside her skull. She takes a moment to get accustomed to her usual darkness.

"Cecilia," Vivian reaches her, banging her hand over the counter, forcing Cecilia to look up. "I have been calling you!"

"I'm sorry, the sensors… they are…." *Monica*.... She smells the distinct scent of coconut oil in the air.

"Monica come here, handle the reception." Vivian orders interrupting Cecilia. Monica comes out wholly from behind the wall. The bracelet vibrates. Monica approaches. Her steps are uneven; she is still finding her confidence while finding her place in Ferthono. Ferthono had found her a place despite her little confidence —she is dressed officially; Cecilia can tell this from the clack of her shoes as she walks.

"Vivian, I'm sorry the sensors were...."

"It is Ms. Ntalale." Vivian corrects her crossly.

Okay…

"Come up to the board floor. We need to speak to you."

"Yes, Ms." Cecelia mocks, getting off her chair. Monica walks up to her desk and replaces her. "Hey," Cecelia salutes but is ignored. She turns to talk to Vivian, maybe ask why she is being summoned, but she does not feel

her presence anymore. She makes her way to the bathroom for a nervous release and then to the lift.

VIVIAN meets Cecelia at the lifts. She waits patiently as she watches the counter marking Cecilia's position. She switches dominance in her stance to her right leg and crosses her hand impatiently over her chest. 8th – 9th – 10th… finally, the lift zooms to her floor. Soon as the doors open. She grabs Cecilia and pulls her towards the boardroom.

"Good morning." A man on the board calls out to Cecilia as Vivian drags her in as though she was a culprit, hand about her upper arm. She turns to the voice, placing him to her left towards the head of the table. It is Mr. Tembo. She recognises his voice and position on the table. The board members tend to be repetitive; they like to sit in the same chairs.

"GOOD morning Mr. Tembo."

"Please sit," Vivian says, pushing Cecilia towards a seat at the table's base. Usually, there would be no seat beyond the table because a presenter would stand there. Cecelia uses her bracelet to trace the chair. She sits, her nervousness reading in her rather meek demeanour. Vivian walks about the room to her seat at the head of the table. She ensures that her footfalls mark her path for Cecelia to keep up. She takes her seat. "Cecelia, you have been called before the board to explain your actions these last few days. This concerns your bracelet." Cecelia takes a deep breath. She squares her shoulders for a confrontation. Mr. Tembo glances at Vivian, then back to Cecilia. He smiles at Cecilia's bravery. "Where were you last Monday... Between eight and ten in the evening?" Vivian asks.

"Uh, I had dinner with friends."

A few murmurs come alive. They make her more uneasy. She squirms, in her seat, suddenly feeling the weight of the inquisition.

Vivian leans forward. She looks to Henry, who sits by her on the table, and nods. She raises her hand and the room goes quiet. "This conversation will be recorded for posterity from this moment on, your union representative could not make it, but he has been looped in via Video Conference. Would you like to face this board today or later with your representative or lawyer present?"

"Ms. Vivian, what's going on?" She sounds frantic. She cannot help the sheen of sweat building on her brow.

"Answer the question, Cecilia," Vivian insists.

"Now..." Cecelia sounds uncertain.

“Good. Let’s begin. Present are all board members. Also present digitally is your union representative. This inquisition follows the use of your bracelet to access information beyond your pay grade on the 24th of March; this would be the evening in question.”

Cecilia swallows hard.

“Please list the names of your friends.”

“Sadic, Christopher and...” Cecilia whispers, “Ophelia.” The tension builds in the room. Feeling slightly choked by the tension, her hand makes an ungainly grab at her blouse at her throat. She pulls it down.

“Full names, please.”

“Sadic Ano, Christopher Yego, and Ophelia... I did not get her second name.”

“Were you aware that two of those individuals, a Mr. Yego and a Ms./Mrs. Ophelia are subjects in a study here at Ferthono?”

“No.”

“Are you lying?”

She hesitates, “No.”

Another board member takes up the questioning. “Correct me if I am wrong. Your capacity here is related to reading people.”

“It is.”

“So, you tell this board that you met Ophelia and never recognised her from the trial. From your interaction with her.”

“I am visually impaired.”

“Yes, we know... but you never had a higher revelation; perceptive deduction did not reveal to you the personae that is Ophelia.” Cecilia shakes her head stiffly. “You sat with the girl for about two hours or more through dinner and did not recognise her.”

“Yes.”

“To what?” A few people laugh; he has not asked a question. He has been merely leading her on. Stating facts that she took as questions.

“The question.”

“Are you lying?”

“No.”

Another board member takes over. This one is female. Usually, she would be gravely quiet, but today concerning this, she cannot stay quiet. “Your bracelet accessed security protocols here on the night in question for about thirty seconds when you had dinner. Did you know of this?”

“No!”

“Were you aware of the hacking as it took place?”

“No!”

“What happened at dinner? Run us through your dinner as it happened.”

“Sadic and I arrived late. Christopher and Ophelia were there already. We drank, ate, and then drank some more. I used the ladies, then left after half an hour.” She briefs her evening to the irrelevant.

“Anything else.”

“I...” She leans forward. “I have worked here all my life; why would I do anything to jeopardise my position here. My inhibitions limit the number of companies that will hire me willingly.”

The man who spoke before takes over. “Incentive. What did he offer you to turn you against us... money, resources... sight?! Did he promise you sight?!”

“I would never!” she cries out, tears coming to her eyes. “I would never abandon Ferthono for anything. You must believe me! I owe you my life!”

Vivian speaks up. “Enough games Cecelia. You have one last chance to tell us the truth. Did you conspire with a Mr. Yego to share Ferthono security protocols for incentives or reparations of any kind?”

“No.” The tears slip their limits. They flow hot and freely. She nods her face behind her hands and weeps a few seconds before composing herself almost too mercurially.

“Okay.” Vivian speaks, “We shall vote. Do you wish to remain in the room as we vote, or would you rather step outside?”

“I will remain,” she whispers.

“All in favour of the termination of Cecilia’s contract at Ferthono effective immediately for...” The rest of the board votes even before she finishes her sentence. ‘I!’; the resounding echo of rejection has Cecelia weeping again. “All in favour of maintaining Cecilia’s contract at Ferthono.” There is nothing. Then a measly throat clear meant to taunt her rejection.

