



Akamba Mfina

Climate Chaos in the Animal Kingdom

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Written by

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&
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but with due acknowledgment, especially of the
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We give due credit to the contributors to this publication, which was birthed from the realization that the Earth does not belong only to humans. The Earth is rather a shared home. The publication is another way of speaking up, through storytelling, for the community of beings who suffer the brunt of the commoditization of the Earth.

We are thankful to the elders who opened to the youths in the Learning from the Wise encounters. These meetings are captured in the second part of the book provided opportunities for the youth to learn the composite approaches for the environmental justice struggles.

We thank Ogechi Cookey and Evelyn Eyo who reviewed the manuscript and made helpful suggestions.

Preface

Discussions on the climate crisis often centre on the extreme weather events that humans experience, and on how global warming impacts countries' economies. The world has hardly considered how the crisis is affecting the many other beings who suffer the brunt of humans' reckless and disrespectful dealings with the Earth. If the world had soberly considered the extensive impacts of the climate crisis, perhaps we would not be busy extracting and burning fossil fuels and then trading in the carbon pollution or grabbing forests to supposedly capture the carbon.

In conceiving this publication, we reminded ourselves that the solutions we frame for the climate crisis would be retrogressive and counterproductive if we do not frame them in a holistic manner that considers the well-being of the other beings.

Perhaps if we had delegates from the animal world attending platforms such as the annual Conference of Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the conversation might have taken a positive and greener turn by now. A system that shuts out the consideration of real solutions to the crisis, elevates the voices of polluters and would not take a bold step to phase out fossil fuels does not even consider that anthropogenic actions are already driving many species into extinction.

Nnimmo Bassey

September 2022.

Writers

Onome Olive Etisioro— Lawyer, novelist and prose poet with a love for literature and food.

Dieworimene Koikoibo— Attorney, writer and environmentalist. A lover of the arts. He writes by the riverside.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	5
<i>Preface</i>	6
<i>Writers</i>	8
Part A	11
Why Turtles Live in Water (Re-imagined)	12
Like Oil on Water	19
The Ones Who Suffer	28
Troubled Waters	80
What Really Happened to Hare in the Race with Tortoise	91
Why This Tortoise Broke His Back	100
Roasted Fish	114
The Fish Delegate	121
The Air Outside (The End)	134
Part B: Learning from the Wise	143
Tales by Sunlight	144
At the King's Feet	153

PART A



1.
WHY TURTLES LIVE IN WATER
(RE-IMAGINED)

– Dieworimene Koikoibo

“Old Ikagi, the turtle used to live on land,” Okosu-Indi began telling another story to the little fishes who had gathered around her in River Mamu.

It was a beautiful and calm night as the river mirrored the full face of the moon and the dotty starlight, except for the distant gas flare that belched its orange light noisily into the night, flickering superfluously on the perfect image of moon, stars and river.

“...Until Ikagi was caught by some hunters. The hunters dragged him to their village and placed him before the amananaowei, who asked, ‘How shall we cook him?’ ‘You’ll have to kill me first,’ said the turtle, ‘and take me out of this shell’.”

The little fishes eagerly listened, sensing that the story was about to take a dramatic turn as was usually the case with stories about Ikagi, the wily turtle.

“‘We’ll break your shell with sticks,’ the hunters retorted,” Okosu-Indi continued.

“‘That’ll never, ever work,’ said the turtle. ‘Why don’t you throw me in the water and drown me?!’

“‘Excellent idea,’ said the amananaowei. So, they took the turtle to the river and threw him into the water to drown him.”

“They were congratulating themselves on their success in drowning the turtle, when two little green eyes poked up in the water and the laughing turtle said, ‘Don’t get those cooking pots out too fast, foolish people!’ As he swam away, he said, ‘I think I’ll spend most of my time from now on, safely in the water.’ It has been that way ever since!”

The small fishes, greatly impressed by the wisdom of the old turtle, laughed and clapped each other’s fins, and swirled around Okosu-Indi.

“Lies! All lies!” Ikagi the wily old turtle, who had been eavesdropping on the company, barged in, ruffling the water in the place where the little fishes gathered around Okosu-Indi.

All the fishes halted and turned to Ikagi, transfixed. The story was well known and had been told in almost every moonlight gathering underwater and on land. Why was Ikagi calling Okosu-Indi a liar now, they wondered.

“I am fed up with all the lies about me you keep feeding these young minds,” Ikagi said wrathfully, almost tearing up.

“But why, old Ikagi? Calm down. What is wrong? Have I not told the truth?” Okosu-Indi asked confusedly.

“The story is flattering, and I am tempted to bask in the wisdom credited to my name, but it contains no truth—that was not what happened—well yes, there is some truth, I used to live on land, but the reason I migrated...” Ikagi paused to suck in deep breaths. “What I mean is, you have told the truth but with its head on the ground and its feet up—,” he went on and on and soon, his heavy breath swallowed his voice.

“Okay, okay, just breathe!” Okosu-Indi, seeing that Ikagi struggled to catch his breath, gently rubbed his back. “Just breathe. Come now, Ikagi,” she ushered him into the circle of fishes, “take deep breaths, and tell us, what happened?”

Ikagi the turtle was unsure if he wanted to tell the story. He knew that if he will not tell his story by himself, the truth will become broken and patched by others, just like his shell. He also knew that he would lose his reputation of being wise before the fishes if he told the story and revealed the truth. But, moving about, carrying on his back the weight of an age-long lie on top of a cracked shell, had become too laborious for him. He took deep breaths and slowly recovered, ready to let down some weight.

“Tell us, Pa Ikagi, how did you come to live in water?” the small fishes kept urging him.

“It was the dragons,” Ikagi finally began. It is better to lose his credit in the eyes of the fishes than drown in age-long lies, he had decided.

“Dragons?” Okosu-Indi blurted. “What dragons?”

“What dragons?” the little fishes asked, entangled in the net of suspense that the old turtle had thrown on them.

“Those fire-belching creatures that the humans welcomed to our land. Everything changed when they made a home of our home,” he continued, sniffing, and pointing to the faraway source of the intrusive orange light.

“You mean the gas fire?” Okosu-Indi the old fish found the tale hilarious but fought hard to subdue the laughter that was going to burst from her, as Ikagi calmly nodded his little head in agreement.

What Ikagi meant to narrate happened several years ago when he was only a young turtle that used to live on the side of River Mamu, in the forests of the communities. Then, his daily activities had been customarily crawling to and fro, observing the forest to see what new leaves had grown since the previous day and while at it, gnawing his diet of earthworms, grubs, snails, beetles— whichever may have crossed his slow course on a particular day. And, never had the sun crawled over him from East to West without it whispering at least one new scheme into Ikagi’s ears to help him outwit the many bullies who confronted him daily.

One day, Ikagi had just eyed an earthworm as it wriggled by invitingly, and as he made to host it in his stomach, he heard sudden screams coming from the human village.

“My ears almost burst that day from the noise. The humans shouted and, initially, I was worried that there was trouble

but I listened more closely and understood that they were shouts of joy, and only then did I move a muscle.”

Later on that day, when the shouts had quieted, Ikagi had crawled to the amananaawei’s house to know what had happened. But he did not bring it up until after the amananaawei had entertained him with a keg of palm wine as was customary, which he downed in a matter of minutes. The amananaawei informed him that the company and the government had signed many documents and the company was to start building its gas flare site in a matter of weeks.

‘Amananaawei, this is not good for any of us—your people or mine,’ Ikagi had told the amananaawei.

‘What do you mean by it is not good for any of us? Do you know the kind of development that this will bring to my village—roads, big businesses, employment and beautiful brick buildings? Or do you like us living in thatch and mud houses rather than brick and aluminium ones?’

‘Amananaawei, the development you speak of is not sustainable. This fire will burn us all—our health, ecosystem and biodiversity. These are not things we can afford to trade for anything! Besides, this is not even a decision only humans can take. We the animals were here long before your fathers came to settle—’

‘Ikagi,’ the amananaawei didn’t let him finish. ‘I can see that the palm wine you took has drowned your senses and is now talking through you. If you don’t have anything sensible to say, please you may leave my house,’ he said, infuriated. ‘What an arrogant, envious, and bitter animal you are. Get out of this place please ...’

“Well, I unseated myself. But before I walked out of his wretched sight, I still told the amananaawei, ‘Amananaawei, at least hear me out. We have received news from our friends

and family from the neighbouring forests and they tell of how these dragons changed everything when they arrived—from new diseases and unprecedented heat and noise levels to distorted sleep patterns. Amananaowei, I am telling you, we cannot afford to have this toxic fire burning day and night in our home. Rethink this, amananaowei.’ But the foolish man wouldn’t have any of it—he had been blinded by the promises of the oil company and the government. How these humans think, is something.”

That day, Ikagi had left the amananaowei’s house humiliated; he swore never to return.

“Well, the only thing that was not wasted about that day was the palm wine I drank to my fill. The rest of the exercise was like pouring water on the back of a duck.” He tried to be witty, at the same time showing his frustration.

The gas flare site had been constructed close to the village right in the forest where Ikagi lived. The years had raced past but the living conditions of the villagers remained unsatisfactory. If the development of the village had entered a race with Ikagi the turtle, Ikagi would have won the race outrightly. And, soon, everything that Ikagi had warned the amananaowei about the gas flare site began to happen. The light, noise and heat from the gas flare all came in full vim and vigour. Many a time, Ikagi felt like his shell was a boiling pot on the flames of the gas flare with him as the content of the pot.

“At some point, I could no longer tell the day from the night. It was as if the sun had become slower in her usual walk over me from the East to the West. The height of it was that the noise from the gas flare was so great that no matter how attentively I listened I could not hear my steps, talk more of

hearing the steps of approaching predators or the whispers of the sun,” Ikagi told the attentive fishes.

“Hmm. So, that was why you left land to live in water,” said Okosu- Indi, with eyes widened with new knowledge and understanding.

Ikagi nodded. “And it wasn’t just me; many of the animals left the forest to other areas too, because it became unbearable for them to stay back. The humans were the last to abandon their settlement when the dragons wouldn’t stop belching strange diseases on them.”

The fishes all turned to face the direction of the gas flare, and River Mamu suddenly became, for a moment, as quiet as a cemetery.

“Well,” Ikagi broke the silence. “There goes the truth. I hope that the humans have learned their lesson from it.” He said finally and began to swim away, feeling the weight of his shell become lighter on his back.



2.
LIKE OIL ON WATER

– Onome Olive Etisioro

No one had ever seen Ajapa, the Tortoise, move so fast, at this time of day when the sun was still rearing its head up from the east.

But Ajapa did not care if he had an audience or not—he had a more pressing matter to take care of; he had to check on his nephew, Kola, the Turtle. And for a good reason, too. After his fall, he had spent too many weeks cooped up in his home, unable to move, unable to do anything else but wait for the healing to be complete.

And all that that time had done for him was give him the chance to watch his wife slowly go blind. It was a chance he wished he never got in the first place; it had killed him to watch her hobble about the house, trying her best to make out the objects in the house. At one point, it had got so bad that she nearly cracked her head open on the wall right in front of her because she had been unable to make anything out.

And by last night, her vision had gone completely black; his Ajoke was now completely blind, and by God, was he angry. Over the weeks it had taken him to recuperate, he had got the gist of what made the birds drop him; the black blood, they called it. The fluid that bled out of the bowels of those man-made fortresses that purged black smoke into the skies, nearly blotting out the sun, day after day. The black blood killed anything it came in contact with, whether it be plant or animal; bird, rabbit ... even his wife.

Especially his wife. The despair pulsed through him with each beat of his heart whenever he remembered the sad resignation in her voice the night before when she had announced that she finally could see nothing but black. How poetically tragic; this black blood ran through her veins and gave her black night as a reward, taking away her sight as it rushed through her arteries.

He wished he had noticed the black blood earlier, he wished he had stopped her from drinking from the river earlier. He wished, even when he knew very well that wishing at this point did nothing to change the situation. Wishing would not change the fact that his shell had shattered nearly beyond saving and the cracked remains had been haphazardly glued back together to prove it. And neither would it change the fact that he was not the only victim of that fall—several of the other birds had died or sustained severe injuries as well.

And this black blood ... this black blood was to blame. He had heard what the fluid had done to the birds: dehydration, and the inability to insulate their bodies, making them more susceptible to the cold while in flight, and so most of them had suffered from hypothermia before they could return home. And last week, he had also found out that the black blood damaged the internal organs of the birds when another one of the birds who had been recuperating from the fall started to lose weight and heave up blood.

The animal kingdom was in complete upheaval. Animals were migrating, trying to find new settlements far away from the black blood and its toxic claws which they now realized had dug themselves deep into their spines. And Ajapa was tempted to run away, as well, but the more he thought about it, the smaller the world felt to him. He thought, just where could he run that would be safe from the black blood?

And even if he wanted to run, he knew deep down that he could not leave ... not when his nephew still lived in these very waters, possibly suffering worse side effects from the black blood spilling into the waters. The more he thought about it, the worse he felt about all of it—how he did not even know about his own nephew's predicament and had not paid

attention to the nagging feeling in his gut that had been telling him to visit his nephew and check on how he had been weathering the famine in the land.

Now, he knew that the famine was probably going to be the least of his nephew's problems ... and that was if he was not already battling diseases and defects just like his wife was.

And that was how Ajapa found his nephew, Kola, the Turtle, coughing on the riverbank, his shell slick with black blood.

"Uncle Ajapa!" Kola exclaimed as soon as he caught sight of him, his hacking coughs receding to reveal a thin, scratchy voice that sent unpleasant tingles down Ajapa's spine. "I heard the news of your fall! I am so happy that you survived! It is nice to see that you are well."

Ajapa did not know if he could say the same for his nephew. He could see that his nephew's skin was ashy, a sharp contrast to the way his shell blackened with the slick fluid of the black blood, and he could not deny the fact that his nephew presented a very ghastly vision, overall.

"You don't seem to be well, Kola," he said to his nephew with deep concern. There was no need to dance around the obvious when it was very plain to see.

His nephew wheezed; each inhalation and exhalation of breath sounded like the painful shredding of his lungs. "Oh, don't I?" the young Turtle tried for humour. "What gave me away? Was it the coughing?"

Ajapa was in no mood to joke, however, but he could see that going along with his nephew's terrible attempts at a joke would help the younger reptile. So, he said, "No, it was the sounding like you were hacking off both your lungs that did it."

Kola laughed then, but even that sound came out like a

painful whistle of air cutting bloody lines in his lungs. Ajapa could not hide his pained wince.

"It ... it's the black blood, isn't it?" Ajapa asked then, unable to keep the question locked in his chest any longer. He itched to ask it, even though he already knew the answer and knew that, that answer would leave gouges in his chest. "The black blood did this to you."

Kola stared at his uncle for a few seconds, before he nodded his head and immediately went into another one of his coughing fits, and this time, Ajapa could see blood staining his mouth with each spate of coughing.

"The black blood?" Kola inquired, his tone curious. "It is called crude oil by the sons of men," he said, and Ajapa blinked.

"Crude oil?" he echoed, and his poor hacking nephew nodded again, wheezing for each new breath he sought to take into lungs that seemed to be too weak to do anything but deflate.

"Yes. The sons of men consider it to be liquid gold, a hunted after commodity," he explained, his tone thin enough to cut lines into his throat.

Ajapa's eyes widened. "Then ... then, that means that they are never going to stop!" He gasped. "It means that they are not leaving any time soon ... they'll stay here and keep spilling this oil into the water!"

Kola nodded his head, his eyes bleak and resigned to what he must have deemed to be his unfortunate fate. "Their big fortresses will keep processing the oil, and the remains will keep spilling into the waters—"

Ajapa held his nephew's bleak gaze with his determined one. "Why do you talk like one resigned to death?" He did not mean to, but he could not stop the anger from stringing his voice taut until he thought it would snap.

Kola coughed again, and it took a while for Ajapa to realize that he was laughing. “Because I am dying, Uncle Ajapa.” When he said the words, he said it without bitterness, but it did not change anything, as Ajapa himself was full of all the bitterness his nephew seemed to lack. “Is there any animal that is not dying from the poison of the black blood, as you call it?”

Ajapa clenched his teeth, unable to refute his nephew’s words. Because all that surrounded him were animals dying from the very same. His wife, Ajoke, went blind after ingesting water tainted with the crude oil; the birds died from dehydration and hypothermia because they also ingested the black blood. And his nephew, standing in front of him now, is nearly coughing up his internal organs after being poisoned by the very same toxic fluid.

And what about he, himself? Was it not also because of this same crude oil that he had been dropped from the sky? Was it not the reason his shell was no longer the smooth carapace shielding him but was now a haphazard mess of the cracked remains they could salvage?

“We can leave this place, and go somewhere else where the black blood doesn’t poison the land,” he said, and his nephew laughed again.

“There is no place that is safe from the sons of men and their hunt for crude oil,” he said, and Ajapa frowned, dismayed at this piece of information that his nephew delivered in that eerily bright tone of his. “I have heard the fishes talk. They say that they come from the Arctic. They say that the sons of men are there, too, drilling through the seabed in search of this liquid gold, staining the waters with toxic black in the process. They say they know of whales and turtles there that have died from the oil poisoning their blood. The fishes themselves complain of reduced growth and liver problems and the

erosion of their fins ever since they were poisoned by the oil. What good would it do me if I run? Even if I can run, I do not believe that there is any place safe enough for me to run to.”

Ajapa scoffed. “So what?” He spat, anger overtaking all sense of logic. “Are you going to wait here to die? Are you saying that we should all wait for the black blood to kill us completely?”

Kola wheezed again, his entire body heaving with effort. “No.” He shook his head, blood staining his lips again as soon as the coughing subsided. “But we cannot fight like this, anyway. We will only end up dying quicker than the black blood can kill us.”

Ajapa scoffed. “You may think that way,” he said to his nephew. “But I am not going to sit around and wait for the black blood to take you or Ajoke away from me.”

At those words, Kola paused, his eyes flying wide. “Aunty Ajoke has been poisoned by the crude oil?” he asked, his voice thick with dismay and sorrow.

Ajapa fought to swallow past the lump in his throat as he nodded. “Yes, it has turned her blind,” he revealed, and his nephew gasped in horror at the revelation. “But you have heard of what it has done to the birds, haven’t you?”

Kola nodded tiredly. “Yes, I have. I heard that it destroyed their internal organs.”

“And that is what I am afraid of,” he said, his tone urgent. “I don’t want to sit around and wait until the crude oil starts to destroy my wife’s internal organs. I’m not going to watch the both of you die like vermin before my very eyes.”

“What do you plan to do?” his nephew asked him then, his eyes sharp with curiosity, but it was the one question Ajapa was yet to get the answer to.