“Cecilia...”

More crying.

“Cecelia... control yourself...”

Infinite tears leak out of her eyes; they prove the power they hold at this moment for vessels that do not work. She cries some more, shuddering in tremors while sniffing repeatedly.

“I may have to call security...”

“I’m... it’s... I have...” She tries to speak between sobs.

“Okay. Relinquish your budge, bracelet, and devices.”

Cecelia’s face is downcast; she lets the torrent flow freely, unable to control it. She lets it reign.

“Now.”

She starts, slips her bracelet off, and pushes it away on the table. She pulls her budge off and does the same.

“Your case will not be reviewed again. Your termination is permanent. You have thirty minutes to exit the premises. Any delays will be taken as hostile acts against Ferthono and will thus warrant issuing a court order or fulfilling an arrest warrant. Do you understand?”

Cecilia nods, suddenly spent. She stands to leave when she hears another board member call her. She turns. “Learn from this; traitors get burned. You can kiss any other job in this grade goodbye. You have been marked, my dear.”

A sob escapes her lips as she turns and walks away.

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CECELIA stands by Ferthono's gates. A little carton box with her effects messily dumped into it at her feet. Tear-stained and lonely, she dials Sadic. She hopes to talk to him, cash in on his promise of comfort and security. Soon as he answers, she speaks in a hasty revelation.

“Sadic, they fired me… something about my bracelet! It was hacked. And they think I did it, called me before the board. Humiliated me and fired my arse before I could state my case.” Her voice cracks, “I have no job! It’s over!”

From his reaction, she can guess that this is not news to him. He lets a nonchalant ‘Mmmh’ come her way. He asks where she is at that moment. “Let me come and get you,” he offers.

“I have called a taxi; I should go home.” In truth, the guard called her a taxi; she was in no condition to call one for herself. She cannot tell him that she is without the gates of Ferthono, literally thrown out with her meagre belongings and all she wants to do is go home and scream her frustration away into her pillow.

“Let me drop you off. I will leave right now, be there in ten.”

“No, I just... I need a moment.” She heaves significantly, then whispers reluctantly, “Sadic,”

His fire dead, he speaks softly. “Yes?”

“It was Christopher.”

———

SADIC storms Christopher's office. He bangs the door shut, which catches Christopher’s attention. He senses an angry Sadic and stands up, meeting him halfway to his table. Before he can utter a word, Sadic cocks back his fist and then lands it squarely on Christopher’s face. The blow lands on the side of his nose. Its impact shifts his centre of gravity, making him stagger back. Christopher catches himself before he hits the ground.

Sadic wiggles his wrist and flexes his fist dramatically, wearing the most outrageous pained expression on his face; he gives up searching for comfort and points at Christopher with his other index finger. “You had no right. That was her life! You had no right!”

Christopher wipes his bloody nose with the back of his hand. “Tell me you were never worried about her working there and I will apologise.”

Sadic cannot say it out loud, but Christopher knows that he has been worried sick. Her job meant everything to her, yet every day, they all wished she would lose it someway. Once, Sadic had mentioned that he prayed that they fire her for as little as a lost pen after he had a nightmare once that they would decide to test her blindness, as he had. Worse, they would claim to have a cure for it. Experimental or not, Ferthono was never to be trusted with anything, especially a life.

“You’re an ass!” He cannot result to name-calling, one punch in the nose is not enough.

Sadic knows that Christopher is right at the back of his mind, his methods may be a little extensive, but he is right.

Silence.

“I’m sorry.” Christopher apologises. He truly means it. He cannot remember the day he has apologised to Sadic. This is the first time he has gotten off his high horse long enough to see his error. “I looked at the gen from Ferthono. You do not want anyone you know near these people. At least now she is out of the umbrella.”

“What of the ripple effect? It was her bracelet that started this. They know this little fact.”

“I will protect her,” Christopher answers with confidence. His eyes hold a resilience of ages. Sadic watches him closely, his face a bloody pulp; he attempts to hold the gaze but nods his head to close his bleeding nostril in a tight grip. “You must believe me.” He continues to speak despite seeing no faith in Sadic’s face.

“The way you did Ophelia?!” Christopher barely contains himself. He cannot tell Sadic the many ways he has shielded them from backlash, from their words and actions. Sadic’s especially because he is more impulsive. He cannot tell him about the recoil from their messes, one that earned him a few broken ribs and two nights in a hospital. Sadic became the confident entrepreneur, pushing at the world’s buttons, leaving Christopher to watch in awe from the sidelines. Case and point, this little dance they were having. He listens quietly to Sadic’s rant. “At what cost. What does the mighty Yego gain when he takes down Ferthono?!” Sadic speaks rudely, never mind his tone that is a subtly disrespectful growl.

“Nothing,” Christopher confesses. “I gain nothing, but Ophelia and Cecilia gain their freedom.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

THERE LAYS A PALENESS on the finger, in a band about her left-hand ring finger.

Ophelia sits at her vanity, tired but unable to sleep. She stares at the image in her mirror. This has become her new addiction, trying to read her past from her appearance. She is waiting for Cecilia's words to work. If she waits long enough, she will see the tide change. Just as she waits on the minute hand to move, she awaits her mental switch to snap, thus pulling her memories back.

Her brows come together as she studies her eyes, nose and lips. She slowly turns her head to the side, eyes get glassy and looks at her profile as though relearning her appearance. She studies her jaw and neck curves. She raises her left hand and rubs the skin on her neck with her fingers. She wants to erase herself. She moves her hand to her cheek and does the same, rubs her hand up and down until her skin is warm and raw. Nothing happens.

The paleness on her ring finger catches her attention. She lowers her hand, palm facing up and stares at the thin and even line of pale skin.

—SHE had noticed the pale skin a while back, just after things started to turn strange. She ignored it. She could ask her friends, but she was afraid of what they would say; it could go well or badly, so she dared not ask.

How would she begin, 'uh, I noticed I have a ring mark on my hand, am I married?' It was Ludacris, even the idea of it. How could she be married? To whom? So she ignored it until dinner with Christopher, his friends Sadic and Cecilia. Dinner was like a jolt of steroids straight to the heart.

She stumbled to bed when she got home, forgetting to clean her face and change. She slept like the dead, waking up twenty-three hours later. It was as though she had been drugged. When she woke up, she had a pounding headache and a strange feeling of hyperawareness. A week later, things started to happen. In a day, she realised more than anyone could ever tell her—

OPHELIA looks at her finger. She gradually turns her hand, letting the area of her inner wrist rest on the vanity as she studies the marking. The skin is tanning, slowly erasing the evidence of a wedding band. She grabs a ring from her jewellery box and places it on her finger, right over the line of pale

skin. She has known for a while now that she is married and is slowly starting to realise that the man missing from her life is Yego.

She now sees the ruse in her life. They are playing a cruel game. They are playing with her mind, all of them; Stacy, Eleanor, Sadic, and Christopher. All under the orders of the puppeteer Christopher Yego. He has been hiding a lot from her, and she is starting to uncover things about her life with the help of a private investigator. Mr. Yego pays her rent and bills at home and the office. She thought she had a standing order that debits her living expenses, but her expenses are usually billed to a dependant expenses account registered under Yego Enterprises. Her two tap-and-pay credit cards are registered under Ophelia Yego.

The only real thing is her income from the practice and the account she uses to store that income.

On the day she comes to this truth, something flips in her mind and Christopher's role in his theatrical piece staring her becomes apparent. She is living a theory she studied in school on memory retrieval. Though she has no practise in Memory Studies, it is not hard to see what Christopher and his friends are trying to do with her; he gave her an ostensibly complete life, now they wait for her to remember her past on her own.

This proves that Ophelia was right to question her past; something happened a couple of months ago that erased her memories. In theory, this memory retrieval process is lengthy, expensive, and somewhat tedious, but for a man with Yego's resources, the moon is as close as a step into a vessel. He wants to sustain the illusion for as long as it takes her to remember. Also, he has a personal stake; Christopher is her husband.

Ophelia looks up and places her palm on the vanity. She stares her image down, willing herself to remember beyond Christopher. She closes her eyes and tries to study the darkness there. Nothing. She opens her eyes and stares into those determined eyes. They say eyes are the windows to the soul; she wants to stare into her soul, see what is lurking there, hidden from her. She wants to unlock the past.

She blinks. The eyes do not blink back.

Her chest constricts, her lips part as she draws a deep breath between her teeth, "Oh-My-God!" She whispers as she squares in on the face. The image looking back at her is darker, paler even. Eyeing her frigid simulacra, Ophelia tries to read into it. *Something*...

She squares in on her features.

“Oh-My-Freaking…” She moves towards zeroing in on the eyes again. “You are not me.” She speaks softly, studying the eyes that seem hers but are not hers. She sees similar bone structure about the eyes, that nose that turns slightly upwards at the tip, and those familiar full lips. The image is suddenly restricted in a haze as tears fill her eyes. The face starts to speak to her, but she cannot hear anything. The face pulls together with concern. Ophelia’s frustration grows from a lack of understanding. She lets her tears fall, grabbing the mirror by the sides of the vanity. “What!” she screams at the mirror, “What the hell is wrong with me!” she shakes the vanity, shaking the effects on the tabletop. “Baby… nothing.” Ophelia reads the lips in the mirror. Her mouth falls open as the air is knocked out of her lungs, “Mum?!”

It is her mother’s face.

Ophelia sees kindness in those concerned eyes. Shaking uncontrollably, she braces on the vanity, her vibrations shaking the whole vanity. A glass jar of brushes slips over the edge, crashing into thousands of pieces on the floor. Ophelia jumps high, grabbing the sides of her head.

Images flock to her brain. She remembers her mother and father. She remembers the fights they had. She remembers her time with her father, the experiments, the night in her father’s garage, and the battery. She remembers shaking uncontrollably… her mother’s face… the gun… her mother shooting her father in the head… the blood splatters across her face when the gun goes off, some of it getting into her mouth. She remembers her parents’ murder-suicide.

Ophelia crumbles to the floor, hiding in the space underneath the vanity, fearing the images as they come flooding in. She remembers Vivian, her aunt. She connects her past to her present. She sees herself in a room of horror. She is locked in and chained to a bed.

Ophelia sobs between breaths, shutting her eyes tightly as the pounding in her head worsens. She feels as though her head is cracking in two. She tightens the grip on the sides of her head as though holding the splitting halves together.

Ophelia remembers her name.

Annie.

———

OPHELIA calls Yego at eight in the evening. She asks him to meet her in the city at the coffee café on Gado Street in an hour. Before hanging up, Christopher tells her that he thinks she sounds different. His voice is lined with hope. He reveals that she is at the precipice of a breakthrough. Ophelia understands what he means; she feels she is beyond.

The city is dulled by a storm that turns torrential now and then. The weatherman was wrong; it was not another warm evening in Nairobi. It seems the long rains are upon the Green City in the Sun. God's wrath pours heavily in the city.

Most of the streets are clear. People caught in the storm huddle in building corners and entryways, waiting for a break in the downpour, but fate proves the people in the city unlucky. This night offers no one consolation.

Ophelia arrives earlier than Christopher. She slips out of the taxi and onto a dead Gado street. Until tonight, Ophelia never realised how deserted the street could be, especially at night. Even so, she finds the rain a little mesmerising this night. She sees a little bit of a pluviophile, maybe a bit of petrichoria in herself. Better yet, this is not Ophelia; *this is Annie.*

Annie likes rain. She likes how raindrops fall. The tiny drops chase each other equidistant from each other. She likes the dance they fall in when the wind blows. She likes the sound of the drops as they land on gutters and streets. The smell of rainy days makes her lux at ease. Rain gives her a rare kind of joy.

Tears come when she sees herself as a little girl playing in the rain. She is wearing a yellow raincoat and the cutest pair of pink gumboots. She sees herself dancing in a light shower.

Her mother calls her. "Baby,"

"Mama, what's wrong?" Annie asks.

"Nothing." She walks up and crouches in front of the girl. "Come out of the rain. You will catch a cold." Her mother speaks.

Ophelia is caught in the memory. She slowly unlocks the past. It is both exhilarating and scary. She reads her mother; she is eloquent and refined.

"Amy," new voice calls. The woman turns to look behind her. Ophelia traces her line of sight. Her father is revealed. Ophelia falls backward in a step. Her back lands on a rigid mass, making her jump. The rain about her stops falling. Taking cautious breaths, she turns her head in fear, cranes her

neck to see who is behind her. She has to tilt her chin up to his face. She sees a face she should know but does not.