What was he going to do? He could not very well march

up to the sons of men causing havoc on the animal kingdom and nature at large from behind those gigantic walls and bite their fingers off. Well, he could, but he doubted that that was going to help anything. If anything, he might even end up being killed by the sons of men.

Ajapa sighed in defeat, even as the anger pulsed through his veins. "I don't know yet," he said, before looking right at his nephew. "But I'm not going to give up until I find a way to save you both."

Kola stared at his uncle for what seemed like an eternity before he nodded his head, as if accepting the determination that he saw sparkling in the tortoise's gaze as genuine. "I have heard of a man they call the Earth Doctor. The fishes say they have seen him helping out animals sickened by the crude oil ... and I hear that he is in this very town as we speak."

Ajapa perked up at those words. "The Earth Doctor?" he echoed, incredulous. Frankly, he did not care about what they called him, as long as he could save the dying animals as the rumours said.

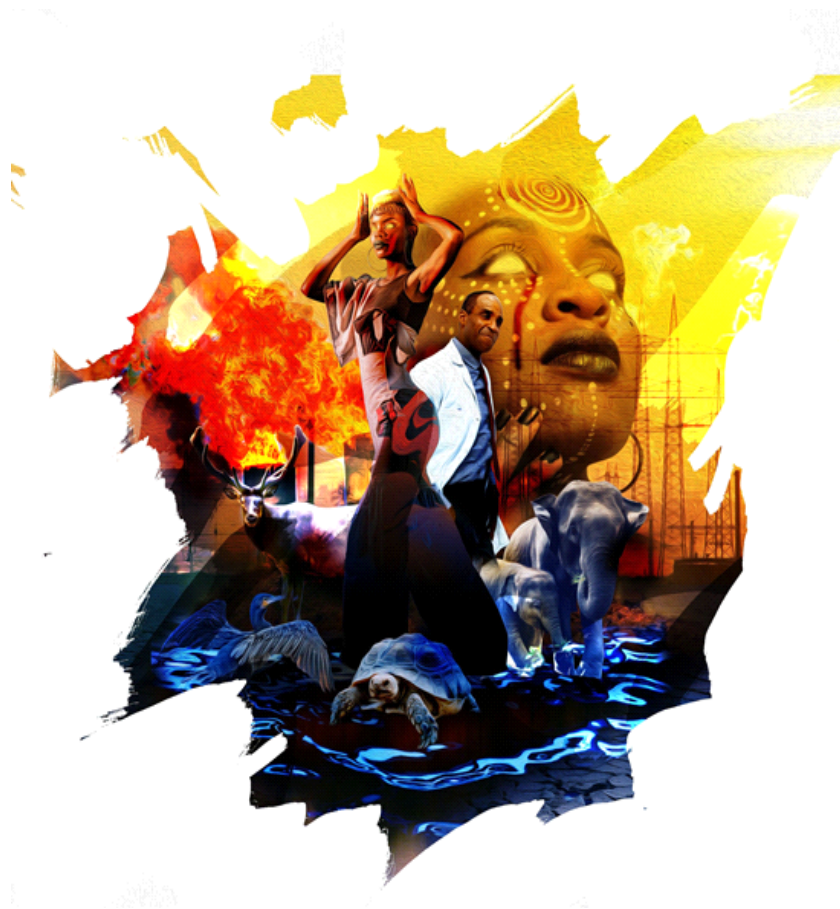
"Hm." Kola nodded weakly, his coughing fits draining him of energy. "If you are truly that determined," his nephew said, his words coming out like mere air, "maybe you can find him, and get him to help us."

Ajapa decided, then and there, that that was exactly what he was going to do. He did not care if he was going to have to go beyond the riverbank, into the midst of the sons of men. If finding this rumoured Earth Doctor was going to help him save his family, and all the other animals sickened by the crude oil, then that was exactly what he was going to do.

The sons of men thought that they could destroy the lives of animals and the cycle of nature just to satiate their greed

for wealth and power. They thought they could kill his close family and not suffer the consequences.

Ha. Not if he had any say in the matter.



3.
THE ONES WHO SUFFER

– Onome Olive Etisioro

I

Ajapa was a tortoise with a purpose. That, and a single-minded focus, too.

That was why he was hurtling along the riverbank that led further and further away from the safety of the forest ... or was it, the danger of the forest? He could not exactly say that his home was any safer than the place he was now heading toward—not after the famine that kept ravaging the kingdom, and certainly not after seeing what the infestation of the accursed oil had done to both him and his family. If anything, the settlement of the sons of men would prove even more lethal, and yet, Ajapa kept trudging on, feet digging resolutely into the sand, with the black oil soaked into the soil staining his feet a gruesome black.

Ajapa had already considered the fact that he was probably also dying, just in the same way that his nephew, Kola the Turtle, was dying. Just in the same way that his wife, Ajoke, was dying—maybe the oil was already bubbling inside his veins—slowly, insidiously, until it would be too late to change anything.

No. Ajapa refused to accept it; the defeat ... the resignation. He was never going to resign himself to a fate as filthy as this, not even when all the other animals were. Not even if Kola already had. He was going to fight, and fighting meant that he had to find the Earth Doctor, the one Kola had said helped animals sickened by the crude oil.

And that was why he had a single-minded focus; why the crude oil-soaked soil did nothing to deter him from his march onward, towards the most dangerous place any animal would

ever dare to venture – into the settlement of the sons of men. Deeper into the maze of buildings where, according to Anansi, the air was thick with soot and smoke, and the people were more monsters than men.

“What are you doing so far from your home, Tortoise?”

The voice pulled him up short, but it was the appearance of the feet in front of his path that made him freeze, Ajapa stopped, letting his eyes slowly travel up, up, up. The son of man standing before him had the biggest eyes he had ever seen, large as they were behind the thick magnifying effects of the glasses resting on his nose.

Ajapa’s first instinct was to duck his head into his shell, and hope it gave him a measure of protection from this man’s sudden appearance, but when the son of man squatted down in front of him and reached his hand out as if to touch him, Ajapa lost his temper. He saw images of his dying nephew and his poor wife, as well as the pitiful birds all dying from failing internal organs all because of the sons of men and their greedy grab for power and wealth. All because they kept poisoning the land with oil.

And Ajapa snapped back then. He snapped outward, closing his teeth around the man’s reaching hand, and heard the crunch of his teeth breaking the skin.

“Ow!” the man, who turned out to be a teenager, yelped and tried to snatch his hand back, nearly tearing off more of his skin as he kept dragging his hand out of Ajapa’s angry teeth. “Ow, ow, ow! Dad! The tortoise is biting me! It hurts!”

Ajapa’s ears tingled. Dad? That meant that there was another human around. And even he knew that two against one were not very good odds. He let go of the boy’s hand, and the teenager smartly scrambled away, cradling his bitten hand up close to his chest.

“What did you do to it?” a second voice inquired, and Ajapa finally saw the man’s feet as they came into view, and when his eyes traveled up, he found a certain older man squinting down at him sans the glasses. No, this man had sharp, piercing eyes that made Ajapa feel like he was being run through with a spear.

“Me?” the boy sputtered in obvious indignation. “I didn’t do anything to it! I wanted to touch it, and it just launched itself at me and ... and attacked me!”

The man smiled, and Ajapa did not like that curve of his mouth one bit. “You must have done something to anger the tortoise,” he said, squatting down just like his son had done, and Ajapa barely restrained himself from lunging at this man too.

“I’m telling you; I didn’t even touch it!” the boy griped, glaring down at Ajapa. “Maybe it’s rabid...”

“Who’re you calling rabid?” Ajapa spat back and the boy flinched, inching further away from him. “This is all your fault, you nasty child!” And, while he knew he was probably taking out his anger on the wrong target, having a target at all to focus on felt really good.

The boy gasped and threw his hands up, glancing back at his father with a bewildered stare. “I swear, Dad! I didn’t even touch him! He attacked me first!”

The man’s smile only widened, and Ajapa began to think over the possibility of getting away with it if he threw caution to the wind and bit the man’s index finger or more off, too. Those odds, though ... still did not look too good to him.

“You seem to be in a hurry, Mr Tortoise ...” the man started to say, but Ajapa was having none of his patronizing tone or interest.

“That’s Ajapa to you!” He snapped his teeth at the man,

short of stomping his foot in a temper. God, humans were exhausting ... and he did not have time to entertain a bunch of privileged murderers, born of the same kind, that was killing his family all for their greed.

The man raised his hands as if in surrender and chuckled. "Oh, of course, of course. Well, you seem to be in a bit of a hurry, Mr Ajapa," he said, his eyes twinkling with curiosity.

"Of course, I'm in a hurry!" Ajapa spat back. "And you are both getting in my way!"

The man kept his hands up in that gesture of surrender and squatted down slowly. "Well, maybe we can help you get where you're going."

Ajapa paused, eyeing the two humans with a decidedly suspicious glare. More than anything, he did not trust the sons of men, and so did not see why he had to trust these now. And yet, the man's curious gaze kept him from moving on even when he knew he should.

"Do you know the Earth Doctor, then?" he finally asked, deciding to take the bull by the horns.

The man looked askance at Ajapa. "The Earth Doctor?" he echoed, and Ajapa quickly began to question this particular human's intelligence.

"I have heard that there is a son of man called the Earth Doctor who helps animals who have been poisoned by the black blood you humans call crude oil," he said, tapping his foot impatiently. "Do you know where he lives? I must meet him immediately."

The man and his son shared a glance before the man squatted down slowly and asked, "Are you poisoned by crude oil, Mr Ajapa?"

"No," Ajapa said. "But my wife and nephew as well as the birds have been poisoned by it, and I have heard that the Earth

Doctor can save them.” Then he narrowed his eyes at the man, his suspicion expanding until he thought he would burst with it. “Do you know the Earth Doctor?”

The man smiled kindly then, his eyes soft as he replied, “I am the Earth Doctor.” Then he stretched forth his hand as if waiting for a handshake and said, “Nice to meet you, Mr Ajapa. My name is Faraday Ogun.”

Well, Ajapa did not think it was very nice to meet him just yet.

He still could not trust that this man just happened to be the Earth Doctor. So, Ajapa eyed him even more suspiciously, and then alternated his glances between the man and his frowning son who still seemed to be glaring balefully at Ajapa and cradling his bitten hand.

“You?” Ajapa finally asked with disbelief in his voice and scoffed when the man nodded in agreement. “Why should I trust you? How can you be the Earth Doctor?”

“Because there is more than one Earth Doctor,” the man, Faraday Ogun, replied. “We are trained to help animals sickened by crude oil.”

Ajapa blinked, slowly looking the man up and down. “Why are you here, then?” he asked, not being one to be easily fooled. He intended to get to the bottom of this man’s charade if there was one. He had heard of sons of men who hunt and kidnap animals for profit; Rowoli the Elephant had relatives who were victims of such men, and Ajapa was not about to become one of their numbers. “How did you just happen to be here, by the bank, at this time of day?”

Faraday Ogun glanced at his son again, before looking him straight in the eye. “I am here to check on a sea turtle we noticed two days ago,” he said, and Ajapa’s ears perked up at that. Sea

turtle? They could not be talking about his nephew, could they? “See, I didn’t come alone ...”

Ajapa scoffed. “No, you came with your son, and I don’t think he’s any kind of help,” he said, and the man chuckled even as the teen let out a disgruntled yell.

“Hey!” He frowned down at Ajapa, looking like he wanted to retaliate but was also reluctant to; he sensed he might just get another bite mark for his efforts. At this point, Ajapa had taken to sulking, not giving a care for the teen’s countenance.

Faraday gave a good-natured smile as he informed Ajapa, “It’s not just my son, Jack. I came along with my foundation. We are dedicated to saving the environment, and the plants and animals living in it from the excesses of human activity.”

A foundation, he said. People dedicated to saving the environment and animals, huh. Well then, they weren’t doing a very good job if they could let his wife and nephew and the entire animal kingdom get sickened by this crude oil of a toxin.

And he was not afraid to say so, either. “Then where were you when the sons of men were vomiting all their crude oil waste into the land and water?” he asked, bitterness in his voice. “Where were you when they were darkening the skies with smoke?”

“You’re one to talk, with your silly-looking cracked shell,” the teenage boy said with a pout, side-eyeing Ajapa like he was the dumbest animal he had ever met.

Ha. The feeling was mutual, because Ajapa was beginning to think even less of this human child with each second that passed.

“How dare you!” Ajapa crowed, incensed that this human child, of a race of beings who were close to killing everyone he held dear, would mock his newly healed back. “It is all your fault that my shell is silly-looking and cracked!”

“Jack!” This time, Faraday Ogun did not sound very congenial or laid back. No, his voice was sharp and hard and angry. “Apologize to Mr Ajapa right this second! I have taught you several times never to pick on other people’s misfortunes or injuries! Do you want me to regret bringing you out with me this morning?”

The boy, chastised and embarrassed, straightened up at once and mumbled out an “I’m sorry, Mr Ajapa. Your shell looks pretty sick ...” and his eyes widened when he saw the way his father’s expression darkened, and he rushed to add, “... in a rad way, of course!”

Ajapa did not pretend to even know what the kid meant, and he was not particularly interested in finding out either.

“What did you mean when you said it’s all his fault that your shell is broken?” Faraday turned back to Ajapa again, with his son now relatively subdued.

Ajapa sighed, his impatience quickly returning. “I did not mean that he caused it, directly, I meant that your kind caused it,” he said, his hackles quickly rising because just the mere reminder of that traumatic fall and the suffering he had gone through after it, made him mad with rage. “It is a long story, but I followed the birds to look for food in the sky, but on the journey back, the birds dropped me and I broke my shell.”

The teenager cocked his brow and shared a confused glance with his father. “Uh, I don’t see how that’s our fault—”

“The birds fell ill because of the crude oil, you buffoon!” Ajapa snapped. Oh yes, he was angry, and he was not even going to hide it. “The crude oil that your kind keeps dumping into the water and the soil! They fell because the crude oil got into their bodies, and caused them to grow weak and thirsty and tired! The journey even seemed longer because of it!

Where was your foundation then, hm? Where were you when the crude oil was slowly killing us?”

Faraday blinked at Ajapa after his angry tirade and, for some minutes, said nothing at all. But after some time, he took in a deep breath and said, “We are here now, Mr Ajapa,” and when he said it, there was remorse in his voice. “Take us to the birds.”

“Why should I even trust you?” Ajapa spat back, his bitterness brimming with each word he spoke. “You are one of them; the beings who seem determined to end all of nature as we know it. Why should I trust that you are not just going to kill my family if I take you to them?”

Mr Faraday Ogun did not even think about it when he replied, “If I was one of those people, I would have captured you and killed you as soon as we spotted you, don’t you think so?”

Ajapa still was not convinced. “I find it hard to take the word of someone who doesn’t understand our suffering,” he said, even though he was aware that he sounded a bit stuck up, he found that he could not let go of his suspicion.

“We wouldn’t be trying to save the animals if we didn’t understand their suffering, Ajapa,” Faraday cut him short and, for the first time, Ajapa heard the annoyance in his voice. “We do understand what these toxins are doing to animals, and we try to save as many as we can find ... but there’s only so many of us to go around, and so much we can do without the cooperation of our government.”

Ajapa’s brows drew low over his eyes. “What do you mean by that?” While he was not stupid, he still did not want to believe what the man could be implying.

But the son of man did not let him keep his prejudice any longer when he said, “Just as you animals are dying, so are the

people here. We are all victims of oil spills. You probably already know by now, that Nature doesn't discriminate against anyone. All will face her wrath if she is poked the wrong way."

Ajapa looked between the man and his son, and then towards the settlement of the sons of men, the very place he had been heading towards before being accosted by these two. Mr Faraday Ogun turned along with him and gestured to the village dotting the other side of the river.

"You animals aren't the only victims of these evil atrocities committed in the name of economic growth and wealth expansion," he said. "Things aren't always as black and white as you seem to think they are, Mr Ajapa. You must think that there is no difference between the men behind those brick walls and the ones in the village, but I can assure you that you are wrong. Most of the time, it is the innocent ones who suffer."

Ajapa looked up at the man again, but his curiosity had gotten the better of him that he could no longer very well hold on to his anger against the sons of men. So, he asked, "Can you prove it?"

And Faraday replied solemnly, "Then, come and see."

II

Oil in our Arteries

We thought it was oil, but it was blood.

Ajapa could not breathe, and it was not from lack of trying. No, he felt like his chest was about to cave in, and every attempt to drag air into his lungs only made it worse—each inhalation felt as if someone was poking his lungs with a serrated blade.

Everything smelled of oil. The air felt as though it was made up of nothing but oil – oily air forming a mist that rested upon everything and permeated from within everything. Ajapa was convinced that if these people breathed out air, it would smell of oil—he was sure that they were highly flammable themselves.

They had not even got that far into the settlement of the sons of men on the other side of the river, and already, Ajapa felt as though his lungs were about to collapse in on themselves. He could not quite fathom how these people could live in such a place where the very air they breathed was infested by the very toxin that was killing his wife with each day that passed.

Oil must run in their veins. And, no matter how disturbing that thought was, Ajapa found that he could not shake it off as completely ludicrous. It was impossible not to think so when the smell of oil permeated off their skin like they were born with it.

“Most of them are born with it, you know,” Faraday Ogun said, and Ajapa remembered that he had companions with him, one of whom he now thought could read minds too.

So, he turned his head to stare straight at Faraday, the man

who claimed to be the Earth Doctor ... or at least, one of them. "Born with what?"

Faraday smiled, but it was an empty one that was just a stretch of his lips. "With the oil flowing in their veins," he said, and Ajapa's eyes widened.

"You lie!" he crowed, rejecting the man's words even though they were the very things he had been thinking about just a few seconds ago.

Faraday shook his head sadly, the light dimming even his eyes. "But you know, don't you, Ajapa?" he said with pity in his tone, making it hard for Ajapa to deny his very thoughts and Faraday's confirmation. "You know that I do not lie. Even you can tell, can't you? You can see the oil flowing through their veins."

And the truth was that he could. He could see the effects of the oil on these people, in the very soil they stood on, even though he did not want to. These people were listless, in a state of brokenness only common with people who had once tried to fight back but kept being beaten down, again and again. These people had a burning vengeance in their eyes that did not reflect in the way they moved through their village; shoulders hunched in a resignation that made his heart shrivel with each beat inside his chest.

"Why ..." he started to say, but the word came out cracked, as though his throat had been scorched from the inside out by the fire. That was a possibility he could not rule out, too; seeing as the very air carried the flammable smell of oil on its currents. "Why do they not fight back?"

Even as he asked the question, Ajapa already knew the answer, but facing the reality was something he had not prepared himself for when he had decided to challenge the Earth Doctor into proving his point. He found that the point

was too sharp, and if he let it, it would spear through his heart and kill everything he held dear.