The man holds up a large black umbrella with her in its canopy. A shiver runs through her body as her heart starts to race. She starts to feel herself fading. She is scared and about to pass out. Looking about her, she searches for Christopher, anyone; the street is empty. They are the only people standing in the middle of Gado Street during a storm. She turns to face him slowly as the cold air sips through her wet clothes, worsening her shiver. She starts to feel her fingers get numb.

"Do I know you?" She asks timidly, teeth chattering.

"No, little Annie. But I knew your father's work." She stares dumb folded. "He was a brilliant man." He places his free hand on her shoulder, bends over, and whispers, "This is all his doing."

Her form freezes to subzero temperatures. She looks up as a haze overtakes her. He disappears behind a cloud that forms before her. She coughs lightly as her body weakens. A pair of headlights hit them. Ophelia's eyes shut slowly as she steps beyond the ether.

TOM can barely see beyond the downpour, despite the car wipers working overtime to clear the rain from the windshield. He makes two figures in the middle of the road in the distance. One taller, of a sturdy built. The other is smaller, in a yellow dress.

He keeps the insight to himself. He inches forward, angling to park on the side of the road as he steals a glance at the figures up the street. The more diminutive form is dragged into the alley between the two buildings across the café.

Ophelia…?!

Christopher looks up from his phone. "Are we here? I can barely see through this rain."

"Yes, sir."

Christopher puts his phone away. Tom parks before the café. Yego jumps out, anxious to hear out Ophelia. She asked to meet him *here*. She must remember how special this place is to them. He proposed here, and they ate here a lot when they were married. Most weekday evenings were spent at their table in this restaurant. They were familiar with the staff and management. Everyone was shell-shocked when he brought her there one Sunday evening, and she had no idea who they were.

Christopher runs into the café. He goes through the ground level of the café up the stairs to the upper level in unmeasured treads, overwhelmed by fretfulness. It has to do with the rain. He has never liked rain. The paranoia that comes with the crying skies is strange. Christopher believes that storms like to leave him alone.

In a stupor, Christopher runs blindly, bumping into a female waitress, the same waitress that almost always serves them, "Have you seen Ophelia?" She shakes her head. Reading his anxiety, she runs a sweeping gaze across the tables, "She is not yet here."

He looks at his watch. It is 9.33 PM. He is late. She could not have left. Christopher walks in a guarded gait to the sidewall of the café's upper floor. He leans on the wall and finds himself looking despairingly at the space. It is mostly empty —just a couple at a corner table taunting his pain with their feverishly annoying state of love. His chaotic state and the contrasted calm of the room wheedle him into an unexpected reaction; he starts to laugh. After about a minute, his face contorts into hard lines. "She is gone," he whispers sadly.

"Mr. Yego?" The waitress is back and worried. So is the couple in the corner. They still glance at the mad man in his impeccable suit. He turns to her. "Are you okay?" she asks again.

He studies her, seemingly the anti-Ophelia. This girl is lighter, much lighter. Her natural features are less striking but highly glamourized in makeup. Her hair is sleek and dark. She looks like a half-cast, part Kenya, part something else. Something with a kick. The kind of genes that cause and solve problems.

Her brows come together as she looks up at him, waiting for an answer.

"Uh," he rubs his fingers across his forehead. His untimely hysteria retakes him. He tells her he is fine. He brushes past her and leaves the café altogether.

Christopher finds Tom holding a shut umbrella on the veranda of the café.

"Did you find her?" Tom asks as he opens the umbrella. With a simple hand gesture, Christopher stops him. They stand like this. Tom avoids his boss's eye; he stares at Christopher's side, looking like a guilty teenager. His eyes lock on something past Christopher.

Christopher follows Tom's gaze. He sees a big black umbrella floating up the street in the wind. Something pulls him to it. He finds himself chasing it

down in the rain. He pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and uses the clean cloth to hold the umbrella up when he catches it. Still crouched, he looks about. The street is empty save for him and his driver Tom. He stands up, his clothes soaked in the rainwater, and jogs back to the car.

"Sir, did you find her?" Tom asks again, stepping into the rain.

"No." He stares blankly at Tom. "She is gone." He is rebuffed by Ophelia's disappearance. It is as though the universe is trying to tell him something, a joke perhaps, and he keeps missing the punch line.

———

A FEW WEEKS LATER...

WHILE in his office on a fine Monday morning, Christopher receives an invitation, a bold 'Mr. Christopher Yego' is labelled on an off-white glazed envelope with his name typed in a rich dark brown font in the middle of the envelope.

Suddenly, he feels sequestered, with an unfathomable amount of noise clouding his brain. There is his beating heart, the thrumming of hot Yego blood going through him, the clock ticking —even the gears in the clock taunt him with some illusory racket… for some reason, he can hear his office assistant from the other side of the room shredding material in an infinite conflagration. Needing release, Christopher pockets the damned envelope and rushes for the roof access.

Yego stands on the helipad, gazing over at a lively Nairobi. To his front was the city botanical park New-Huru Park. These gardens gave the city the name Green City in the Sun. He remembers the struggle to keep this park, the tears shed. The value of true bravery. He turns to face the downtown of Nairobi city. The area is dwarfed, people looking like tiny spots moving about a maze of buildings and vehicles. He thinks of the filth that marks the area, the clogged drainages, the dirtied and blocked streets by trash. The city lives on, ignorant of his judging gaze.

She lived there… slept on those streets… ate off those streets… a street child in Nairobi…. He wrings his nose at the thought. *Until Bemus found her….*

For some reason, he knows this is an invitation from Bemus Manange. He can feel it deep within. He knows.

Christopher forces himself to deal with why he came up there in the first place. His hand makes its way to his pocket. He finds the envelope and

scoffs as he pulls it out, almost gagging with abhorrence and contempt. Somehow, he knows this piece of communication will ruin his mood. Christopher opens the envelope, which reveals a little folded note. He takes a damning breath and reads.

———

CHRISTOPHER goes as summoned. He was asked to present himself at Aquinas DANA University; Psychology Department Thursday at 4 PM. He arrives at the university early and waits a good hour for his appointment. He holds a large black umbrella like a cane before him, the same umbrella he picked when he lost Ophelia again.