Faraday Ogun shot him a look that said, "Do you think they haven't tried? Do you think they were not like you, once?"

And that was what scared Ajapa the most, as he passed by these people who walked as though they had accepted the reality of death dining every evening in their homes. He feared that these people had once been as bitter and enraged as he now was. They had once fought against this taint of death that had now made a home for itself here ... but all to no avail. He did not want to think that that was what his rage could amount to; nothing more but a broken spirit to match his shattered shell and the bitterness that would slowly poison him from the inside out.

He could not face the reality that there was no way to escape this hell the crude oil had now become to his existence ... if the sons of men committing these atrocities did not care about the effects they would have on people of their kind, what hope did he have that they would care about the effects on him and his kind?

"Come with me," Faraday broke into his self-defeatist thoughts and he looked up at the man. "I want to show you something."

Ajapa had a feeling that he was not going to like what he was being led to see, but he could not stop his feet from moving, from following the Earth Doctor further into the village. In each house they passed, people raised their hands to wave at Mr Faraday Ogun, wearing big smiles on their faces; the kind that showed that these people liked him ... trusted him, even.

He said as much to the Earth Doctor. "These people trust you," he said, wonder in his voice, but he could not help it. The vengeance he saw in these people's eyes disappeared

whenever they looked at Faraday Ogun; instead, their eyes lit up with a kind understanding, as though this man with his well-pressed clothes and expensive shoes understood their struggles.

Faraday shrugged at his observation. "Like I have told you before, Ajapa, animals aren't the only ones affected by the oil spills and the gas flaring," he said, his tone suddenly becoming dark and hard. "These companies are destroying not only whole ecosystems, they are also destroying the livelihoods of many communities and societies at large. Human beings also suffer at the hands of these corporations, and most of them cannot fight back against these big corporations. Most of them fight back but are severely beaten for their efforts. They need someone who will keep up the fight for them. That is what I do."

Ajapa blinked as yet another person they passed by raised his hand in greeting, shouting out blessings on Faraday and his family. "You fight for these people," he said, and Faraday looked down at him.

"I also fight for the animals as well," he said. "I fight for everyone whose voices can be easily quashed, but as you have seen ... it is not an easy fight." He finally stopped in front of a small house, and when his son, Jack, stepped out, Ajapa remembered that he had sent the boy ahead of him a while ago when they started their walk down here.

"Dad," Jack said, his eyes bleak with worry. "She finally put to bed but ... the baby ... the baby ... she is doing even worse ..."

Ajapa looked between the son and the man, noting how the air between them had turned tense and dark, electric with a pain he was all too familiar with. Ah, so he truly was about to face something he most definitely would not enjoy.

When Faraday looked down at him, there was a plea in his eyes that Ajapa did not quite understand until the man spoke. “Shelve your bitterness against us humans for a few minutes, will you, Ajapa?”

Ajapa blinked at the words, his brows drawing down in affront, but he could not say anything to those offensive words because Faraday and his son ducked into the house, leaving him to follow wordlessly in.

The sight that greeted him as soon as he stepped in made him regret ever challenging the Earth Doctor Faraday to prove his point. The sight appropriately sharpened the point, and the tip poked its way into his chest, inch by inch.

The first person he saw was the baby, too still and quiet to ever be mistaken for a living being, and if the dead silence had not given him away, the blue tint around his little mouth and skin proved it to be true, even though he was wrapped in a bunch of wrappers and was still wet with blood and body fluid from birth.

A stillborn baby.

The mother was a different matter altogether, however. Even weak from childbirth, it was clear that she was very much alive and grieving. Her thin wheezing cries of “My baby! My baby! I can’t hear him. Why can’t I hear him?” sent the temperature of the room plummeting by several degrees.

Ajapa could not stop the shudder that wracked his body as the chill of her words and the thinness of her cries slithered down his spine. He watched, as if in slow motion, as Faraday Ogun rushed to the woman’s side and held her down as she struggled to stand.

“My baby! I can’t hear him. Why can’t I hear him?” she cried still, even though it was becoming clear that there was not sufficient air in her lungs for her to form the words, so

they came out like air, but their impact hit like bricks nonetheless.

“Put her to sleep!” Faraday whispered urgently to his son who was holding a syringe in his hand. When he decompressed the syringe’s contents into her body with a needle in her neck, the woman stopped struggling and slipped into unconsciousness, still muttering those heartbreaking words under her breath.

Faraday sighed and sat back on his haunches, his hands dangling off his knees, and his eyes dim with sadness as he looked down at the perfectly still baby. A baby who should have been kicking with life and crying its head off if everything was as it was supposed to be. But nothing was as it was supposed to be because...

“It’s the crude oil, isn’t it?” Ajapa asked then, his words coming out hesitantly, as he was afraid to even make mention of the poison when such a tragedy was still fresh on everyone’s mind and still occurring.

He soon realized that there were other people in the room when he felt extra sets of eyes on him, all pairs looking at him with shock but one pair. One pair, belonging to an old woman, seemed to look through him. He quickly realized why; the poor old woman was blind.

“I am sorry for the loss, good people of this house,” he said, realizing that he had rudely stepped into their most vulnerable moment without so much as condolence. “I apologize for coming here uninvited ...”

“Oh, but you were invited, Mr Tortoise,” the old woman said, and Ajapa’s eyes widened. The woman smiled a sad smile at him. “I might be blind, but I know a tortoise when I hear one.”

Ajapa cleared his throat and glanced at Faraday who gave

him an encouraging nod. "You say I was invited?" he asked, and the old woman nodded, but she was not the one who answered his question this time.

It was the younger woman sitting beside her who did. And this woman had a batch of rashes all over her body, and her arms bled because it was clear that she kept scratching at the rashes, irritating them and causing them to wound.

"You came with Mr Faraday, so you are invited into our home," she said. "Anyone who Mr Faraday brings is always welcome here."

"And to answer your question, Mr Tortoise," the old woman spoke now, her voice thin and scratchy, "yes, it's the crude oil. The crude oil is the root of all our misfortune here in our village."

Ajapa let out a breath he had not realized he had been holding. "The crude oil truly runs in your veins?" The incredulity in his voice could not be disguised. But that was not all he was incredulous about, though. "Why are you all so calm about this tragedy?" He turned to look again at the stillborn baby and felt the tears gather in his eyes the longer he stared at it.

"We have cried all the tears we have to cry for him," the old woman said, even though the sadness was still heavy in her voice. "Truth be told, we have cried all the tears we have in our bodies. There is nothing left to cry for our dead because we die every day. We have nothing left in us but ... the oil."

Ajapa turned to look at her again, and even though he knew she could not see him, he still bowed his head to her as he asked, "And is it the oil that took your sight, too?"

The old woman smiled sadly again. "How did you come to that conclusion, Mr Tortoise?" she asked, and there was a

morbidly humorous tone to her words. "Was it all the talk of oil?"

Ajapa nodded his head, his sadness nearly overwhelming him as he said, "My wife...she's going blind as well."

The silence that followed his words was heavy with sympathy and the pain that he was still trying to come to terms with, but these people seemed to have already accepted that pain as easy as they breathed.

"Oh. The plague of the oil spill has reached the animal kingdom, hasn't it?" the old woman asked, her voice heavy with pity.

Ajapa's throat felt tight, as though it was enlarging inside the cocoon of his neck. "And my nephew ... he is already so poisoned by the oil that he can barely breathe."

"Ah." The younger woman breathed, her face suffusing almost at once with fresh pain, and Ajapa realized that even though the pain had become part of these people, it remained hard to bear. If anything, it became ever sharper, more deadly...

"I lost my son that way," the old woman said after she sensed that the younger one was no longer able to speak. "The asthma took him from us in the dead of the night. He was her husband." She gestured to the weak, unconscious woman lying almost as unmoving as her stillborn baby lay. "The week before he died, my own husband died of a heart attack. The crude oil was to blame for that, too. The crude oil has poisoned the very soil so that even our foods have become toxic to us."

Ajapa glanced at her again. "Oh." He could say nothing to that. "I see."

And he did see. He saw that these people were as much victims as the animals were. The Earth Doctor had been right; nothing was ever as black and white as he had thought it was. Not all the sons of men were his enemies.

These ones? These ones were more like kindred spirits at this point.

“Ajapa asked me why you didn’t fight back,” Faraday spoke for the first time in long minutes, and all their eyes went to him. “Oh, that is Mr Tortoise’s name,” he clarified, realizing they were not familiar with the name, Ajapa. “He asked me why you all accept this fate.”

The old woman laughed then, but it was an empty sound that edged closer to sorrow than mirth. “You think we didn’t try to fight back against them, Mr Tortoise?” Her voice was thick with the bitterness that roiled Ajapa’s belly. Hearing it in her voice made the point spear him in the chest, almost poking into his heart. “You see, we fought back. We protested with cardboard and placards and they suppressed us with brutal force, sending the police force against us, shooting at us with guns. We even took up arms in response, Mr Tortoise. But they only came after us with double the force and killed most of our young men. That day ... I will never forget that day. The ground bled red so much that it eventually turned dark ... so dark that we thought it was oil ... but it was blood.”

The point tore into Ajapa’s heart, poking clean through, and Ajapa gasped, trying to draw in the air but his lungs were refusing to cooperate. The reality and despair of the old woman’s words... of these people’s suffering settled heavily in his bones, even heavier than his shell felt on his spine these days. These people’s reality felt so much like the future of the animal kingdom should he try to take up arms against these corporate sharks who were greedy for nothing but more wealth. These sharks could put bullets through his wife’s eyes, just like they had done with these people.

And if they could do these things to people of their own kind, what chance did he and his kind have against them?

“Do you see now, Ajapa?” Faraday asked him and he turned to regard the man with bleak eyes. “We are all victims of the oil spills and the people behind them. These people are not your enemy.”

And Ajapa saw. He truly did.

It truly was always the innocent ones who suffered.

But at least, now he knew who his true enemies were, and he was not going to lose his will to fight. Oh, his anger was just beginning, and he had enough fuel to keep it going. These people might have lost their means to express all their anger and bitterness, but now he knew their pain because he shared that pain.

He would become their outlet. Mother Nature would fight back and, just like Faraday had said, Nature discriminated against no one. Just as these people were destroying lives and communities and ecosystems, so would they also be destroyed.

Mother Nature would become their greatest enemy in turn.

III

When Our Veins Run Dry

Ajapa was parched. He had never thirsted for water this much in his entire life, and each time he swallowed, it felt as though nails were scraping the insides of his throat raw. It was funny to him, that the same water they had all taken for granted had become something so scarce, that he was near unconscious from want of it.

Oh, but he was parched, and yet, even now as he stood in front of the riverbank, he was unable to quench his thirst. It felt like nature's most cruel joke; to have relief so close within your reach, but be unable to take it.

Oh, no, that was not quite right. It was not nature's cruelty; nature was blameless in this. Here was the water that nature had given them all, freely and without demanding it. No, the cruel ones here were the sons of men, the ones who bled oil into the water, poisoning this source of sustenance without remorse.

Ajapa looked over his shoulder, back towards the village, as the clear memory of the destitution of its inhabitants played at the forefront of his mind's eye. The children with their sick bodies looked so malnourished that he had been able to see their ribs nearly pushing out of their skins. The adults afflicted with blindness, tumours, and the pregnant women bleeding out miscarriages on the footpaths. And still, they were breathing in the polluted air black with soot and smoke and crying for some water to drink.

Maybe he should not have run off and left Faraday in that house with those women who wore grief like a worn-out garment, and yes, maybe that would make him seem rude to have snuck away without telling them or Faraday, for that matter, but he had found that he could not stand to stay in that room where the stink of death made it rather hard to breathe.

He found that he could not bear to stay another second in that village, where the suffering became all too real, and the dystopian future seemed even closer than he had thought. A future that was devoid of water, where people will kill for it, and still not find a drop to drink.

So, maybe the sons of men were just as much victims of the oil spills and pollution as the animals were ... but ... that did not change the fact that they were also the cause of it. That particular fact could not be excused; he supposed he could only try to understand it, to come to terms with the fact that the sons of men were a parasitic ecosystem on their own; with the more powerful feeding on the weak, and draining them of their very will to live.

And he could not forgive the fact that they had spread their parasitic tendencies to all the other inhabitants of the natural world, taking and taking and taking while giving nothing back. Now, it seemed that they sought to take the life of Mother Nature once and for all, and he had a feeling she was not going to stand for this slow death they were callously inflicting on her.

He knew that for a fact, because he could not stand for the slow death they were inflicting upon his family and the animal kingdom as a whole. That had been why he had come out on this journey in the first place: to find a way to heal his wife and his nephew, but now... now, he did not even know if he

could put his trust in that son of man his nephew had called the Earth Doctor. Not when even he could not save the people of that village who were slowly dying from the very thing he claimed to save the animals from. How, then, could he trust this doctor to save Kola, his nephew ...?

But God was he thirsty. Again, he tried clearing his throat, but the action only made the insides of his throat itch, and he soon started to hack and cough to clear the discomfort and needling pain.

“Do you need some water, Mr Ajapa?”

Ajapa yelped, scared into jumping, whirling around to find the source of the voice that had scared him so. He found Faraday, the so-called Earth Doctor, standing a little way behind him, unscrewing the cap off a bottle of water. Ajapa was certain he had stars in his eyes as he watched the man unscrew the lid and squat down on his haunches, holding out the bottle of water to him.

Wordlessly, Ajapa closed the distance between them and grabbed the open water bottle with his teeth. Faraday was kind enough to hold the bottle up as he drank, so that the water slid into his throat, immediately cooling, as well as soothing, the dryness and discomfiting pain all at once. He could not get enough of it—it felt as though he had finally found the river of life, from which having drunk, he would never thirst again.

But as soon as Faraday pulled the bottle away, as soon as he swallowed the last drop the bottle had to offer, he felt the stirrings of thirst return, slowly and subtly. And he realized that this thirst was one that he had always lived with, but now, in the face of such blatant scarcity of freshwater, it was a thirst that was aggressively pushing itself to the forefront, demanding to be sated. Now, when there was nothing to sate it with.

"You left without a goodbye," Faraday said into the silence that was quickly settling over them like an oversized coat.

Ajapa cleared his throat again, his eyes fleeting from the man's face to that water, and back again. "I was thirsty," he replied shortly, not willing to admit just how much seeing those villagers affected him. "But there was no water to drink there, so I came here, but ..."

Faraday sighed, sadly. "There is no water to drink here either," he said, his voice low and bleak, as he looked at the oil-stained water that had once been a river of freshwater. "The activities of the oil refinery have destroyed the water here. And where their talons have not reached, the extremely hot weather dries up brooks and rivers and streams ..."

"And whose fault is that?" Ajapa asked. The words came out like an unexpected strike of lightning, and when they flowed into the air, they crackled with all the obnoxious crack of thunder; loud, abrasive and uncaring for whoever heard it.

Faraday looked at him then, his eyes flat with a sadness that seemed even older than Ajapa was, but if anyone out of the two of them was to be tagged the older, then that person would be Ajapa. He was sure he had seen one prior generation of the sons of men before crossing paths with this man.

The son of man was nodding his head as if accepting his fate. "It is true ..." he said. "That it is no other species' fault but mine. We are indeed the destroyers. We use the Earth more than we save it. I know more than you, Ajapa, that my kind is boiling the Earth alive."

Ajapa cocked his head, shaken by Faraday's use of that phrase, 'boiling the Earth alive'. He was so rapt that he asked, "What do you mean by that, boiling the Earth alive?"

Faraday blinked at him then, as if just coming to his senses and realizing the words he had spoken. "Oh, you must have

noticed it; you know, the extreme changes in the climate? Extremely hot weather polarized by extreme cold?”

Ajapa cocked his head in thought. “I’d thought it had just been my imagination,” he said, and Faraday shook his head adamantly.

“You’re not the first one to think that. There are even learned members of my kind who think that it is nothing but a figment of our imagination, but it is not. Oh no, it is very real. It’s a phenomenon called climate change,” he said, his voice becoming more and more passionate as he spoke. “But it doesn’t only refer to rising temperatures, but also extreme weather events, shifting wildlife populations and habitats, rising sea level, and other impacts ...”

Ajapa shook his head, holding up his hand. “Can you slow down?” he cut in, and Faraday’s brows flew up to his forehead. “I can barely comprehend what you’re talking about.”

“Ah, right, sorry,” he said with a tight smile. “Hm, how will I explain this? I think to better explain, I should start with the phenomenon of global warming.”

Ajapa felt as though his head was about to explode. “What is that?” he asked, sounding resigned, even to his ears.

“It is an aspect of climate change,” he said, and Ajapa nodded slowly as if he understood.

“Oh, is it?” he said with an overdramatic interest, and Faraday chuckled at that.

“Yes, it is. Let me break it down more: it is the gradual increase in the overall temperature of the Earth’s atmosphere attributed to greenhouse effects caused by the increased levels of carbon dioxide and other pollutants in the atmosphere,” he said, looking closely at Ajapa to make sure he was following him.

“So, in simple terms, it is...” Ajapa trailed off, and Faraday’s smile widened.

“In simple terms, global warming is the long-term rise of the planet’s temperatures,” he said, his words concise.

So concise that Ajapa finally understood the concept. “Ah, I see.” He nodded, true interest ringing in his tone. “Then, what are these ... these greenhouse gases that cause the rise of the Earth’s temperatures?”

Faraday got down on his haunches in front of him, and Ajapa watched as the passion in his eyes dimmed and nearly blinked out. “Greenhouse gases are gases in Earth’s atmosphere that trap heat. You see, they let sunlight pass through the atmosphere, but they prevent the heat that the sunlight brings from leaving the atmosphere.”

Ajapa gasped, his eyes narrowing. “And where do these gases come from?”

At that question, Faraday’s expression melted into one of discomfort. “Don’t you want to take a guess?” he finally asked, and that bleakness was back in his voice.

“It is also the fault of you sons of men?” Ajapa ventured, his voice just as resigned as Faraday’s.

Faraday ducked his head, nodding slowly. “Greenhouse gases come primarily from the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, natural gas ... petroleum ... that humans use for energy generation,” he explained, and both of them turned their gazes to the river currently spotted with the black plague that was the oil spill.

“So, what you’re saying, is that this refinery that is staining the air black with soot and smoke, is trapping heat in the atmosphere, and contributing to global warming?” Ajapa asked, his eyes holding Faraday’s own.

Faraday sighed. “Yes,” he said, looking up at the sky. “Not

only is the smoke causing defects and diseases in the people of the village, but by continuously trapping heat in the atmosphere, it is also contributing to climate change, causing a shift in the already established weather patterns of the planet.”

Ajapa scoffed in disbelief as the full reality of Faraday’s words settled on him. “And ... the more you humans continue to burn these fuels, the worse these changes are going to get?”

Faraday nodded again, but before he could open his mouth to answer, another voice gave him the answer.

“Already,” it said, coming from behind them and all around them at the same time. “These changes are at your doorstep. Rain and snowfall have increased across the globe, and yet, some regions are experiencing severe drought, increasing the risk of wildfires, lost crops, and drinking water shortages. Was it not you, Ajapa, who was just complaining of thirst?”

Ajapa and Faraday looked at each other before turning to find the speaker. The vision that greeted them made Ajapa freeze on the spot, his legs immediately beginning to shake: the earth itself seemed as though it was splitting asunder, and they watched as a head full of green leaves ascended out of its depths.

“Well, here is the conundrum. Even if this river had never been polluted by the oil spills, the extreme temperatures would have caused it to dry up, just as it has done to many other rivers across the continent. Freshwater will become scarcer and scarcer until it will become an expensive commodity. The time is coming when the Earth will be so devoid of water, it will be akin to nature’s very veins running dry.”

Ajapa sucked in a breath as the woman made out of tree bark arose from underneath their feet, casting a black glare at

the river in front of them. Then she looked away from it and, facing them, she said, "Then, even without the oil spills, you still will not find a drop to drink."

Mother Nature had come to bear, and she did not sound pleased.

IV

Lungs Bloated with Carbon

And that was how they met Mother Nature by the riverbank.

There was oil leaking from her eyes. She was singing a war song.

Mother Nature loved to sing. Everyone in nature knew that. Ajapa especially loved the times when she flitted through the forests, trilling out melodies of cool evening breezes and of warm mornings because, in those moods, she let all the animals run up to her and get hugs and kisses.

And yet...

Ajapa could not move. He did not think it was wise to go up to Mother Nature and hug her when she had thorns sticking out of her skin like warning signs. If there was one thing he and all of nature knew about her, it was that she was not kind when dealt with treacherously even though she was tolerant. It was that, none of them could ever predict her moods and actions.

But, looking at her now, Ajapa could likely guess just what kind of mood the mother of all nature was in, and it was not a good one. He thought that it would be a good idea to sneak away and take the path cutting through the village, away from her simmering rage.

"Maybe we should just go back to the village," he whispered up to Faraday while tugging at the man's trousers.

Yes, that was a better idea. Ajapa did not think Mother Nature would be very excited to see a son of man like Faraday,

especially not when she was in this mood. And he did not want to stick around to find out if his hunches were right or wrong. No, he just wanted to go away before everything blew up in their faces—when she blew up in their faces.

Honestly, he was doing the son of man a favour here. But, as was their nature, the son of man did not take the salvation Ajapa was offering him on a golden platter. No. The arrogant man looked down at him and smiled. Ajapa did not like the look of that smile one bit—it looked as though he was being mocked.

“Do you even know who that being is?” He hissed up at Faraday. “I wouldn’t smile like that if I were you ...”

Ajapa’s words died in his throat because in that same instant, he turned his head and his eyes accidentally locked on to her own. It was never a good idea to meet the eyes of Mother Nature when she had a war song woven into her voice like this.

He gulped down nervously, torn between tearing his gaze away from Mother Nature and also struggling to hold her gaze. Should he say hello, or turn tail and run? But then, if he ran, what would happen to the son of man, Faraday? Mother Nature would almost definitely harm him out of revenge, wouldn’t she ...?

But before he could even finish that thought, maybe even drag Faraday away by the nape of his neck, Mother Nature’s eyes left his own to catch the man’s own. Ajapa was not expecting the glow she had in her eyes as soon as she noticed the son of man.

“Faraday. You have returned,” Mother Nature said approaching them, her skin of tree bark dripping blood, sap, and oil.

It was then that Ajapa noticed it; the thinness of her voice,

and the way it sounded as though her lungs rattled in her chest every time she spoke a word. It was then he noticed the way she stooped low at the waist, never fully standing as straight as he had first thought. She looked as though she could barely stand on her own two feet. But ...

But that was impossible! Mother Nature was invincible ... was she not?

Ajapa was so caught up in his swirling thoughts that he did not even notice the fact that the son of man, Faraday, had already left his side and was running towards Mother Nature.

"Son of man, wait!" he said under his breath, launching himself off the ground and clamping his teeth around Faraday's trousers. And that was how he found himself dangling from the man's clothes, unable to stop him from reaching Mother Nature.

This is it. This is where we die, he thought to himself, squeezing his eyes shut as memories of his wife who was slowly losing her sight, and his nephew whose lungs were poisoned by the bane of their land that was oil, flashed through his mind's eye. Was this where his journey ended? After suffering such a tragic fall, and trying to get healing for his family, was he to meet his end here, at the hands of Mother Nature herself?

"Ajapa, you silly animal." Mother Nature's tone was a bit shaky when she said those words, but there was no mistaking the affection in them—the emotion echoed loud and clear in the corridors of her throat, and Ajapa could do nothing but snap his eyes open.

And he quickly found himself looking into eyes that were nothing but mirrors of the Earth and all the seasons in it. When he looked to the side, he found Faraday looking down at him, with a small smile on his face. That was also when he noticed

that the son of man was holding Mother Nature with his arm around her waist.

How ... how was he so confident that she would not turn on him and gouge his eyes out? Or was he thinking that she would not be able to do anything to him because she seemed weak? Then he was a damn fool, that was what he was. To underestimate and continually take advantage of Mother Nature was the number one hubris of the human race, and any second from now, she was going to show him just how foolish it was for them to continually brutalize and victimize her ...

"I appreciate that you are so affronted on my behalf," Mother Nature said then, lifting one trembling hand to cup his face. "Even though it is amusing to see."

Ajapa swallowed, his eyes nearly shaking in their sockets. Well, of course, it would amuse her. He knew how ridiculous it was to her to see a creature she could squash in her grip, if she so willed it, rage on her behalf. He would laugh too if he were her.

"But this son of man does not deserve my wrath," she continued, the amusement in her tone quickly outweighing the affection.

Ajapa blinked, his eyes flitting from Faraday to Mother Nature, and back again. "W-why?" he asked, his voice breaking on that one word. If he was being honest, he was still shaking in his shell because, despite her smile and amusement, she was still leaking oil from her eyes, and those eyes? They were still black with the promise of war.

Mother Nature does not forget, and she was not going to start now. After all, just because she thought Faraday did not deserve her wrath, that did not mean that there were not others who deserved it. Oh, she still had every intention of going to

war, and he had no intention of being in the crossfire. If only this stubborn son of man had listened to him when he had suggested they take the road through the village—

“Why?” she echoed, then tilted her head to the side as if deeply thinking about it. “Well, if not for anything else, at least he hasn’t let me fall on my bum whenever we have crossed paths.”

Faraday shot her a look, one that Ajapa could only describe then as impetuously exuding vexation. Ajapa wanted to bite him so badly before Mother Nature saw that look on his face, but he did not get the chance to do that before the son of man spoke.

“Is that all you see me as?” he said with an affronted gasp. “I thought we were closer than that! Now, I’m offended.” This time, though, there was a smile on his face to show that he was joking.

At least, Ajapa hoped to heaven that he was joking. These sons of men never knew how to show respect if it bit them on their behinds.

But Mother Nature did not respond to that jest with affront. No, if anything, she simply ignored it in that regal, yet razor sharp way of hers that usually saw all the inhabitants of the planet standing on the wrong side of survival.

“You said it yourself, didn’t you, Ajapa?” Mother Nature turned to him again, and Ajapa forced himself to remain calm, and not show her just how spooked he really was at her constant attention. “That the sons of men are parasites, to the Earth, and even to their own kind.”

Ajapa swallowed, his eyes shaking in their sockets when he realized that she was simply repeating the very things he had thought in his mind. Did his words sound arrogant, as

though he was questioning her order of things? No one wanted to be on Nature's bad side.

"And didn't you say your kind are both the destroyers, and the destroyed?" She directed that question at Faraday who was still at her side, and the man shrugged with downcast eyes. "But, you see, obliteration in nature is not, in itself, a bad thing. As is the cycle of life, there must be death because there is life. There must be night because there is the day. The problem happens when there comes an imbalance in the set ecosystem ordained by me."

"The imbalance of taking without giving back." Faraday supplied, and Mother Nature nodded at him, obviously satisfied with his answer. "When we use more than we restore."

Mother Nature slipped out of Faraday's supportive hold and turned to the river, leaning over so she could dip her hands made of tree bark into the oil-stained waters. "I have lost count of the number of sea animals I have picked up from the shore; stained with oil, and dying from the poisoning ... all because of the continued drilling for oil in the seas by mankind. The air is continually polluted with carbon emissions because of mankind's seemingly necessary need for energy, with no regard for the effects those emissions have on the Earth's atmosphere. These catastrophes keep occurring because mankind is more interested in using more than they are about saving."

Ajapa swallowed with great difficulty, because he remembered that his nephew was among the ranks of those sea animals fatally poisoned by the oil spills in the water. And, even though he wanted to speak, he did not trust that anything that would come out of his mouth would be anything close to comprehensible.

"And Faraday is one of the few who are trying to save nature more than they want to use and discard it," Mother Nature

said, and Ajapa's eyes flicked to the son of man she was currently leaning on. "Among his kind, he is one of the few who I can confer the name 'saviour' on. And so, Ajapa, I hope that answers your question of why he is one of the few that do not deserve my wrath? He is an Earth Doctor, seeking my healing."

Ajapa blinked then, realizing that this entire convoluted explanation was her way of telling him why she spares this son of man. "But you do not forgive mankind, nonetheless, do you?"

Mother Nature's answering smile was the perfect picture of retribution. "They do not ask for forgiveness. I cannot pardon an arrogant race who has not asked for it," she answered, and Ajapa felt chills run through his entire body, nearly icing him on the spot. "Mankind uses saviours like Faraday to abate my fury even as they continue their endless destruction of nature, relying on and yet not supporting the various campaigns they raise in their bid to restore balance to the global ecosystem. They do not care about the Earth; they only care about what they can get from me, even at the expense of my health. Tell me, is that not a deliberate act of terrorism?"

Ajapa was nodding even though he was not sure that was a rhetorical question. But Mother Nature was on a roll, and could not stop speaking.

"They keep burning fossil fuels despite resounding warnings about the devastating effects the activity has on the atmosphere, and as temperatures keep rising each year because the residual gases from these fossil fuels keep trapping heat, and when this heat begins to dry out brooks and streams and rivers which inevitably leads to droughts that can bring about wildfires and destroy crops, they begin to come up with ridiculous solutions

like manufacturing special anal plugs for cattle because those innocent animals release methane when they fart.”

Faraday laughed into his hand and Mother Nature rolled her eyes at the words even as she said them. Ajapa’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head when he heard that particularly ridiculous solution, and one thing was clear just from hearing that alone.

“They know they are the problem,” he said, and Mother Nature fixed her ancient gaze on him. But this time, he was not afraid. “But they are deliberately being obtuse about it; thinking they can escape liability. They are passing the blame.”

“Yes,” Mother Nature agreed, her tone dry. “An old trait of mankind.”

Faraday cleared his throat. “I would like to apologize on behalf of those who made that suggestion—” he started to say, but Mother Nature held up her hand of bark.

“You will not be the scapegoat,” She said, and Faraday pressed his mouth into a thin line. “Mankind will pay for their crimes each with his level of involvement and lack thereof. Mankind is fond of talking about climate change while doing absolutely nothing to bring down this fever that they have inflicted on me. They have heated up the Earth so much that the phenomenon has destroyed the natural order of the seasons, and the extreme shifts in weather have caused severe reactions in nature.

“Take the Australian wildfires, for example; the wild bush fires raged for months, burned more than ten million hectares of land, and over a billion animals were estimated to have died, with many species pushed close to extinction. The changing climate worsened the wildfires with the hotter, drier conditions feeding the fires’ raging hunger to consume. What caused the drastic change in climate? Mankind’s selfish

activities and the struggle for power and wealth! With each continuous defiant activity by mankind, the global ecosystem is being destroyed year after year.”

Ajapa could not believe his ears, and neither could he wrap his head around the number of animals losing their lives in fires of that magnitude. Here, the animal kingdom was beset with oil contamination and air pollution, and over there ... animals were being burned alive. He could not even imagine the agony they must have gone through, animals losing their family, with no one to turn to—

“Oh, Ajapa, even I am haunted by the memories of those dreadful months,” Mother Nature, holding up her hands of tree bark in front of her face, narrated. “Koalas crawled out of the burning trees, hot and dehydrated—thirsty for water. These creatures do not drink water, getting all the water they need from the leaves they eat. But during those wildfires, they were so desperate for water that they drank it out of bottles. I could feel their thirst, Ajapa, I could feel their desperation and despair. Animals lost their lives and the trees ... The trees all burned down.” She paused.

“Talking about the trees; if they are not burned down, they are mowed down to make room for concrete buildings and plantations. Has mankind forgotten?”

Ajapa’s teeth rattled at the sudden boom of Mother Nature’s voice, and the sound made him jump in fright, his heart thudding in his chest.

“Has mankind forgotten that trees are the lungs of the Earth?” she bellowed, her eyes glowing bright with anger. “Without the trees, the carbon dioxide that is being trapped in the Earth’s atmosphere will have nowhere to go! Without the trees, there will be no oxygen, and without oxygen, there will be no mankind! But mankind has forgotten the cycle of nature

in favour of urbanization and the chase of wealth. And so, they are dooming their future generations to the fate of having lungs bloated with carbon with nowhere to go because the Earth will be devoid of trees!”

Ajapa shared a look full of fear with Faraday, and even the son of man looked worried. Mother Nature was working up a storm now; they could see the clouds gathering on the horizon, and they knew that it would only spell disaster for the innocent people of the village if they did not try to talk her down from her rage.

“They are quickly creating a future where my veins will run dry, devoid of the lifeblood that keeps life thriving, and my lungs shrivelled and useless. They are creating a future where I no longer exist because I will be dead, and they are doing it even while knowing that fact! The world’s global ecosystem is being disrupted because of the intentional activities of mankind. They know that those activities will substantially damage ecosystems, harm the health and wellbeing of species—even mankind themselves. It is a deliberate act of murder! Is that not a crime?”

“Yes. It is mass environmental destruction, also known as ecocide,” Faraday murmured, and Ajapa turned to look at him, his body shivering from the chill of fear.

Mother Nature’s mouth was set in a grim line when she said, “Then they must be tried according to the full extent of that crime. And if they will not pass judgement on themselves, then I will do it for them.”

V

To Slit Nature's Wrists

"Look, Ajapa. See how they kill me."

Oh, Ajapa saw, no matter how much he wished he did not, and it was the most gruesome form of murder Ajapa had ever seen. Even from this distance, even standing at this vantage point from whence time and space seemed inconsequential, Ajapa could feel the intense heat of the fires, and the almost never-ending way they burned, endlessly; as though hell had found a way to breach the Earth's surface. And yet, just beside that catastrophe of burning craters as wide as the circumference of an entire town, Ajapa watched as one last iceberg almost as big as a hill, crumbled into the seas, quickly dissolving into liquid.

It seemed as though it was nothing; as if it were a phenomenon occurring too far away for one to care about, but Ajapa saw the water level increase just another one-eighth of an inch, and had instant eclectic visions of the seas finally exceeding their boundaries and overflowing to submerge the land again. And he realized that this vision was not just terribly poetic—it was the almost inevitable future. With the way humanity was going, it was clear that soon, the Earth would be fighting the extremely polar opposite war of either being razed to ash by fire or being once again submerged in the seas, burying the gentrified world mankind had built on the foundations of its cruelty to, and neglect of, Mother Nature herself.

In the middle of it all, stood mankind, the obvious anti-

heroes of the great apocalyptic story; being their arrogant and entitled selves all the while tearing down the perfect global ecosystem Mother Nature had built—dragging all in nature down along with them.

The sons of men were the heralds of the apocalypse, but they were too power-drunk and comfort-hungry to see it!

“Oh no, Ajapa. They see. They just pretend like they don’t. They pretend like I don’t exist when it suits them.” Mother Nature said.

Mother Nature held him within the crook of her arms, trembling as though she would drop him at any time without warning. He could feel the death of Mother Nature in the way she shook, in the way she stood—with her back stooped so slightly over, like she could no longer bear her own weight, could no longer chart her own orbit. He felt it in the way her skin burned up against him where her body met his own, he smelled it in the acrid scent of burning bark that followed her every turn and every breath that came out of her mouth, as though she was being burned up from the inside out.

She was burning up from the inside out.

Oh yes, Ajapa could feel it. But watching it happen in real-time was its own kind of cruelty. This is all the result of the ruthless carelessness of mankind. The thought set his blood to boil, and made him want to sit back and just watch the world burn ... but he could not let that happen, not when he and everyone he knew will simply just burn with it.

“You also think that’s a fitting punishment, don’t you?” She smiled down at him then, and it was a deadly stretch of her mouth. “I’ve thought about it, too. What if I just end myself before they even get the chance to finally slit my throat?”

That question was too big and too grave a concept to ponder, let alone even imagine, and Ajapa snapped his head

up at once. “No!” The one word fell from his mouth with the precision of missiles, aiming straight for her conscience.

Her smile dimmed in a sardonic way; in that way that gods do when they know their suffering is inevitably meant as a burnt offering.

“No?” she resounded, and Ajapa quickly dropped his head, realizing his own show of entitlement; his own willingness to sacrifice nature herself just so he could keep breathing. “Look how they slit my wrists, Ajapa. See how I bleed; slowly, I am already dying. Who would care ... what would happen if I decide to go out with a big bang once more?”

That was a question he knew he could not answer on behalf of mankind—they would have to give her the answer themselves, but he could at least speak for his kingdom, for the global ecosystem, of which he was a part.

“We ... we still need you!” he cried, and she stared down at him with an expression akin to resignation mixed in with something akin to dread ... as though she had already known what he had been about to say before he even said it. Ajapa did not like that look, because it only showed him that Mother Nature was truly nearing the end of her patience—and when that happens, these visions of polar extreme destruction she showed him now would become even worse; the only proof of Mother Nature’s utter loss of faith in Mankind. He could not let that happen, even if the sons of men were hell-bent on unleashing the apocalypse upon nature until nothing was left; until all returned to darkness, and the waters covered the face of the Earth once again.

Ah. Ajapa thought then, if Mother Nature carries out her threat—

The rising sea levels will win, in the end. That only made sense, he supposed. It was, after all, the water that made up a

large percentage of the world. In the end, it will overflow and take over the land once more. After all, the waters were Mother Nature's lifeblood, and if mankind would keep cutting through her veins and arteries, then yes, she would bleed ... and drown the entire world as she died. It was all so tragically poetic that he almost shed a tear—but he made himself hold back the tear—it was, after all, not going to do anything but add to the rising levels of water in the world.