He wishes to return it to its rightful owner.

Christopher sits too still, barely noticing the life about him. Students and educators pass about him. The clock in the waiting area ticks away, but Yego sits there unmoving. His mind is lost in oblivion. He exercises patience in unearthly proportions this day.

The clock strikes four and he stands just as the receptionist ushers him to a door to the side. “Mr. Yego… he will see you now.”

“Thank you.”

CHRISTOPHER does not judge Bemus for his large office with gleaming trinkets plastered all over his desk. Trophies sit on provisions all over one wall, his wall of titles. Christopher deduces that these are his reasons for living. He takes time to study a few of them. Most are rewards for his work in Behaviourism.

Bemus watches him silently. He eyes the umbrella in Yego’s hand and swallows hard, loud enough for the sound to get to Christopher’s ear.

“You study human behaviour.”

“My focus. Yes.”

Yego moves to another section of the wall. “Were you ever an actual priest?”

“Yes. I was discontinued when I delved too deep in this.”

Christopher nods. Having seen enough, he makes his way to Bemus. He places the umbrella gently across the man’s desk. Christopher’s muscles are tight as he works every nerve to restrict himself from swinging it at Bemus’ head.

Bemus bites down and points at a seat.

Christopher takes a seat. He allows himself a moment to relish the ease that creeps all over his back. The chair in the reception was rather uncomfortable. His slight delight sits sarcastically on his face until he moves on to the reasons for his presence here. “Ferthono paid you to study me,” he speaks calmly, “why?”

“Someone paid them to.” Christopher’s brow wrinkles at his vagueness. “A Henry Kaikai.”

“Kaikai?!” Christopher does not recognise the name.

“Know any Henrys?” Bemus asks.

Christopher nods, “Kiarie, Joho and Njoroge.”

“Kiarie. Henry Kaikai Kiarie.” Comes his provision. Christopher eyes him doubtfully. This makes Bemus patronise him, “I have no reason to lie to you.”

This makes Christopher chuckle. Undoubtedly, the man has every reason to lie. Yego can feel his gun burning a hole in his back. His fingers twitch to grab it and jam a bullet or two in Bemus’ thick skull. Again, he asks why.

“I wouldn’t know. The thing that drives him disconnects from his purpose of chasing after you.” Christopher tilts his head inquisitively. “Money drives him. He spent millions to actualise this.”

“You must know something. Why me? Why Ophelia?” Christopher is beginning to lose his nonchalance.

Bemus reads his anxiety as a push for an argument. He chooses to be forthright in his uniquely infuriating way. “How do you think breakthroughs in science are made?” Bemus asks him.

“You do not use innocents in your games of madness!”

The man laughs. “She volunteered.”

“Lies.”

“We could sit here and debate her choices when she came to me, but it would be pointless. The girl was sick in the head. Being part of the trial was enough of a trying affair. If she weren’t mad initially, the process would surely turn her so.”

“You used her….” Christopher is empathetic toward Ophelia’s plight. “She must have been a child when she came to you,” Christopher whispers, overtaken by the words being uttered about his Ophelia, his brilliant and beautiful wife.

“She read the paperwork herself but still signed. She needed something, and she came to us. We gave her that and she gave us her life.” Bemus

speaks so carelessly. He cares not what Christopher thinks of him. “And that was no child. She came to us at twenty-one. She was an adult.”

Barely! Christopher cannot breathe. “This is madness!” He met a nineteen-year-old girl with the body of a fifteen-year-old, thin as a stick willowy from poor diet and unhealthy life choices.

BEMUS leans back in his chair. It creaks as he settles in. He watches the man before him. He sees a powerful man brought to his knees by a woman. A story as old as time itself. Bemus’ right index finger makes its way to his chin. “I have little consolation for you. Seeing that she holds your heart...”

Christopher looks up. “I will tell you this. Before she came to us, she was approached. The base study was conducted on her when she was younger. Her father wrote a vital part of the theory on her life. She was his muse, you could say, what we call a genie pig in our field. The notes made no sense when actualised on anyone else… but on Ophelia...

She was her father’s most outstanding achievement.

When he died, he left a void in our world. It took us years to find that his theory was only compatible with Ophelia. When we reached out to her, she was *broke*… on the verge of damning her life for as little as a hundred shillings. She needed this, and we needed her. Ten years was the price. She gave us ten years and we gave her enough to last her the rest of her life.”

Christopher ponders Bemus’ words, “It’s not been ten years.”

“It’s just about a decade. She has willpower like no other. The manipulation stopped working on her.”

“Hypnosis?!”

“Among other things….”

“So, no one else in the world had this theory?”

“I’m sure someone has a version of the theory. You know this; discoveries are not made linearly.” He elaborates with his hands. “But here in Kenya. This theory is as novel as a new dawn. You understand why we grabbed the chance when we did.”

“Ferthono studied a psychological theory in behaviourism written on Ophelia…. What does it have to do with Henry and me?”

“You are a bright man. Enlightened.” He bends slightly, taunting Christopher. “This should not be that hard to figure out.”

“Please.” Bemus lets the word sit in the air between them, toxic. The delay works well to rile Christopher up. “You know all the answers I seek.

Tell me what I need to know." Christopher implores Bemus lowering himself further.

He, in turn, is amused by Christopher's tenacity. He chooses candour with a twist. "What's to say this is not an attempt at saving you? You may be the mad man in this tale. Ophelia... she was beautiful, wasn't she?"

"What?" Christopher is getting angrier by the minute. "Was?! "

Bemus laughs. "Just as I was a priest. Disgraced and discarded. You may have had an illusion play the part of a real girl. Your mistake was and still is believing that she is real."

Christopher is shaking. "I not mad!" He warns.

"Well, what's a man in love with a figment of his imagination if not a mad man?"

AFTER he is done with his games, Bemus reveals that Henry sits on the board at Ferthono. He was well aware of the *Ophelia Theory* even before signing his contract with Ferthono on the study of Christopher. He adds that Henry is bored, an older man with everything one could ever want. Just as he picked Christopher, he would have chosen any other man or woman for his entertainment. Bemus sees no real reason behind Henry coming after Christopher ―other than to find out what makes him tick.

Christopher believes Bemus.

The scholar adds that Henry finds him boring and has moved on to a more promising prospect; a young local female TV anchor.