Ha, Ajapa laughed to himself. Was he not overestimating himself? What gave him the idea that his meager tears would even reach the level of Mother Nature's growing bleeding? But that was all the more reason he should hold those tears back.

"The son of man, Faraday!" Ajapa blurted out at once, his eyes wide with a panic. "Is he not the one you call the Earth Doctor? Is he not tending to your wounds?"

Mother Nature smiled down at him again, and it was a dead slash of her mouth. "And how many doctors does the Earth have to spare me?" she said, her skin of bark seeming to flake off here and there. "All of mankind were meant to be my doctors, Ajapa. All of them. I am not despising their nursing for all this time, in fact, I am grateful for them all, but they can only do so much against the other eighty percent who are determined to put me to death."

"Ecocide." Ajapa blurted it out, the term returning to his memory in Faraday's tone. "Wasn't that ... wasn't that what the son of man Faraday called it? Didn't he say that they're moving to make it a criminal offence?"

Mother Nature smiled. "The Earth Doctors are trying their best to save me, and they hope to hold all those who intentionally kill me for their own selfish gain to criminal

charges. That is what that term means. It is the mass damage and destruction of ecosystems— the severe harm to nature which is widespread or long-term. Do you know what that means?”

Ajapa thought about it and gasped out loud when he realized the full implications of what she said. “Then ... that means—!” he started to say, and Mother Nature nodded, her smile dimming just a little bit.

“Yes. That little village is an example of ecocide,” she said, and there was no mistaking the thread of rage thrumming within her vocal cords. “You were right, that the sons of men are harming themselves even in the process of harming me. After all, when the Earth runs a fever, mankind falls sick, too, being part of the global ecosystem. Climate change is the result of many years of all the harmful industrial activities and now, I cannot stomach this fever any longer.”

Ajapa could not stop his eyes from going to the vision Mother Nature had sprawled before them, but even as his eyes went to it, they started to switch. This time, they went back to the oil- damaged waters of the little village, and then spanned outward, as if to cover the entire Earth, pulling forth all the atrocities mankind had chosen to inflict upon the Earth in their chase for progress even at the expense of nature itself.

“Most of these risks have been known for decades by these companies, and yet, they still choose to continue these practices, uncaring for the health of the planet,” Mother Nature continued to speak, her tone thoroughly devastated, utterly betrayed. Ajapa could only imagine the measure of despair she must be feeling now, and how much she had been putting up with all these years. “My lifeblood, my womb, my lungs— mankind has continuously taken a chainsaw to them all, and

left me bleeding over and over. They go deep-sea, bottom trawling and end up destroying entire ecosystems by dredging the ocean floor. They have caused multiple fish species to go extinct from overfishing.”

Mother Nature shook her head, her disappointment was almost palpable. “They have spilt oil into the oceans continuously. They have polluted them with their plastics, they have mined in the deep sea, polluting the Pacific to utter devastation. And then, there’s deforestation, which is the biggest threat to biodiversity and climate on the planet. Industrial livestock farming, mineral extraction and oil drilling continue to contribute to deforestation, as well as creating additional harm through the contamination of land and river systems. The Niger Delta has suffered continuously from constant oil spills over many decades of extraction and is still one of the most polluted regions on Earth. Do you know how much damage that is?”

Ajapa could not even begin to imagine it. He simply could not; it was too terrible to even comprehend.

“The sad part about it is that most of mankind doesn’t even know how close to death I am.” Mother Nature sighed again, and finally turned away from the vision sprawled before their eyes as it dissipated into nothing. “Sometimes, I wonder if they would even care if I lay in front of them, bleeding from neck cut open for diamonds.”

It was at that moment that Faraday appeared before them, after they stepped out of the dimension of things yet to come. He smiled at Mother Nature, his eyes bright with an apology and a love Ajapa had not seen in the eyes of the devastated villagers.

And Ajapa turned to Mother Nature then, his heart in his mouth when he said, “There are those who care, who fight to

punish your remorseless murderers.” When she looked down at him, her eyes dim with bleak hope, he then said, “They will continue to preach your gospel until all of mankind will work to heal you.”

She laughed, a humourless sound. “Why do you think they will?”

Ajapa smiled back, his own stretch of mouth humourless in its execution. “Because, just like me, mankind does not want to die.”

No. Not even when they deliberately kill themselves.

VI

When the Earth Runs a Fever

“After all, when the Earth runs a fever, mankind falls sick, too.”
The world was burning.

Or was it that he was just running a fever? Jack put a palm to the forehead, but all he felt was the scorching heat from standing out in the sun for too long. He swallowed past the dryness in his throat, and it felt as though he was swallowing down a stack of needles. Desperate, he reached into his backpack and pulled out the bottle of water his father always made him carry with him during these missions, and quickly popped open the cap, almost devouring the bottle in his haste to wet his throat.

But as soon as he swallowed down all the water, his throat seemed to dry out again, as if he was being burned up from the inside out. Was he really running a fever, and just could not tell because of the intense heat? Glaring at his empty water bottle in undiluted disgust, he almost smashed it against a rock in his sudden fit of fiery rage.

But his hand froze up above his head, when his eyes fell on the small, quivering rabbit hopping about on the rock, its fur covered in black soot. Eyes flying wide, Jack dropped to his knees at once, holding out his hands in a gesture of peace, hoping to calm her down.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” he said soothingly, remembering at once the reason why he did this work with his father. He did it because he loved to take care of animals, and this rabbit was

one animal in distress, one more animal he could take care of. “I’m here now. What’s wrong?”

“Jack!” the rabbit cried, her nose quivering from terror, and he realized he knew her. This was Jumoke, the Rabbit; mother of a litter of over ten babies she had just recently birthed. The look in her eyes only made his heartbeat even faster, but Jack made himself stay calm—he could not show his own alarm and cause her to go even into a panic attack, not to mention that rabbits were already quite skittish creatures to begin with.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, Momo,” he kept his tone soothing, even as he looked around, hoping that maybe his father would appear, but he knew that hope was futile at a time like this because he knew that his father was currently tending to Mother Nature and—he did not like to say it but—she could be fussy as well sometimes. Of course, he did not say it to her face though; even he was not stupid enough to piss Mother Nature off. Especially when her fussiness was a direct reaction from the continued stress man kept putting her through, so he could not complain about it.

All that did not stop him from thinking about it, though. Somehow, for a millennia old personification of the Earth, she really did remind him of the fussy overbearingness of his own mother. She also had a temper similar to hers.

“It’s hot! It’s so hot!” Jumoke the Rabbit cried, still hopping on the rock, and Jack quickly realized that the rock must be scorching due to the intense heat from the sun today. He immediately scooped her up into his arms and held her close to his bosom.

But that was when he noticed that the soot was staining his sleeves and hands, indicating that it was a recent stain on her fur. Maybe, he reasoned, it was the soot from that damned oil refinery, polluting the air non-stop that had stained her fur,

but the more he ran his hands through, he felt the coarseness of singed ends falling between his fingers.

Singed? Jack was on immediate alert. Her fur could only be singed if she had been in the vicinity of a fire.

A fire!

“Momo, where are your children?” he asked, urgency pounding through his veins and threading itself through the tremulous note of his voice. “Is your home on fire?”

Jumoke the Rabbit was crying now, a loud keening sound of pain and loss. “Everything is on fire! I can’t even get through to my burrow!”

Jack did not even waste any more time, his feet already making the decision for him, and running towards the direction of the forest. Dropping back down to his knees, he quickly opened his backpack and nestled Jumoke inside it, leaving it unzipped so that she could still breathe.

“Stay here, Momo. I’m going to get your babies,” he told her, effectively sealing the words into a promise he was just going to have to keep. With that, he turned and wove his way through the leaves, carefully but quickly, searching for the fire.

And because he now knew what to look for, he saw it at once. The smoke was hard to miss, in fact, and that meant that it had been burning for a while and was spreading. Very fast.

No wonder, he thought, that he had felt as if the world around him was burning. It was because it was literally on fire! He knew he should call his dad for help; that was the responsible thing to do. But he also knew that his father would try to stop him from trying to save the animals if he did call, and he could not bear to see them die. So, maybe he was being reckless, but he still could not stomach the thought of letting so many animals die anyway. especially not Jumoke’s newborns. They did not deserve to be burned to death, so if

he moved fast enough, maybe he would be able to save them in time.

But she just told you that she cannot get through to the burrow.

The thought popped up in his head like a yellow warning sign, and it almost pulled him up short. Almost. Still, he pushed on, determining that that was probably because she was small. He, on the other hand, was bigger, and could probably find a way around the fire if he was fast enough.

“A human hoping to be faster than a wildfire? Now, that’s another level of mankind’s arrogance I haven’t seen before.”

That voice, and those words stopped him in his tracks, and he whirled around at once, his eyes roving this way and that, searching for the speaker. He found her quickly alright, and the vision she presented was jarring, to put it mildly. Jack found himself taking a step back, and then two.

The entity made of fire smiled a fiery smile at that little retreat. “You made a promise to Jumoke, did you not?” she prompted him, jutting out one hip lazily. “Are you going to run away now and break that promise?”

Jack knew a taunt when he heard one, but he also knew trouble when he saw it. And this entity was trouble. To put it simply, this persona was the ever-burning aspect of Mother Nature, and this one was fixed on nothing but carrying out the vengeful urges of Mother Nature.

“I’m not going to break it, but ...” he trailed off, debating whether he had the guts to taunt this persona as it was. He knew for a fact that she would not hesitate to raze him to the ground where he stood. Mother Nature was a double-edged sword, and this persona, Wildfire, knew how to swing that sword.

The fiery personification of the continued rising heat levels

of the Earth, Wildfire, scoffed at him and turned around. "Come with me, Jack," she said, motioning to him with one fiery finger.

But Jack hesitated, and for good reason, too. For all he knew, she could be leading him towards the heart of the fire, just so she could laugh as she watched him struggle to survive the thick smoke and licking flames.

"If I thought to raze you to ashes, I would have done it by now, Jack, don't you think so?" She did not stop walking, and Jack realized that he had no other choice but to follow her.

"Then why are you wasting my time? I have to get help! To put the fire out with—"

"What?" Wildfire asked. "This village has no water. What they have is oil, and that would only cause more harm than good, don't you know that?"

Jack hated the helplessness he was feeling. "Then, I have to save Jumoke's babies—"

Wildfire looked away from him then, and he did not like the way she stood, with her arms going to wind about her body almost in a remorseful gesture. "Can you not see, Jack?" she asked, her tone the epitome of low heat. "Everything has been razed to the ground. Why do you think those babies who can't even walk on their own survived?"

Jack exploded then. "You should have saved them!" he cried, wanting more than anything to shake her. "You just didn't want to do anything because you're trying to take your revenge on us for what we're doing to you!"

"No," Wildfire said, and her tone was so final that Jack could do nothing but heave in grief. "It is not that I didn't want to do anything, it is that I am the result of that very thing. The Earth is running a fever, Jack, and everything inside it ... will just end up burning."

Jack was still grieving but could not let go of a thought. “But ... but ... did ... did you start the fire?” he stuttered as he inquired in a muffled tone, fearing the worst.

“Me?” Wildfire crowed incredulously, before pointing at the sky. “How is this my fault?”

Jack eyed her from the corners of his eyes. Well, he could not very well say that it was her fault, now, could he? He knew that she had manifested here simply because of the fire. Then

...

“This is what caused the fire.”

They stopped before a blackened heap that served as the starting point of the rapidly spreading raze of black ash that he could see miles beyond his eyes.

“The villagers dumped this debris here to be burned,” Wildfire said, folding her arms, and shaking her head. “Oily rags, compost piles, dry grass. And then they throw in a lighter there just to up the ante.”

Jack clenched his fists and said, “They should know better.” Because he knew for a fact that his father had made it a duty to educate them on why it was not safe to burn debris like this indiscriminately, especially in these times of climate fluctuations.

Wildfire scoffed again. “Their waters are polluted with oil, Jack, and their farms are dead from the soil being poisoned by the same toxic pollutant—”

“Then shouldn’t they be careful with their forests, too?” he asked, his heart hammering in his chest from the slowly growing rage.

“They are simply doing what they have always done. Take the US for example,” Wildfire said, her tone conversational. Jack wanted to scream. “Where more than eighty percent of wildfires are caused by people, and one contributing factor is

debris burning, just like this one. They do it because they believe that the fire will eventually peter out. “But this,” she spread her arms wide then, gesturing to the burning forest around them both, “is simply what happens when the Earth runs a fever. The Earth is too hot, uncomfortably so, and anything on fire will keep burning, and once the fire starts, warmer, drier conditions help the fires spread and make them harder to put out.”

Everything ... will just end up burning!



4.
TROUBLED WATERS

–Dieworimene Koikoibo

I

Newswaves

“Buran!” Ungulu bubbled his best friend’s name from a far distance as he sprinted, his fins quicker than ever.

It was not an ordinary day in River Mamu; it was an unusually boisterous and bubbly day. Ungulu swam with such a speed that, had it been a regular day, fishes in Mamu who saw him would have easily believed that he was running from the fangs of a shark, and would have run for their lives as well, too. But those fishes that knew Ungulu to be the talebearer that he was, also knew that he, even at such speed, was only on his way to deliver another of his stories to the ear that was willing to listen.

And, since it was not an ordinary day, any fish that may have seen him could have rightly guessed the story that swam with him that early in the morning into his best friend’s place. Yet, not many fishes had the time to stand and stare or worry about Ungulu’s sprint, for they were equally up and about the same waves-making news.

“Have you not heard?” Ungulu asked when he reached Buran, even before Buran could reply his familiar greetings. His eyes were wide and his mouth itched to tell his tale as he impatiently waited for the first words he always expected from the listeners of his hot gist.

“Heard what?” Finally, the words came from Buran. “What is it this time? It’s too early for unnecessary bubbles, please,” Buran said dismissively.

“Ah! Why are you always the last to hear? And who says what I’m about to tell you is an unnecessary bubble, huh?” His tiny tail twitched.

“Ungulu, you are my best friend but, who, in the entire length of River Mamu, does not know that nine out of ten bubbles which come out from your mouth are full of lies?”

“Hmm! You of all the fishes in Mamu should know that a bubble is enough for the wise fish!”

Buran thought about it. “I hear you. So, what is it this time?” “This one is confirmed; Mamu has overflowed!” he announced, swirling proudly, having successfully let the cat out of the bag.

“What do you mean, the river has overflowed? And you say you have come to tell the truth this time?”

“But yes, I mean it! The river has overflowed. It’s all over the human settlement. No, what is wrong with me! The human settlement is all over the river!” He bubbled and swirled around Buran.

“You mean the flood is here already? At this time of the year?

And so big, that the humans live on the river?”

“Times have changed, my friend!”

“Indeed! It must be due to last night’s rains.”

“Who cares!” Ungulu giggled hysterically.

“Is that why every fish has been sprinting this morning?” And why was Ungulu excited about it, Buran wondered.

“What do you think?! There’s good food just floating around on the water at the human settlement. Let’s go plundering, my friend! Quick, come, let’s go!”

And with that, he launched out and left at the same speed with which he had come, not even looking back to check if his friend followed behind.

Anyway, Buran had always wondered what was the secret life of humans, especially of those who lived beside Mamu, his habitat. But year in and out, since he was born, and throughout the known history of Mamu's long and steady flow, her lips—as he had been told by his grandma—even in their fullest had not exceeded the skimpy, waterside outskirts of the human settlements beside it. Rather, she had constantly ebbed by a fraction of an inch each year as if afraid to kiss the skirts of the river.

So, that morning, when the news of River Mamu's flow into the community of their human neighbours—and the news of how humans now used canoes to move from house to house—floated to him on Ungulu's swim waves, it intrigued him the more. He wanted to follow the river to explore the lives of humans. After all what was the river without him and all the other fishes? A dead river was the one without fish—the two both paddled in one boat, he knew.

This was an opportunity to learn about the humans and perhaps ask them all the questions he longed to ask—to learn about the creatures that had caught and eaten his nuclear family, he thought.

“Let's go-o!” He, too, made to set out, but—

“Hey, hold it there! Where do you think you're going?” It was Grandma Buran who, swimming in from nowhere, called him to a halt.

“I say, where do you think you are going?” she repeated. “Erm... to ... to that human settlement. Grandma, I hear the river has overflowed, and the village is all over the—”

“And so you're going to do what? Drink it dry?” she cut him short. “Have you forgotten what these humans are capable of? Have you forgotten so soon how they hooked, chopped and ate your father and mother!”

“But ...” Buran was almost teary. “Grandma, I’m not the same as my par—”

“Grandma Buran” Iwiri the turtle called out, as he intrusively floated into the space. “Don’t you also notice the difference? Greetings.”

“Greetings, Pa Iwiri,” Buran greeted.

Iwiri’s entrance took Grandma Buran aback a bit, but she recollected herself and said in a dry, suspicious tone, “Greetings, Iwiri. Yes, there is a difference even between twins, but—”

“No, no, that was not what I meant,” he waved in correction. “I meant the heat. River Mamu seems to be warmer today—actually over the last few days.”

“Oh! That? Yes, I felt it earlier yesterday, but I felt it was just my old age taking a toll on me”

“Oh no! Grandma I have noticed, too! At first, I thought it was only my space but no, it seems to be the entire water—it’s heating up!” Buran confirmed with glowing eyes.

“Ahan! There it is then. The word I got yesterday from my cousins at the sea must be true!”

“What word, Pa Iwiri? Tell us please!” a curious Buran enquired.

“Well ...” he attempted to clear his throat and then continued, “my cousins, the sea turtles, sent me word, that they have been facing an unprecedented rise in the temperature of their home and, not just that, a rise in the level of the sea itself, causing erosion and tall vegetation berms —making it difficult for them to breed.

“Some of them, like the green turtles, are now being forced to nest in front of the vegetation line—”

“Ah!” Grandma Buran wailed.

“That’s so unfortunate,” Buran added.

"That's not all," Iwiri reminded them that he was not finished with the floor.

"There's more?"

"Yes," he lowered his voice to a whisper now and looked around through the corners of his eyes before continuing. "Even worse. The currents of the sea are also changing and do you know what that means? It means the sea turtles are being exposed to the new predators that follow these new currents."

"Eweyyyy!" Grandma Buran shrieked. This time she drew nearer to Buran, as if to shield him from an inbound predator, even though she knew that they were miles away from the sea.

"Yes. And they say this distortion of traditional patterns is affecting all the species at sea."

"But what could be the cause of this sea-level rise, and heating? Could it be because of some abomination we may have committed against the order of Woyen?" she asked, with the confusion and concern of an old fish.