As a parting shot, Christopher asks, "Will you lead me to her?"

Bemus looks him straight in the eye and denies him. "No. You should move on with your life. The girl you know is gone."

Christopher stands abruptly. His body burns a little too hot for him to continue sitting in a leather chair. "Will you pay for this?" He asks of judgement then punishment. Christopher asks even though he knows the answer to his question.

"Maybe one day… in an afterlife," Bemus speaks candidly. Again, Christopher believes him. Bemus further warns Christopher. "She signed official papers. Before a lawyer. If you pursue this, things will not end well for you and her."

A rabbit hole, just as he had predicted. They would rip her life apart again if he pursued justice. "Thank you for your time."

"I'm glad I could answer your questions."

Christopher walks towards the door. He turns about on a heel as he reaches it, his eyes cold as death, “Bemus, you should leave this city. I never want to lay eyes on you again.”

Bemus laughs a little. “I am already packed. This was not what I signed up for.”

———

ABOUT a week after that meeting, Christopher receives a parcel with some video recordings in the enclosure. He is quick to play one. He senses that they have something to do with Ophelia. He calls in Sadic. They watch the recordings on Christopher’s laptop screen. His friend Sadic stands behind him. It seems like a psychological thriller rather than a reality they both share.

|“OPHELIA define the subject,” Bemus orders.

He is sitting before Ophelia on a steel chair. She is on a thin metallic hospital bed. She is seated at the bottom edge of the bed. One leg is folded beneath her. The other is painfully chained at the ankle to the bed. She looks worn, with dark circles below her eyes, deathly beat.

“Not me.” She answers back defiantly, making Bemus laugh. He shakes his head at her, sucking at his teeth angrily, producing a clicking sound of anger.|

CHRISTOPHER gazes into the screen, too wired to move a muscle.

|“CLEARLY. Pay attention. Now, define the subject. Start with his name.”

“Christopher N. Yego. 5’9, dark chocolate. Fit with a chiselled body...”

He writes as she speaks.

“Give me more than the physical,”

“Ethereal, overwhelming...” she laughs, unable to truly emote the laugh as she is weak. Her laughter turns into a coughing feat.

“Oh boy.” Bemus puts aside his notebook and sits back in his chair, eyeing her curiously. “Are you serious?” She shrugs, “Ophelia, explain yourself.”

“I find him exhilarating.”

Bemus narrows his eyes at her, he thought she was pulling his leg, but he sees this now...|

CHRISTOPHER sees recognition on Bemus' face—

|...SHE is serious. “Do you have feelings for the subject?”

She hesitates. Her chest heaves heavy suddenly. She tilts her head and studies the space between her and Bemus. Her eyes grow wide, her lips part like she is about to say something but her tongue is caught.

He thaws over her silence. “Do you feel for him?” He asks softly.

“I...” Her voice is swallowed when she starts convulsing. They are shocking her through her connection to the bed. She falls backward, strung. She wriggles with limited grace. The tendon in her neck strains as she twists backward, arching her back.|

CHRISTOPHER’S hand tightly grabs his seat handle. The other folds in a tight fist on the desk. Sadic steps back, his jaw held so tight that his teeth hurt. He cannot believe his eyes. If he did not know Ophelia personally, he would swear all of it was a sick joke.

They watch as she eases into a state. The tightness on her body fizzles. She takes deep breaths coming into an almost lucid state. Sweaty and a drippy mess, she stares right at the camera in the corner. Her eyes slowly shut as she goes into an exhausted sleep.

Bemus watches her, his mind working before a voice speaks over them, “Tabula Rasa.” He studies Ophelia some more before answering back. “That would be the best option,” He agrees with the unseen entity.

The audio-visual recording ends and the screen turns black.

“They cleaned her memories intentionally!” Sadic speaks the obvious. Christopher is still staring at the screen, strung tightly. He leans back stiffly. The seat cranes backward, seemingly inundated by the new position, but it holds. He runs a finger across the slit between his lips, his gaze flinty on the computer screen. Sadic walks about the desk as he continues to speak. “She was used to get to you. You should return a favour. I know a guy...”

Christopher remembers Professor Bien’s words. He speaks up, “No.”

“But they...” Sadic begins to argue.

“No. I will handle it.” Christopher concludes indignantly, his tone subduing Sadic. He indicated this much with his tone alone; he is not going after Ferthono or Henry. He cannot tell Sadic that he has a more valuable price, Vivian Ntalale Oreng’ani.

“OPHELIA, before, she was quiet. Detached.” Vivian confesses.

“Calculative, conniving. The moment she spoke those about her would know she was not born poor.” Christopher tells her, “They would know that

she did not belong.” He leans forward, eyes squarely on a patch of water before them. Birds float about the pool, chirping away, building morning sounds. It is a cold morning, so their choice of venue is interesting. The park is sparsely populated today. The temperature is relatively low, too chilly for the commonplace niceties of park lounging and lazing about.

“But does anyone?” Vivian asks, even though she knows precisely who Ophelia is.

“Mukuru; a damping site. This slum is little over forty years in the making. It is located where an old quarry site was. The stones from this quarry built the neighbouring industrial zone. Part of this area became a dump site for industrial waste.

She is too old to be a third-gen, maybe a second-gen or a first-gen,” He speaks as though trying to discern truth from the chaff. “The braveness of the task mesmerizes.” He speaks of her bravery to choose to live here, of all places. To chase life beyond her comfort zone. “This girl is a marvel.” He continues.

Vivian swallows a lump.

“You would sit there and let me connect her birth to the slum yet you know her bloodline?!” He waits, but Vivian is now tight-lipped as a tomb. “I connected the dots. She was your niece before you took her birthright, threw her out in the cold, and just when she was finally free from her past, you handed her over to Ferthono.” Christopher speaks about what should be her confession. “Did it sting a little,” he sits back and points at his chest where his heart should beat. “Right here, where your ticker sits, does it pinch in the slightest?” He turns and leans to the side. He whispers in her ear. He means to settle his rhetorical questions with his judgement brutal and finite. “You failed her. Do you think dear Anthony rolls about in his grave, cursing you out at this moment? Eh?” He pushes. She sobs into her hand, visibly shaken by his words. She shakes her head from side to side. The air around them sits thickly despite the chilly and breezy morning they are experiencing. “Hypocrisy will kill you, Vivian. Quit crying. You don’t care.