"Grandma, that was what I was going to find out before you stopped me—"

"Well ..."

Iwiri attempted clearing his throat again and resumed in his original croaky voice. "Unfortunately, my cousins are as clueless as you and I. But we have to know. Why stop the young one?" He rooted for Buran. "If we can, we have to know the cause before the full effects of whatever it is that is haunting the sea gets to us," he said.

"You are right, Pa Iwiri. I feel there is a real connection between what is happening at sea and what is happening in Mamu—the flood and heating," Buran added.

Then, Iwiri started. "Grandma Buran, you know, all of this may be what I am suspecting—"

"Don't! He is but a fingerling, too young for that horror!"

Grandma Buran stopped Iwiri, almost sobbing as Buran stood there, lost, with eyes blinking, dashing from Iwiri to his grandma and vice versa, wondering what horror they talked about.

It was silence then.

Grandma agreed that they needed to know for sure what was coming, all right. But she was not comfortable with the idea that her beloved, orphaned Buran should be the one to go and find out the cause of the waters' troubles and possibly end up being a sacrificial fish in the barbecue wires of the humans. She had lost his parents and little brother to the hot hands of the same humans he was eager to approach, and the thought of losing him too, scared her through the deepest, predator-infested parts of the ocean and back. And more so, when the idea was being endorsed by the turtle, whose kind was widely known in all the animal kingdom to be cunning and crafty.

Her head began playing all the stories she had heard about the tortoise, cousin to the turtle, and his wit and craftiness—how he had deceived many animals into a snare. She always took everything the turtle said with a pinch of salt and had always advised her offspring to do the same. She was not about to let Buran swim into his snare.

"No, not my Buran," she said and just then, she discovered that Buran and Iwiri the turtle were no longer present with her. They had swam away unnoticed while she was still deep in her thoughts.

"Buran!" she screamed, but they were already far gone.

II

Bloated Fish

“Hold on, wait for me, Buran!” the old, gasping Iwiri begged Buran, who was swimming far ahead of him, fast approaching the human settlement. They had not stopped swimming since they had snuck away from Grandma Buran. They had not even stopped to check if she was swimming after them.

“Old turtle, you have to try and keep up.” Buran stopped, anyway, floating in wait, panting himself. “We don’t want to arrive in the dark, do we?”

“You know my bones are old now and my shell has become heavier than ever. Don’t be deceived by how well I carry it. If not ...” He clapped his lips, set to brag. “Have you not heard, of how Tortoise outran Hare?”

“Oh, I heard that story. Grandma told me and I found it quite fishy. Grandma said Tortoise tricked the Hare to win the race.” Buran said casually, clueless that he had just burst the old turtle’s bubble.

“That is not true!” Iwiri countered, almost angry. “Look, your grandma does not have so many nice things to say about my bloodline. What actually happened was this—”

“Ewwwww!” Buran shivered and jumped, disgusted by what had just touched him. It was a dead fish. Dead, grey and smelling, floating belly up.

“What is it?” Iwiri asked as he drew closer.

“Dead—Ewwwww!” He shivered again as another dead fish touched him. “—Dead, rotting fish!”

“Hmm,” Iwiri said, having caught up with Buran and also touching one of the dead fishes himself. “This one is soaked in oil.”

“Oil?”

“Yes, crude oil.” Part of him glad—glad that the young fingerling will finally know the truth that his grandma had been protecting him from, and part of him worried—worried what Grandma Buran would do to him when she found out that he had spilled the truth to the fingerling. But what? It was for Buran’s own good. It was better, that the fingerling knew about all the predators that were after his kind, for that way he would recognize danger when he saw one, and escape it.

“What is crude oil?”

The old turtle’s pupils popped, feigning surprise at Buran’s lack of knowledge of what crude oil was.

“Well, don’t look at me like that. I am a bottom fish, I haven’t made it to these parts before, you know,” Buran defended his ignorance, still shaken by the sight of the carcasses of his kind.

Iwiri remained silent for a moment. He scratched his beardless chin as if to therefrom collect the words with which to explain what crude oil was. And determined to seize the opportunity to sound as ocean-deep and mysterious as possible, he said, “Crude oil is blood—the black blood of greed worshipped by man.”

“Oh ...” Buran was still as lost as he had been before Iwiri’s answer. “But why are the dead fishes soaked in the blood of greed?” he probed.

“They’re not just soaked in the black blood, my young friend; they were choked to death by it. I’m not surprised your grandma didn’t tell you about this. Who will blame her? After all, a devious turtle is not involved here.”

The fingerling was saddened. But the company had begun

travelling on again, this time slowly, and Iwiri the turtle went on telling Buran the young fish the few things he knew about crude oil, especially how it had made the humans go crazy over the years.

“They pump it from the ground to sell, and when they must have made profit enough to acquire vanities, they spill the remaining into our home. And, after they have almost spent their profits acquiring vanities, they repeat the process—pumping, selling and spilling. Look.” He scooped the water and poured it back, and traces of crude oil lingered in his palm and, raising his oil-smeared palm to show Buran, he said, “It’s everywhere, even inside our bodies. You never know until you turn belly up and dead, like these fishes.”

Buran was weighed down by all he had seen, and was lost in absorbing all he was being told by Iwiri, that he did not know they were already in the human village—not until he began being knocked on by plastics, nylons and personal belongings of the humans. That, and seeing from afar the humans paddling their canoes in and out of compounds, made Buran to agree with his best friend Ungulu that the settlement was all over River Mamu. The water, like a fishnet, spread across and covered the entire length and breadth of the settlement and the humans, alongside their houses, had been caught in it and in a frenzy. Buran could see how the humans struggled to escape the water’s net like a fish would the net of a fisher. Speaking of fishes, where is Ungulu—the thought seeped into his mind.

“We must look for my friend, Ungulu,” Buran suddenly declared. “I’m sure he is somewhere around.”

“I wouldn’t bank on that. I wouldn’t be surprised if your friend has been caught, chopped, roasted and eaten by these

humans who love barbecue as much as they love their lives. Or, perhaps, being the glutton we know him to be, he has overfed on their poisonous food and died and floated away belly up. I never liked that fish, anyway.”

“No, no, no. Not my Ungulu,” Buran forbade as if the old turtle had just spoken an abomination. “We must look for him!”

“Okay.” Iwiri attempted to clear his throat. “But this is the farthest I go,” he said, and floated to drive home the point that he really did not mean to go any further with Buran.

“Wait, are you not coming with me?” Buran drew the conclusion, surprised. Actually, Buran was surprised that he was surprised at old Iwiri’s unwillingness. When had the turtle and his kind ever been willing to put themselves in harm’s way for anyone? Definitely not in this case that involved a fish they did not like. He should have known better—better than to have sneaked off with the crafty turtle who would abandon him and leave him alone to their mission. Grandma Buran had always warned him against the old turtle; he thought now he knew why.

Iwiri did not answer the question. Rather, he said, “Remember, we don’t have all the time in the world ... and, watch out for the predators! They will be lurking around with their hungry fangs and thirsty bowels!” he shouted after Buran, who was already out of sight. “And, you didn’t tell me what I should tell your grandma happened to you!” he shouted one last time and, getting no answer, turned around to begin his journey back home



5.
**WHAT REALLY HAPPENED TO HARE IN THE
RACE WITH TORTOISE**

– Dieworimene Koikoibo

“What has happened to Buran!” Grandma Buran the fish demanded impatiently and aloud when she saw from afar that Iwiri approached alone although he had earlier snuck off with her grandchild Buran.

“What may have happened to Buran was the same thing that happened to Hare in the race with Tortoise,” Iwiri said when he reached her. “The reality that many, including you, have not come to know,” he added, gasping.

To say the truth, the turtle did not know what may have happened to Buran the fingerling, having abandoned him halfway in their mission to ascertain if there was any connection between the rising sea level and the unprecedented warmth in River Mamu. Iwiri had left the fingerling alone to the mission after the fingerling had insisted on looking for his rumour-mongering, gluttonous best friend, Ungulu, whom Iwiri thought was likely to have already been served as barbecue in the hands of the humans.

But the old turtle simply wanted to set the record straight regarding his cousin, the tortoise, after so many years of a warped version of the true story of the famed race between Tortoise and Hare.

“What do you mean? Where is my Buran! What have you done with him?” Grandma Buran pressed, her swim bladder running low on gas, and her heart racing like the currents of River Mamu, knowing the turtle to be wily and often mischievous.

“Before I tell you the possible fate of Buran, we must first set the record straight concerning the race between Tortoise and Hare,” he confessed remorselessly.

“What has the duo to do with the whereabouts of my grandfingerling?”

“Everything, as you will see. Everything!” he said in his tone

of ocean-deep mystery, spreading his arms as if to say ‘everything’ meant not just River Mamu but the entire Earth.

“Ah, Iwiri, we all heard and know what happened on that day of the race—Tortoise drugged Hare, thereby causing him to sleep off on the racetrack, while Tortoise ran to the finish line. What else is there to tell?”

“Oh, correct, that was what you were told by Hare or the animals that Hare had lied to. You didn’t witness it, did you?”

Grandma Buran shook her fish head.

“But I was there to witness the race myself,” he said, with an air both of pride and frustration.

Grandma Buran could not agree more that she had not been there herself to witness the race. She had not even been born at the time it had reportedly taken place. So, what Iwiri the turtle said intrigued her. Iwiri the turtle was approaching his hundredth year now and, no doubt, was alive and well of age at the time the race reportedly held. So, it was possible that he was indeed there to witness it, she considered. After all, his cousin was one of the racers. So, yes, she was interested, especially because Iwiri had said what happened to Hare was what may have happened to her Buran. If her Buran was dead, she wanted to know the name of the death that may have killed him so she could find it and cry a river that would drown it.

“So, tell me, what really happened to Hare?” she finally asked, agreeing that taking a moment to know the truth—because, just what if Iwiri had the truth—would do no harm after all.

And so, Iwiri cleared his throat, scratched his beardless chin as if to collect words from there, and then began.

“I will start from the beginning ...

“In those days Hare fondly made fun of Tortoise for being

so slow. ‘Do you ever get anywhere?’ he would ask with a mocking laugh that haunted Tortoise. ‘Yes,’ Tortoise usually managed to reply Hare, ‘and I get there earlier than you think. Do you want a race with me to prove it?’ Hare was amused at the idea of running a race with Tortoise but agreed to give him a run, and so a day was fixed for the race. The venue was agreed to be the path along the forest, and the word was sent to all the animals to come witness the race.”

He paused and attempted clearing his throat again before continuing.

“On that day, all the land, air and even some aquatic animals, gathered at the venue to cheer their favourite. Even I had received word from my cousin. So, I attended the race from River Mamu to cheer my cousin, Tortoise. The sun scorched like it was cooking three big pots of party food—each, the size of the Earth for everyone attending the event—as if it was the marriage ceremony of Lion, king of the jungle. The air was dry and the breeze pierced us as it blew through the crowd of lively and cheerful onlookers—who, despite the arid weather, stood along the sideways of the path to watch the race. Soon, the fox, who had consented to act as judge, marked the distance and started the runners off and the pigeons were also set off to aerially monitor the race from beginning to end.”

He paused to search Grandma’s face for the level of attentiveness he wished to see. Nodding his inner head in satisfaction, he continued.

“Of course, Hare dashed off and before long into the race, gave Tortoise a long, long gap. But that gap became short-lived because suddenly—!” It was a theatric shout.

“What happened?” Grandma managed to ask, hiding the shock that came with Iwiri’s theatrics.

“The fire-breeze!”

“What fire-breeze?” She bristled, swirling in search of the fire that she thought was around. “Iwiri, you’re beginning to scare me,” she confessed, still looking around for the fire with the breeze.

“No, no, calm down. There’s no fire, not here,” Iwiri assured her and after she appeared to him to have become calm he continued. “I meant on the race ground; there was a gust of iron-hot breeze mixed with dark particles that swept through the venue! And everyone scampered for cover. I, too, had my face in my shell, till moments after the hot breeze had passed. It was then, when we raised our heads again, that we saw it!”

“Saw what? What did you see?” She just could no longer hide the intrigue that overwhelmingly swelled in her like the flood in River Mamu.

“Tortoise was running ahead of Hare! And Hare was just there, moving dizzily on the track, far behind Tortoise! Oh, look—!” he suddenly pointed to the sky, where a bird currently hovered. “Just in time!” he announced as the bird flew downwards and near to them.

Grandma Buran did not wait to see; she immediately plunged and darted for cover, thinking it was a hawk that was coming for her.

“It’s only Eda the pigeon!” the turtle promised, amidst a peal of mocking laughter, and only then did Grandma Buran return to calm, mute in embarrassment.

“Greetings, Pa Iwiri!” Eda the pigeon greeted. “Is all well? I was in the neighbourhood, picking news items as usual, and I heard screams of ‘fire!’” He flapped his wings and hovered over the duo.

“Oh, all is well, Eda. But all will be better if only you will give us a bird’s eye view account of what happened in the race

between Tortoise and Hare years ago. Come, come.” He beckoned Eda with his feet. “I remember your father was one of the pigeons who aerially monitored the race on that day.”

“Ahan! I see! I knew I heard ‘fire’! That story was my father’s favourite while he yet lived, blessed be his feathery memory! An embarrassing day for Hare! A win for Tortoise! And yet, not many animals know the true story!” Eda cooed on and on.

“Tell us then,” Grandma Buran jumped in. “Tell us exactly what he told you.”

“My father, blessed be his feathery memory,” he resumed cooing again, “said, on that day, all the land, air and even some aquatic animals gathered at the venue to cheer their favourite—”

Grandma Buran was running low on patience, and she was not willing to refill, so she cut in. “Can you please fly to the part of the story where the fire-breeze started?” She wanted to get to the bottom of the story that suddenly seemed wider and deeper than River Mamu, and full tilt she wanted it.

“Yes! Yes!” Eda understood. “My father—blessed be his feathery memory—” he continued, “said the race began and he and the other pigeons aerially followed the racers with Hare initially sprinting far ahead of Tortoise. He said the sun was hot like never before and it had him scared that his wings would burn if he flew even an inch higher, so he flew at the height of the tallest tree in the nearby forest.

“But the next thing he heard from the nearby forest was the horrific, pained screams of the trees! He said he looked down at the forest and saw that it was a fire that was sweeping through the forest and squeezing the life out of the trees with its giant flames and fumes! My father, blessed be his feathery memory, said, next came the fierce breeze, the undertaker dressed in soot, as it carried the ashes of the dead and cremated

trees, and spread the dusty, dark particles abroad! And that was when it happened! Hare was down!”

“What do you mean he was down?” Iwiri asked with interest as hot as the scorching sun of the day of the race.

Eda proceeded to respond. “He said Hare seemed blinded by the dusty, dark particles in the fierce breeze from the forest fire and staggered dizzily! Yes! And that was when Tortoise brought out his head from his shell, and continued the race to the finish line, winning the race! What the animals saw, after they had recovered from the dirty fire-breeze, was Tortoise breasting the tape!”

“Ahan! Didn’t I tell you!?” Iwiri gloated, sprinkling the river water. “But Hare lied to the rest of the animals, saying, ‘Tortoise drugged me to win the race’; yen-yen-yen.” He mimicked gibberish and let out a loud, haunting laugh. “And that lie spread faster than wildfire, the actual cause of his loss. I hear the humans even say Hare deliberately slept off in the middle of the race. Alas, all lies! It was the dirty, dry breeze from the forest fire that caused what we mistook for Hare’s dizziness! Tortoise is innocent!” Iwiri announced, splashed the water and continued his laughter.

“Yes, Hare wasn’t sleepy from being drugged or otherwise, he was struggling to regain his sight that had been taken away by the dark particles from the forest fire,” Eda affirmed.

“Eh! Indeed! Tortoise is innocent THIS TIME!” Grandma Buran finally agreed but she did not want to dwell on that. “What must have caused that forest fire? Eda, you have lived amongst the humans, and you fly about picking and spreading news. So, you must know something, anything. What is the trouble with our homes?” she quickly switched topics.

“Oh! I see you didn’t receive my last newsletter, THE

PIGEONHOLE in these parts, or you did receive it but rather pigeonholed it.”

Iwiri abruptly stopped laughing and looked at Grandma Buran. Actually, the duo looked at each other, eyes filled with accusations.

They knew that Eda was right. They had received copies of THE PIGEONHOLE and pigeonholed them as Eda had just insinuated. They had never considered Eda’s newsletter to contain such important issues as the survival of their homes. They always thought the newsletter was about animal politics like equality amongst animals and, since they had long accepted that all animals are equal but some are more equal, they never took it seriously. They knew, all right, that the nightmarish oil that spilt from the pipelines into their waters and suffocated them to death, was from the humans, but that was it. They had thought nothing more of it.

“Anyway,” Eda shrugged and flapped, “in it, I wrote an article, Climate Chaos: Humans are Irresponsible! and explained the cause of what we are facing. It’s called climate change. The forest fires, the sea level rise, floods and heating—it’s all because of the humans; they are practically cooking the planet through the burning of oil, gas, bitumen and coal, as well as through their reckless habits of consumption. Humans have been living irresponsibly! They are responsible!” he cooed, frustrated.

Then he paused, caught his breath and began again, this time calmly.

“Normally, when the Sun’s energy reaches the Earth’s atmosphere, some of it is reflected back to space. The rest of it is absorbed and re-radiated by greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide, warming the atmosphere and the surface of the Earth only enough for it to

support life on Earth. But the disaster is in the overconcentration of these gases in the atmosphere due to human activities that increase them on Earth. Like gas flaring, burning and cutting down forests, livestock farming and so on”

“Phew!” Iwiri breathed heavily. “I always knew that the most foolish animal was wiser than the wisest of those humans. I just never thought they were foolish enough to cook the planet!” he declared.

Grandma Buran just remained transfixed, absorbing what she had just heard. She could not understand why, in the name of all that was good in River Mamu, someone would set fire to his own abode. Where would they go after the life on this planet had been reduced to ashes? And that was when she remembered that her Buran still had not returned from the human settlement, and her fears amplified, having heard that the humans were the cause of the sea level rise and the flood and heat of River Mamu. More than ever now, she wanted to find her grandson.

“Where is Buran?” she suddenly spoke, to no one in particular. Iwiri the old turtle said nothing.

It was Eda the pigeon who volunteered. “I saw him over there.” He gestured towards the human village. “I saw him darting about in the human settlement. It seemed he was looking for something,” he flapped.

And off she launched for the human village, with the two other animals going their separate ways.



6.
WHY THIS TORTOISE BROKE HIS BACK

– Onome Olive Etisioro

Anansi the Spider heard a lot of stories. But he was here to confirm this one.

And he usually did not crawl this close to the riverbank, being more interested in weaving his web around brick-walled monstrosities that the sons of men had built beyond the forest. He was usually too busy gathering up the stories of the people, weaving them into a tapestry of tales that he then buried into the fabric of the earth. That way, he was able to keep his finger right on the pulse of the Earth herself, and also on how the sons of men planned to make that pulse stop.

Already, he had watched them build their brick-walled monstrosities at the edges of the forest and plant their fortress by the riverbank. It was from there that he discovered the black blood that stained the waters and the billowing black smoke that tainted the air, day and night.

Anansi's gourd was full of stories flowing from the dreams and thoughts of the sons of men themselves. And it had not taken him long to find the pattern; to discover the truth in all these stories. The truth was that the sons of men were the culprits to blame for the famine sweeping through the animal kingdom, and leaving animals dying left and right.

That was why, even though he did not usually crawl this close to the riverbank, he was here all the same—following the trail of broken backs and plucked feathers that the birds had led him on. They had come to him, hobbling and weak, with the gruesome story on their tongues; and he was now here to confirm if it was true. It was a story of Ajapa the Tortoise falling from the sky and breaking his back; leaving a trail of broken birds in the wake of his descent.

And that was how he found Ajapa, lying broken in a nest of sharp shards of glass, metal and an offering of feathers—

alone in his misery but for the mournful moaning of Ajoke, his wife.

“You did something to offend the birds, didn’t you, Ajapa?” Ajoke cried, shaking her head at his broken state. “Now, look at you! You’ve fallen to your destruction!”

Anansi cocked his head, intrigued by this odd pairing so much that he crawled further down his web, and dangled in front of her eyes.

“Ah!” Ajoke yelped and scampered backwards, shocked at having an eight-eyed arachnid swinging in front of her face from out of nowhere. “Is that you, Anansi? What are you doing on this side of the coast? Are you here to see my husband, too?”

Anansi hummed on his web; his eyes fixed on Ajapa’s pathetic form. “Indeed, I am,” he answered. “Poor Ajapa must have taken quite a fall.”

Ajoke sniffled, withdrawing her head a little deeper into her shell. “I am sure it was all his fault.” she said, her tone sharp and accusing. “My husband likes to believe that he can trick everyone and also get away with it. I’m sure that he tried to trick the birds in Sky, and they got angry with him and dropped him.”

Now, Anansi was curious, and he asked, “Is that how you think Ajapa ended up in this debris with a broken shell?”

His question only seemed to release the dam of tears that Ajoke must have been holding back.

“The birds dropped him!” she cried, rolling around on the bank, glee shining in her eyes. “They dropped him here because he is so annoying, that they got tired of him.”

Well, she got one half of the story right. Indeed, the birds had dropped him, but it was not for the reason she thought. It was also true that they had gotten tired, but not of him, *per se*.

The famine in the land had become too severe in the past few weeks, so the King had sent the birds on a journey to scout for food in Sky. All the animals were aware of the fact that the birds had family up in Sky; family that fed them fat so that they did not feel the brunt of the famine like all the other land animals did.

But Anansi knew something that the other animals did not know, his wife included. What they did not know was that the King had sent Ajapa the Tortoise along with them as well. Everyone knew that Ajapa was the best orator in the Kingdom, and the birds certainly needed someone who had a way with words to convince the people of Sky to send some food to the land animals. Everyone also knew that Ajapa was a bit of a greedy trickster, always after his interest above everyone else's.

It seemed that even his wife understood that bit about him maybe a little too much. "Oh?" he prompted, eyeing the Tortoise's wife with curiosity. "Did you hear this directly from the birds themselves?"

Ajoke froze at once, her eyes shifting this way and that as she considered his question and found herself lacking. "N-no, I didn't." She finally snapped through her tears. "But the birds must have dropped him for a reason!"

Anansi sighed. "Indeed, they had a reason," he agreed in a pensive mood.

And all at once, her face crumbled at the confirmation of what she thought to be her worst fear. "Oh!" she cried, trying to pull herself completely into her shell. "He tried to trick them, didn't he? No one will come to help me stitch him back together ..."

Anansi regarded Ajoke tiredly. "Why not? It is not the reason you are thinking, Ajoke," he said, realizing that no matter how

dense Ajoke was, in tha moment, she was just going to have to know the truth.

“The birds did not drop him because of anything he did.”

Anansi was sure of that now.

Ajoke paused then, her face scrunched up into a look of uncertainty and the confusion that resulted from that uncertainty.

“How do you know?” she asked him then, looking down at Ajapa’s pathetic form, as he struggled to breathe.

Anansi looked down at the struggling tortoise as well, all of his eight eyes bright with pity. “I know far more than you,” he said, swinging those same pitying eyes on his wife. “Have you forgotten who I am?”

Ajoke backed up at once, lifting her hands in surrender. “I am not contesting your place as the holder of stories, Anansi,” she said quickly, her eyes flitting this way and that, as if looking for a way of escape from having put her foot in her mouth.

While everyone in the animal kingdom knew that Ajapa was a greedy trickster, no one could dispute the fact that Anansi was a cunning trickster in his own right as well—one who had subdued the great beasts and delivered them himself to the King in order to be named the holder of stories. If he had been cunning enough to capture the Tiger, and the Python, then a mere hysterical tortoise would not be a problem for him. Ajoke was not looking to become the spider’s next victim—she already had enough problems on her plate with her husband lying broken in front of her.

“Then,” said Anansi, his tone grave, “make sure you remember what I am about to tell you.”

She nodded enthusiastically; her enthusiasm born more out of a love for her life than anything else. She knew very

well that while the Spider might look tiny, he was deadly as an enemy.

"I will not forget it even if I forget my name!" she said, and Anansi smiled, amused.

"Ajapa was dropped by the birds, not because he did anything to offend them, but because the birds grew tired of carrying him," Anansi said, his tone quiet but just as grave.

Ajoke pulled up short, her face frozen in surprise. "They grew ... tired? Tired of carrying him?" she asked, her head tilted in bemusement.

Anansi nodded and picked a feather from amidst the nest of metal debris. "Look at this feather, Ajoke." He told her, stretching it out so that she could see it herself. "Look at it carefully. What do you see?"

Ajoke carefully took the feather, eyeing it like it was an alien object. "A feather ..." she muttered, nervously looking from Anansi to the feather and back again, still uncertain.

Anansi tried not to roll his eyes. "Well, obviously. Of course, it's a feather," he said. "What do you see on it? Does anything stand out to you?"

"She's half-blind," another voice volunteered from above them both, and they both swung their gazes up to find Akanbi, the sea Eagle hovering above them. "Her eyesight started to deteriorate terribly some weeks back."

"Ah." Anansi nodded with understanding following quickly on the heels of the bird's pronouncement. "That explains a lot of things."

The Eagle hovered for a while before landing on the riverbank beside Anansi and Ajoke, his feathers ruffling with his sudden landing.

"A-are you here to see my husband, too?" Ajoke asked him,

squinting up at the big bird's giant form. "Were you also part of the party that flew with my husband?"

Akanbi nodded slowly, his sharp eyes swivelling to look pityingly at the tortoise's broken body. "Yes, I was," he said, shaking out his feathers as he did so.

Ajoke did not wait for him to say anything else. She dropped the feather in favour of grabbing the Eagle by his feet. "What did he do to you that made you drop him?" she cried, her eyes wet with much more tears. "At least, tell me so I can know what to tell the King when he comes asking."

Akanbi the Eagle levelled his sharp gaze on her, and the tortoise's wife discreetly tried to duck her head further into her shell.

"I-I will apologize to you all, on his behalf," she was quick to add, but Akanbi quickly cut her off.

"Ajapa was not at fault," Akanbi announced, but his tone was anything but triumphant. In fact, when he said the words, he ducked his head, as if trying not to meet anyone's eyes. "Ajapa did nothing to offend us," he said again, and Ajoke paused, her confusion and uncertainty returning twofold.

"What?" She blinked, squinting harder as though she could not see anything in front of her anymore. "He ... didn't play any tricks on you? He didn't offend you?"

Akanbi shook his head again, but he said nothing else.

Now that Ajoke knew for sure that her husband was innocent, for once in his entire life, she became angry. "Then why did you drop my husband and injure him this severely? Why did you break his shell?"

Akanbi the Eagle looked like he wanted to curl deeper into himself as her angry questions seemed to pierce him like poison-tipped arrows. "It's our fault," he said.

But Anansi decided to step in then. "No," he said, and both

Akanbi and Ajoke turned to look at him, their expressions fluctuating between varying degrees of anger and guilt. "None of you is to blame for this."

Ajoke and Akanbi glanced at each other before they turned their stares on him at once.

"What do you mean?" they chorused at once, curiosity sharp in their tones.

Anansi picked up the feather again and raised it up so they could both see it. "Take a look at this feather. What do you see?"

"Ah! That is Ochuko the Sea Gull's feather," Akanbi said as he peered at it, sounding as though he had just solved a puzzle. Then his face fell. "She broke her wing, and won't be able to fly for a while."

Anansi nodded. "Injuries can heal," he spoke. "We must be thankful that she is still alive."

Akanbi the Eagle did not look very convinced, but he knew he could not dispute that. He knew it was a miracle that he was still alive, and had gotten away from the fall with all his limbs intact.

"I want to believe that, for Ajapa's sake," Ajoke said, the sorrow thick in her voice, thick enough to make the Eagle flinch, his eyes flitting away from her own, immediately landing on the feather Anansi still held up between them just so he could have something else to focus on.

But then, his eyes sharpened as he looked at the feather, and they widened. "Wait. What's that?" he asked, peering closer at the feather. "It looks like the same fluid that coats my feathers as well!"

Anansi blinked, staring back at the Eagle with renewed interest. "Do you see it now?" he asked, and Akanbi narrowed his eyes. "That black slime coating the feather?"

“Yes,” Akanbi nodded, his eyes taking on a curio shine. “I thought I was the only one that had it staining my feathers,” he said and spread one wing open so that they could both see the black fluid caked over his feathers.

At that prompting, Ajoke peered even closer at the feather in Anansi’s hand, then at Akanbi’s own feathers. “Yes ... yes, I can see it!” she cried. “Wait ... isn’t this the same slime that started spotting the river some weeks back?”

Anansi nodded his head. “Yes, it is the one and the same,” he said in agreement. Then, he asked, “Do you know what it is?”

Both Akanbi and Ajoke shook their heads, disgust showing plainly on their faces. “No,” they said. “There have been rumours that it is the retribution of the gods.”

That was the running story the King had spread throughout the kingdom, even though Anansi knew firsthand that the King had no idea what was going on, either. But that is why the King had sent him on this quest; if there was one thing that was certain, it was the fact that Anansi would know what was happening.

And Anansi certainly knew. He knew exactly what was causing this famine to sweep through the land, and he knew what caused the birds to fall from the sky, dropping Ajapa as they did.

“Well, you could say that,” he told them both now. “That’s if you can call the sons of men gods.”

Akanbi narrowed his eyes at once, already catching on to the sardonic note in the Spider’s tone. “The sons of men?” he asked, sparing but a glance at the tortoise’s wife who was listening in stone-cold silence.

Anansi nodded. “Haven’t you seen it, Akanbi?” he asked the bird. “The black blood bleeds into the water out of those

big fortresses.” He pointed towards the walled buildings beyond the river, where black smoke continued to billow into the skies, blotting out the sun. “Built by the sons of men.”

Akanbi nodded his head. “I have seen the fortresses’ giant veins ... but I did not know that was where the fluid came from,” he said, cocking his head with interest. “Does this mean ... that they are also the cause of the famine in the land?”

Anansi nodded his head. “The black blood doesn’t only flow into the water ... it also soaks into the Earth, and wherever it sinks, plants die.”

Ajoke gasped. “Does that not mean ...” she began, apprehension arresting her facial muscles until she looked like she would soon faint, “that whatever this black ... blood touches ... dies?”

Anansi looked at them both, pity in his eyes. “Yes. This black blood is apparently very toxic,” he said, looking out at the river. “It kills whatever it touches. And it is slowly killing you.”

Akanbi and Ajoke turned to regard him, their eyes bulging with apprehension.

“You?” Akanbi crowed. “Which one of us are you talking about?”

Anansi looked them right in the eyes and answered, “Both of you.”

Ajoke gasped, looking down at her husband. “I don’t know what you mean ...”

“But you do, Akanbi. Don’t you?” Anansi nodded at the Eagle. “Ever since that black fluid started to coat your feathers, you’ve felt it.”

The Eagle blinked, his expression blank for a few seconds before his eyes widened with alarm. “Yes!” he gasped. “When we started the journey coming back from Sky, we started feeling a bit strange ...”

Ajoke swivelled her head around to look at him. “Strange? How so?”

Akanbi cleared his throat. “Well, our feathers kept separating because the black fluid had caked over our feathers and wasn’t properly aligned. So, we couldn’t keep our body temperatures in check. We started to get cold halfway through the journey.”

“And you all still agreed to fly, carrying my husband along with you?” she snapped, her tone sharp with accusation.

Akanbi sighed. “We thought we would be able to make it back home, but we must have miscalculated the distance because the more we flew, the farther the distance seemed and the harder it was to bear the freezing temperature. We lost some of our comrades to the cold.”

Anansi closed his eyes in sympathy. “And the rest that made it this far?”

Akanbi lowered his head sadly. “They fell due to dehydration,” he replied. “And it still shocks me, because we were given water before we began our journey back. But ... on the journey back, many of them began to complain that they were thirsty. I thought we would be able to hold on until we landed, but ... I think it’s the fact that the journey took longer. They couldn’t hold out any longer and ... and that’s when they started falling. That’s when they dropped him.”

Anansi listened intently in silence, putting the puzzle pieces together as he let the Eagle’s story sink into his mind. “Ochuko told me...that she started to feel thirsty not long after she tried to preen her feathers before the flight back. She said it wasn’t the first time it was happening since she began to preen the black fluid from her feathers,” he said and opened his eyes to regard the Eagle. “Did you perhaps, preen your feathers as well?”

Akanbi did not even think too long. “No,” he said at once. “Everyone else took off before I did, and I didn’t want to be left behind. So, I took flight without preening.”

Anansi snapped his fingers. “Then the dehydration must have been caused by the birds ingesting the black fluid into their bodies. We know now that it is toxic to us.”

Akanbi heaved out a breath. “And ... and because it cakes over our feathers, it keeps us from being able to align them properly for a flight!” he said, with wide eyes. “That’s why we all felt so cold flying.”

So, the black fluid caused dehydration in the birds when ingested, and it also impaired their waterproofing and exposed their sensitive skins to the extreme temperature—the very problems they did not need whilst in flight.

Anansi turned to look at the tortoise’s wife. “Tell me, Ajoke. When did your eyes start to go bad?” he asked because he had suspicions that Ajoke’s and the birds’ conditions were closely linked.

“My eyesight?” she asked, and squinted in thought. “Hm, some weeks back, I think ... when the black fluid started to spill into the water! It started to go bad ever since I started to drink the fluid-spotted water!”

From the river, Anansi turned his gaze to the river beyond the bank; the same body of water speckled with the black blood. Knowing that one tidbit of information only served to prove his theory that most of the animal kingdom’s woes began after the river started to bleed black. The birds, and now, the tortoise’s wife, too; they were all victims of the black blood. The spill staining the water black was eating them all up, from the inside out.

“It seems that this black fluid is the cause of most of our problems,” he said, and the two other animals with him turned

their gazes bright with fear towards the water. "It has poisoned most of the land and the water, that we can't even be sure of what's safe and what isn't."

Ajoke swallowed. "So, the birds did not drop my husband because of anything he did," she said, and the Eagle and the Spider turned to look at her. "And they didn't do it of their own volition, either. They are victims, just as my husband is," she said with total resignation.

Anansi nodded sagely. "As we all are." he replied. "We all are victims of this black spill."

As it stood, it was safe to assume that every animal in the kingdom was a victim to this black blood that the sons of men bled into the land and water.

"Our nephew, the Turtle!" Ajoke exclaimed, suddenly remembering their water-bound relative. "Will he also be affected by this?"

Anansi gave her a look that sympathetically said — Certainly. Then he added, "He may as well be in a more deplorable state than you and your husband."

He may as well already be dead. But Anansi did not say that part out loud. Not yet. Not until all the animals were aware of what this black blood was doing to them all, little by little.

And he had wasted enough time just crawling across the walls; listening. Now, he must act, for to dally would be to sentence the natural world, as they all knew it, to death.

"What are you planning to do?" Akanbi asked him then, and Anansi looked from him down to the pitiful Ajapa, weak and broken and barely conscious in his bed of shards.

"You should be thinking about what you can do," he said, beginning his ascent up his web, and away from the three. "Stitch your husband back together again, and try to survive," he spoke to the Eagle and the tortoise's bewildered wife. "We

may cross paths again. Maybe by then, you can tell me what we can do.”

And, just like that, Anansi the Spider skittled away, confident in the confirmation of the story he had heard. It was true, after all. The sons of men, and the black blood, were determined to end the world as they knew it—all in their quest for wealth and power.

Ha. Not if Mother Earth had any say in the matter.



7.
ROASTED FISH
(IV of Troubled Waters)
– Dieworimene Koikoibo

He kept on swimming.

The magnetic fragrance of burning fish and the disturbing thought that that fish could be his friend, had kept him swimming against the tide.

“Ungulu!” He bubbled now and then in high-pitched desperation as he followed the aromatic smoke trail of a roasting fish, navigating the filth-filled flood in the human settlement.

He had never considered his best friend or any fish for that matter, to be one whose carcass would emit such a sweet-smelling aroma because what kind of fish would think that? And now that it crossed his mind, that that smell could be from the grilled body of his gluttonous and garrulous Ungulu, he shuddered as if suffering from a sudden cold—a cold that could only come from within. Yes! From within”because the water was still as unnaturally warm as he had observed it to be earlier when he was with his grandma and Iwiri the wily old turtle. His heart quivered at his own imagination of Ungulu’s body grilling; his watery life force turning into smoke and ascending to meet and squeeze out acidic tears from Father Sky’s eyes. He snapped out of it.

Maybe this smell is not Ungulu. Maybe this one is some other fish. Maybe Ungulu is next on queue for the grill. And if only ... if only I swam faster, I would reach there and save him from being burnt on the stakes like an unfortunate heretic; although he had not quite figured out how he was going to save his friend from being roasted by creatures who Iwiri had said loved barbecue as much as their lives. As for Iwiri, it takes a devil to know another devil, he thought. He wondered if this was the old turtle’s plan all along— to lure him into the burning bowels of the humans. At least now he was rid of him.

Ungulu must be found, dead or alive! he had resolved.