Lay on your mattress of money and dream fine dreams of the life you have forged for yourself.”

“I do!” She cuts him off, speaks between sobs. “I care, I love her….”

He pulls back but raises his voice at her, never mind her emotional state. “I have seen a fraction of what you put her through. That is not love!” He

forces himself to settle, taking deep breaths to cool his burning soul. “Her name, please.” He knows her given name, Annie. They mention it over and over in the recordings. He also watched a recording of Vivian’s interview before she handed them Annie. She does not confess her relationship to the girl, but Christopher finds out either way. He wants all her names from Vivian.

“Annie. Annie Naseriya Leiyan.”

Maasai... “Thank you.” He stands and straightens his suit. He raises his collar to shield his ears from the cold that threatens to devour them. “Manange is gone. You too should disappear. I suggest somewhere warm, fitting for a cold bitch. The weather may just warm your chilled heart.

What you did to that girl, I would not do to my worst enemy. I would seek to end their suffering rather than add ten years of torture to a period of sixteen years already served.” Christopher sighs. He looks up at the cloud-covered sky. He takes a deep breath and feels the sting of cold air on his sinuses. “The ethics of hypnosis require respect for the study and free will. What you did to your niece is morally repugnant. Shetani aina yake, Vivian.” You are a unique kind of devil. “You put me to shame, and people call me cold. I am far much thawed compared to the likes of you.”

He lets those words sink as he stands there looking down at her. Doe eyes, with fresh tears waiting to drop, stare back at him. He feels nothing for her. He had wanted to end them, chop them down to nothing, but then he looked closely at their work, and Ferthono has done a lot of good. The bad surely cannot outweigh the good… Or could it? Is his anger over Ophelia's mistreatment enough for him to revert to old ways? His ways before his success, before he knew his friend Sadic?

He may seem confident about his choices about this matter, but in truth, Christopher is conflicted about his choices. He wants to let Sadic take charge of it all, sit back and watch the magic happen. But as Professor Bien had said to him, he would have to take charge entirely and not rely on Sadic for help anymore. He chooses to be strong and bold in his step.

He walks away.

CHRISTOPHER leaves behind a wound Vivian on the park bench. She bursts into an unhinged state; she cries out so profoundly that she can barely pull a full breath without gasping. She falls to the side and laments in complete remorse.

That is the last anyone, including Ferthono, hears of Vivian Ntalale Oleng'ani.

———

CHRISTOPHER stands on the roof of his car and looks down the street in Nairobi. He looks out of sorts in his stellar tailor-made suit on the car. People have started to gather and stare up at him, whispering.

He can almost hear their words. They laugh at him. They question his sagacity. They wonder why a man that looks like him would stand on his car? And in broad daylight, waiting for the world to notice him. A few phones come out to record him.

Tom, Christopher's trusted driver comes out of the car and looks up at his boss. He is worried that his boss may have genuinely lost it. His face is composed as he speaks up at Christopher. "Sir, maybe you should come down." Christopher does not acknowledge him. He stands on, waiting. He wants to be seen. He wants her to see him. Tom waits for Christopher to heed his wise words. This man is Mr. Yego. The Mr. Yego. Net worth 2.2 Billion in pounds. Tom knows the man has a good name to uphold. He owns half of this city and they who look up at him at this moment have never seen his face before. They know his name, but they do not know his face. They sure will now. It is only a matter of time before they reconcile his name and face.

Ophelia, remember me. Christopher jumps off the car roof to the ground. He takes a moment to adjust his cuff, never mind the eyes on him, both natural and digital.

Tom comes about the car and gets the door. Christopher gets in, sits back left. He leans back into the leather and shuts his eyes, his head resting heavily on the backrest. His mind is somehow calm despite all he has learned. He feels better knowing. So much better. He prays she is safe wherever she is... away from him.

Ophelia...

He can almost smell her next to him. He can almost feel her hand slip about his thigh. He winces at the contact. He wants to bathe in her right now.

"*Christopher...*"

He hears her whisper his name and smiles. His head shifts towards the direction from which her voice comes from.

TOM starts the car and drives them off. He steals worried glances at his boss. Surely, Christopher Yego is not himself.

He vows to correct his error; the night Ophelia disappeared, he should have trusted his eyes, but he kept his yap shut on that truth. He wasted precious time. They may have caught up if he was not such a coward. He now sees the gravity of his mistake.

Tom vows to be instrumental in finding Miss Ophelia. For the sake of his and his boss' sagacity.

EPILOGUE

FOUR YEARS LATER...

ANNIE BEGS HER DAUGHTER to have her breakfast, “Ophelia... Eat. Come on. You have school in a bit.” They are running late on account that she is not a morning person. She has come to find that *Ophelia* also hates mornings. Annie knows now that she has the makings of a terrible mother. She coddles the girl too much, and in return, there are times when she chooses to be stubborn. This is when she reminds Annie of her father.

Ophelia looks up at her mother, and Annie cannot help her smile. The girl has a nice warm chocolate tone, a blend of *him* and her. She has her nose and dark eyes. She has her hair. She smiles, and tears come to Annie’s eyes.

Annie looks away, just as she hears Ophelia bite into her toast, stifling a laugh. She is perfect. *Too much like him... but perfect.* She swears to herself.

The girl gets carried away again. She forgets she is eating and starts to play on her mother’s tablet.

There is a knock on the front door. “O. Eat!” She warns as she walks away from the kitchen, “Otherwise, I will take you to boarding school!”

“I am in kindergarten!” The kid talks back but grabs her toast and eats it with new zeal. Afraid of the thought of being away from her mother, attrition triumphs.

Annie walks past the living room and to the front door. She opens the door with a smile, never mind peeping to see who it may be. She feels safe. Her smile dampens as she finds herself face to face with Christopher Yego.

“Hello, Annie.” He speaks too calmly.

A shiver runs down her body. She leans heavily on the door as she feels her legs grow weak.

CHRISTOPHER‘s reaction is priceless. He laughs slightly. He grabs the bridge of his nose in understanding, but his hand falls almost too quickly. “I guess that’s one of the things that drew me to you...” *So vulnerable.* He realises that is the reason why they selected her for him. She was and still is the perfect bait. She had looked so fragile. In a way, she still does, but knowing what she has been through, he sees little that is delicate about Annie. He laughs again. He has to remind himself that he is angry at her;

the fact that he must remind himself has him unsettled. He straightens himself, demur ready for a fight.

She senses his reproach and decides to escape. Annie pushes the door shut, but he jams his shoe in the doorway. She cannot nudge it closed.

His face morphs to poor venom. “Where is she?” he asks. She shakes her head at him. Tears come to her eyes. “Where is my daughter?” He pushes the door open but does not step over the threshold.

“Christopher,” her voice cracks as she regains her balance, continuing to shake her head at him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Know that it was all a game?” She does not answer him. “Why in God’s name would you sign your life away for experimentation?!” He fails to ask so much more. What did she think they were doing? Did she even read the fine print? What happened when they let her go? Does she remember everything? The questions remain pent up within him, unasked. They would not be answered as long as he kept them inside. Worse, they scour his insides, running laps through his mind, demonstrating that he cares, still.

“I... I need...de-d the mo-ney.” She stutters. “I didn’t know how deep the research was. I was naive...”

“For the money.” *She would sign her life away for money*. He wonders about the price. How much would Annie take to ruin her life and his in one flailing sweep? What’s the worth of their lives together? “Huh, ignorance.” He speaks while he eyes her for a quiet daunting minute. He counsels himself into a proper reaction. He fails at calculating exactly that. His mouth banters without much connection to his brain. “Stupid, utterly idiotic...” How about the child... Had she renegotiated the terms when she found she carried his child. Even without much thought, his hands start to reach for her. He wants to shake her out, an act that should earn him the slightest satisfaction. “You insolent...”

“Mama?” A little voice cuts him off —the owner of the angelic voice peers over her mother’s leg. For a second, he doubts her paternity. She is far too small to be of his loin. He softens instantly, taking a step back to accommodate the shock.

Annie kneels. She holds the scared little girl in a brief hug. Annie pulls back and holds the girl’s face in her hands. “Remember when I told you about your daddy.”

“Yes...” the girl sways a little as she speaks. She nods at her mother.

She has beautiful eyes, the largest darkest orbs he has ever seen. Her little pigtails dance in the movement. Christopher smiles. She is too sweet.

"I told you that daddy was a big and strong man, and he had to be away to..."

"Deal with stuff." She says it with such innocence and conviction.

Annie nods. A tear slips down her cheek. "Well, he is done. He is here. Ophelia, this," her hands drop from the little girl's face. Annie ushers her right hand to him as they turn their heads to Christopher. "This is your father." They look up at Christopher, who crouches to help them both.

The girl analyses his face, searching for something. Her lips turn to the side as she tightens her eyes at him. Christopher sees a lot of her mother —his *Ophelia*— in the girl. This makes him smile. The girl turns to her mother and whispers in a non-whisper, "But he is so old."

Annie laughs.

Christopher holds his laugh in a tight-looped smile.

"So am I, sweetie," Annie supplies. "Go on now. Say hello." She tells Ophelia.

The girl suddenly turns proper. She faces him and extends a little hand to Christopher. "Hi, I am Op'elia."

Oh, God! The way she eats the 'ph' in Ophelia breaks Christopher's heart. He takes the little hand and shakes it gently. The softness of the hand thaws him completely. He savours this moment. "I'm Christopher."

"Would you like some toast? Mama can't cook, but she makes great toast!" She spits some gutty honesty.

She is so Ophelia. "I would love some. Thank you."

The girl turns and walks back into the house. Annie takes a second to organise her thoughts.

Christopher stands before she does. He bends over, circles his hand about her upper arm, and pulls her to her feet. "We have a lot to talk about." He speaks calmly. He does not smile at her. He has smiles for Ophelia, though.

She nods. She appreciates him being nice to Ophelia. "Yes." She whispers.

"But, thank you." He speaks words she never expected from him.

"For what? I put you through hell." She cries silently despite the shock registered on her face.

"For raising her as my child. Thank you for not taking that away from me."

She laughs sadly, then bites on the inside of her lower lip, restricting the laugh. She takes a few seconds to measure him. She then steps to the side and lets him in.

Christopher steps over the threshold, feeling a sense of belonging.

May you find yourself, my dear.

NOTE FROM AUTHOR

THANK YOU so much for reading this novel. I hope you enjoyed it. I endeavour to simply entertain and maybe educate… I hope.

I look forward to hearing from you. I will try to reply to any pressing queries through email and social media.

I have the following people to thank for the work they put in to ensure the success of this project. To Dan Kamau... *Lookie* how far we have come. Thank you for being a true friend and walking this path with me. To Makena, my editor and friend. Thank you for your time. I love you. My Psychological and philosophical adviser, Wilma ‘Kenzia’ Masibo, my first readers Shiro Njuguna and Harriet Wairimu, you are precious to me; thank you. This would be another lost tale without you. Thank you for your time, for being brutally honest, and for helping me give the best that I can offer. Special thanks to Francis Welle and Kevin Arianda for supporting my writing. I am eternally grateful to my family and my friends... you make me strive for better, *mapenzi tele.* Ultimately, much praise to the Almighty God.

That’s all for now, remember to Live and love.

Yours truly,

Sandra Nekh.

Remember, **reproduction of this text in any media beyond this is strictly forbidden**.

If you wish to do so, contact me, and we may have talks over it and hopefully come to an arrangement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SANDRA NEKH invented the smile. She says that she dreamt of this formation after a night of karaoke and drinks, specifically after downing about a thousand glasses of strawberry cocktails… and here we are; humans that smile. She has a pet dragon called Sir, and she sings with birds every morning —she has an angelic voice! She once wrote a practice composition about a dream that became her first series of novels. They are breathtakingly odd, engulfing, ethereal, and will leave you thirsting for more —she is a romantic with a liking for thrillers.

Nekh is a great teller of tales. She was given this power by her great great grandmother, Nekhonga —the old soul she is named after. Witness the Nekhonga Effect in her work; book lovers say it is an unfathomable kind of genius.

You can visit her online www.sandranekh.com.

ALSO WRITTEN BY THE AUTHOR

- The Burgundy
- Eastern Butterfly
- Amir
- Dissociate Series;

- Dissociate Nalia’s Resolve
- True Nairobi
- Red Nairobi
- Silent Nairobi
- The Last Chapter