And if dead, he would look into the face of the death that may have killed his friend and spit on it with the fury of a fish. But his fins could not go any faster than they already were, and he cursed them for it—he cursed them as though it will be their fault if he met Ungulu dead. The smell of barbecue had grown more potent than ever and his fins paddled fast ... fast ... faster

...

“Ungulu!” he called again for the umpteenth time.

After a few more turns and almost knocking off his head on plastics, Buran was only a few metres from the execution ground. Then he floated, as he could now see the source of the aromatic smoke. He could see a boy superintending over a makeshift fireplace—a stove with a crown of gasping tongue of fire that was fuming with smoke. The boy, who stuck fish in sticks, was shirtless and perched on a table with legs drowned in the dirty, brownish water that covered the verandah of a once lively but now abandoned house. The stove was close by his side like a cherished family heirloom that he was afraid to lose to the flood.

Buran’s eyes followed the boy’s hands as the boy continued to turn the stuck fish over and over the gasping flame and thick smoke. He watched the smoke rise to escape the site in the same way it does when unable to stand the sight of even the most well- executed Lynch Law—the smoke rises to spread the news of the heinous crime—to give an eyewitness report and a trail to what the supremacist fire was doing to the undeserving victim. Besides, this one, if at all it qualified as lynching, was highly amateurish.

But all of that was something alien to Buran the fingerling. What Buran knew was that the sight could not compare to the scent that had led him to the place. And he was immediately sure that the scent would not be representative of the actual

taste of the fish, even though he had not and would never eat a barbecue—especially not this one, he thought...

“What are you doing?” he demanded of the boy, who looked searchingly before discovering Buran among the rubbish that floated everywhere on the water below him.

“What do you mean? Has the flood entered your fish eyes?” the boy asked, his eyes narrowing on Buran. Then he turned and resumed placing the fish over the stove to roast in the gasping flames and thick smokes.

Buran was glad and vexed at once by that. The boy could understand him and talk back, but he did not like the cynicism in the tone and the nonchalance with which the boy acted.

“Don’t talk to me like that!” Buran snapped back.

“I can see you are a rude fish.” The boy did not turn back.

“So rude you are going to burn me to a stake like you’re doing to my friend, I guess,” Buran said and the boy’s eyes went immediately to the sticked fish in his hand like he had been caught in the act of a grievous offence.

“What do you mean, burn you to a stake, like what I’m doing is some kind of punishment?” he said and laid the fish by the stove on the table as if that alone could justify any sin he may have committed. “Look, little fish, before you crucify me, I didn’t kill this fish—I found him dead and floating on the water—I think from the oil—I am starving and I have to eat—this is the food chain,” he rapped the words and concluded with a shrug.

“Right. Food chain. Just as it is food chain to spill the blood of greed into the waters and kill the fishes, is it also food chain to dump your waste materials into the water? Was it food chain when you used my fry sibling as bait to catch my parents? You, humans, are full of stupid excuses!” Buran spat with fury.

The boy lowered his tone as he said, “I am sorry about

your folks. Look, a lot of things are improper when looked at with a fish's eye, but proper when seen with human eyes. And, in so many cases, to do otherwise than what we do, is to choose death."

Buran was baffled and curious about what he meant by to do otherwise means to choose death. Would the humans die if they did not pump, sell and spill crude oil? Would they die if they stopped discarding their wastes into the waters? Would they die if they stopped their foolish fishing habits?

Noticing Buran's puzzled face, he quickly explained, "What I mean is that, the powers that be do not want a change. And our habits have become patterned by the decisions of those powers— we are forced to live this way. Again, food chain ..."

He paused and looked at Buran, eyes beckoning a confirmation that he was making sense but he did not get any from Buran, so he resumed. "Look at this flood, for example, look how it has evicted the villagers from their own houses even though we have contributed little to nothing to its occurrence ..."

For a moment, Buran seemed to have forgotten about the search for Ungulu and was now interested in the cause of the flood, his original mission. "How can you say you have contributed little to nothing? What about all these plastics that block water pathways, was it not your handiwork? Who forced you to do that?" Buran queried rhetorically.

"Is that what is causing the sea level rise too, and even the rise in the temperature? And, think—if there was no plastic, would there be plastic waste?" the boy shot back.

"Why don't you tell me, you seem to know?" Buran said, even though he got the drift.

If the boy knew, he had no knowing smile on his face that could tell. But he spoke. "The truth is that it is the corporations

aided by the government and vice versa. They are the ones roasting the globe. They have dipped and sauced the Earth in greed, stuck her like a fish with their laws and policies, and are turning her over and over ...” He picked up the stuck fish and began flipping its sides on the stove, then continued—“... And over their gas flares and carbon fumes. They are making one gigantic barbecue ... a barbecue meant for only a few big, insatiable stomachs of course. But we are the ones who suffer the burn most, aren’t we?” He paused and turned to look at Buran.

Buran did not answer. He kept staring at the boy’s hand as if the answer was in it but burnt beyond recognition.

The boy cackled and began again. “The entire Earth is burnt beyond recognition.” He followed Buran’s eyes to look at the stuck fish. “Just like this fish. Just look at you, who would have thought that a fish from down the river would be here, in front of my verandah, speaking to me about roasted fish? You see, that’s what the governments and corporations have caused; they have changed a lot of things including our life patterns and habits, from the biggest to the smallest bits, by destroying our old ways and giving us only a few choices. They have grabbed the soil in which our values were rooted, and converted it into mining fields. We are boxed in. To act the old way is to choose” He stopped, as if suddenly realizing that what he was saying hardly made any sense.

Buran seized the opportunity to make a pitch. “But even now, you’re dying. Why don’t you die trying the old way? If not for the animals, do it for you.”

Giving a seemingly resigned nod, the boy said, “Yes, fish. We’re all dying. Man and fish alike. Look at my village, water has overtaken it, and yours is taken by heat. We are all dying from the greedy guts of the globe-barbecue eaters.” The boy

did not speak with the emotion that could be expected of someone who was dissatisfied with the situation. His expression was rather bland—neutral.

He continued, blandly. “You see, a lot of us don’t even remember the old way. How can we then go back to it? It’s only a matter of time before I run out of air, and you pop up dead, belly up. It’s too late.”

But Buran was immediately reminded of the oil-smeared and dead fishes he and the old turtle had seen on their way—becoming at once aware that the sun had begun setting her bed on the Western skyline and before long would slump, cover its rays with the blanket of darkness and call it a day, he shivered. It was getting late and he had not even found Ungulu.

Maybe it was too late to save Ungulu. At least there was no magic that could bring back the fish that had been roasted beyond recognition, and indeed those oil-smeared and dead fishes. But he refused to believe that Mother Earth had reached her menopause and could no longer bring forth healing.

Shrugging off his thoughts, he shook his head. “No, human. Something can still be done,” Buran said as he began swimming away, returning home to River Mamu. “I will go back to my people, and we will build back better the old way.”

For the boy, Earth was not only a crime scene, she was the victim of ages of undeserved lynching, all right, but whether she needs saving was another thing entirely. He kept on minding his smoky business.



8.
THE FISH DELEGATE

– Dieworimene Koikoibo

He was winded, but he kept on swimming.

It was not that Kala-indi was not scared of the dangers that he knew awaited him in the outer waters away from his home; he was. But whenever he remembered what his late grandpa, Okosu-indi, used to tell him when he was a smaller fish, his fears subsided.

Okosu-indi had always told the fingerling, each time they went for a swim, that there were fishes and there were sacred fishes, whose livers (as enjoyable as they were by fish-eaters) proved poisonous to fish-eaters; that if a sacred fish was caught and eaten, the fish-eater too would not live to tell the story. Grandpa Okosu-indi had fondly referred to Kala-indi as a sacred fish.

But again, that was before the humans waged the war. That was long ago when human beings were sane enough to hold such sacred beliefs. Now? He did not have only sharks and other fish-eaters to worry about, there were the explosions, the trawlers of the industrial fishers, the contaminated and poisonous water; and the chunks of plastic from King Polluter and his subjects. Kala-indi was not even sure that sacred fishes were anything but legends. His earnest prayer was that he would not die before he delivered the message of the fishes.

And he kept on swimming, determined on his mission to bring help to the fish kingdom.

Halfway to the waterfront of where he had been told was King Polluter's river town, something sharply seized his skin! Next, he heard the penetrating voice of a little girl.

"Hey, Mama!" the fisher-girl called out to harbour as she pulled the hooked Kala-indi into her canoe. "I caught a fish!" she announced her feat.

I escaped everything; the sharks and other fish-eaters; the explosions that went off; the trawlers of the industrial fishers;

the contaminated and poisonous water; the chunks of plastic; but got caught by a tiny hook from a little girl? How come I didn't see the hook, line, and sinker? I have failed the fish kingdom, Kala-indi thought, frustrated.

"Big one?" said a deeper voice that Kala-indi believed to have belonged to the girl's mother.

"Well, a tiny, little one," she responded, now disappointed with herself for previously celebrating her catch.

Tiny, little one? Was he hearing the right things, or had exhaustion from his long journey impaired his hearing ability? What kind of human being in King Polluter's troubled waters still thought any fish was 'a tiny, little one'? What he heard got him so absorbed that, for that moment, he was numb to the excruciating pain inflicted by the fishhook.

"Just put it back, dear," the motherly voice pleaded. "There are bigger ones out there. You just have to be patient. Now come on to harbour, we'll try again tomorrow."

Now Kala-indi was sure the fault was in his sensory system probably caused by the pain inflicted by the hook.

"But this is my first catch. I want to keep it."

The silence that echoed from the mother's end forced Kala-indi to say a short, silent prayer. He prayed for the mother to agree so that he could get to the town and indeed to the palace of King Polluter and relay the message of the fishes. He prayed not to be eaten before he had a chance to accomplish his mission. More so, he wanted to meet the rest of this strange family, Anibra-pa.

Soon the moment of decision came. "Okay. Okay. You can keep it. Besides, if the fish had not opened its mouth, it wouldn't have been caught. Now come on, it's getting dark."

Yes! That's it! Yes! Kala-indi jumped up and down in the canoe—got the little girl thinking his display was from a place

of agony— only he felt the pain now—as she brought him to calm and freed him gently from the hold of the hook and line. Then, she placed him in the bowl that was on the floor of the canoe and began pulling the canoe back to the waterfront.

Long, long before Kala-indi was born, the fish kingdom and the human kingdom had lived harmoniously as neighbours under a mutual arrangement that entailed respect and fair exchange. The humans ensured that the waters were clean and healthy for the fishes to live in, and the prize for that was the fattest and healthiest fishes for the humans who fished the waters.

But the tides had taken a turn when the kingship of the human kingdom was passed down to King Polluter who created a new norm upon his ascension to the throne. By the norm, it was now okay for humans to dump hazardous wastes and plastics in the waters, and to catch small fishes. Of course, it was a bad turn of tides for the fishes.

The human kingdom began dealing with the waters disrespectfully and with reckless disregard for their neighbours, the fish kingdom, violating the peace that had lasted for years between the two kingdoms. The fisherfolks became indiscriminate about the size of fishes their nets and hooks caught. They no longer went after big, fat fishes alone as they used to, but went after small fishes, too. In fact, they began using explosives and trawlers for killing all sizes of fishes. Humans also discharged all sorts of substances and chemicals, plastic, and oil into the waters—ponds, canals, creeks, rivers, lakes and oceans.

It was war. A war fought by only one side but with casualties on two sides. The fishes, on one hand, were either caught in the small nets or explosives or trawlers of the fishers, gorged to death by drinking from contaminated and poisonous water, or died from swallowing chunks of plastic from King Polluter's new norm. The humans, on the other hand, died from eating the dead and poisoned fishes or at least starved from the scarcity of fishes in the waters because the few surviving fishes had hidden away from King Polluter's new norm. Who would not hide?

At the time, only a few fishes saw old age. Okosu-indi was one of them. The grandchildren of Okosu-indi always wondered what secret was behind his uncommon age, but Okosu-indi had refused to answer their wonder. He was not known for making bubbles; no one had seen him make bubbles since the humans began the war. The small fishes soon became frustrated by Okosu-indi's muteness. Many a time, they gathered at the underwater town-square to make bubbles about the hardship that the new norm of the human kingdom wrought on them. There, they questioned themselves on why fishes like Okosu-indi had refused to do or say anything about the attacks on the kingdom.

Usually, one of the fishes would ask, 'What may have provoked this war? They no longer respect even our most sacred grounds. The places where the fishnets and fishhooks are not wide or long enough to reach, the contamination has reached; the plastics have sunk deep to reach and cut our throats, and the oil has flowed into and blocked our gills.' Another would say, 'That man even fishes at all, is the curse of Woyin upon us.' And another would ask, 'But, what about the explosives, the plastics, and the oil? Do you forget the days when it wasn't like this; when we—the humans and us—lived

in peace? Or has Woyin's curse been amended?' It was during these gatherings that many of the fishes were caught in the fishnets or explosives or trawlers of the industrial fishers— so much that the number that attended each subsequent meeting kept reducing because, many were dead; many more had fallen sick from the plastic-infested and oil-polluted water, while the others had become too afraid.

One day, the fishes had gathered again, and right in the middle of one of those discussions, Kala-indi, the first grandchild of Okosu-indi, came up with an idea. 'Let us have a talk with King Polluter and his subjects. Let us try to tell them how senseless and unnecessary these unprovoked acts of war are,' he had suggested. The fishes had lauded Kala-indi's idea but feared it. Firstly, because they believed King Polluter, a human who was as egoistic as they come, was not going to sit down to listen to a fish delegate tell him what was unnecessary and senseless. Secondly, because they believed that the delegate was sure to not return alive. For days, they went on debating these two fears, but especially the second one. Who would go on behalf of the fish kingdom? What guarantee was there, that the delegate would reach King Polluter and relay the message before he was either caught in the small nets or explosives or trawlers of the fishers, or gorged to death by drinking from the contaminated and poisonous water, or died from swallowing chunks of plastic from King Polluter and his subjects?

The number of small fishes had continued to dwindle as the days went by. So, fed up, Kala-indi had volunteered to carry the message of the fishes to King Polluter and his subjects; knowing that he had really slim chances of surviving the small nets that would be thrown at him; the explosions that would go off on his way; and all the dangers they feared. He knew

he had chances way slimmer than the tiniest of creeks he would have to cross on his journey to the human kingdom. It was a great task. But he had agreed to undertake it.

When the day appointed for Kala-indi to set out on his mission arrived, a great number of the fishes had defied the odds to gather at Okosu-indi's place, to witness Okosu-indi give his blessings to Kala-indi for the journey ahead. This was the custom when a fish was to undertake a great task or had achieved a milestone lap in swimming.

Okosu-indi had waited for all the fishes to settle around him in his bed. Then, he cleared his throat, opened his mouth, and made to speak, releasing the first-ever bubbles most fishes present had not seen him make since the war began. The bubbles were so great that they all marvelled. But suddenly, a fishnet descended into Okosu-indi's place where they were gathered, and covered them! Many fishes, even Okosu-indi and his secret were caught up in the net. But Kala-indi was one of those who survived the attack, having swiftly finned his way out of the scene.

The news of Okosu-indi's death had spread throughout the underwater kingdom and so many rumours erupted. The one that was widely believed among the fishes was that Okosu-indi had ascended to live with the humans for his exceptional wisdom in surviving the war waged by the humans against the fishes—even though this did not make any sense or sound logical. Okosu-indi's secret to surviving early death during the war had remained elusive within the kingdom. They had never believed that a day like that would come when he, too, would be caught like the others before him. He was never a fish that made so many bubbles, and none since the war began.

Heartbroken at the death of his guardian, Kala-indi swore never to drop out on the mission. He was ever more determined

to reach King Polluter and relay the message to him and had, against all odds, finned his way out of his home, through the creeks, canals, rivers and oceans, unafraid of the sharks and other fish-eaters.

“Please add water.” The voice was loud and clear.

“Huh?” the girl looked over her shoulder, to see who was coming behind her.

No one.

“It’s ... it’s me, the fish ... the fish you have in your bowl. I am suffocating, please ... please add water ...” he said faintly.

She stopped paddling and carefully moved close to the bowl, where she found Kala-indi gasping for breath.

“Did you just speak?” She was not expecting what followed.

“Oh yes, kind little human,” Kala-indi said between breaths. “Please ... add ... add water to ... to the bowl ... I am suffocating.”

Ebiyara’s eyes popped. Was she in one of those tales by moonlight, that had animals that talked and acted like humans? She felt she was imagining things, but that did not stop her from quickly scooping the river water with her hands into the fishbowl that sat comfortably in the middle of her small canoe.

“Thank you. Thank you!” Kala-indi, refreshed, bubbled and moved his fins and tail, splashing water on the girl’s face—having her lit up and giggling uncontrollably.

“By the way, I am Kala-indi. Can I meet you?”

“My name is Ebiyara—Princess Ebiyara.” Still giggling, she skipped the canoe seats, returning to the stern. She sat down

and began paddling again, still giggling. She was glad she was not imagining things.

A princess? Could she be King Polluter's daughter? The question had him caught between apprehension and confusion. Best case scenario was that she was King Polluter's daughter and would easily get me into the palace to deliver the message of the fishes and bring an end to the war. Worst-case scenario, I would be chopped, cooked, and eaten and it would bring this journey to a fruitless end, he thought. But Ebiyara does not look like someone who would let that happen to me. If she is a princess as she claims, she would be a kind one, he thought again.

These thoughts had Kala-indi preoccupied and silent for the rest of the travel to the waterfront, and throughout the walk down to Ebiyara's home. A talking fish, he was sure, would jolt the mother and attract attention to him. He did not want that, at least not until he was sure who they really were.

On the way, he could not stop pondering about what the mother of the girl had insinuated earlier. 'The fish was caught because it opened its mouth,' she had said. And before long, he thought he had discovered Okosu-indi's secret to surviving the war all that while.

Muteness! Okosu-indi remained uncaught because of his muteness even in the face of the unjust war against the fishes. What an old con! And the other fishes had been caught because they frequently made bubbles, fruitless bubbles. But wait. Another thought came to him. If the fish was caught because it opened its mouth, what about the water snail; why and how did it make it to the cooking pots? It did not make sense now. These humans will always find justifications for their faults. Kala-indi kept busy with his thoughts.

“Are you the daughter of King Polluter?” he asked, alone again with Ebiyara inside the kitchen of the royal house—as she laid the fishbowl, with him in it, on the floor of the kitchen. It was evening already.

“What? Who is King Polluter?” she squatted beside the bowl. “His Royal Majesty, King Polluter, Lord over Beasts and Plants alike, Exploiter and Destroyer of the Water, Air and Land of the Earth (GCHFVN), isn’t that your father?”

“What? No! That’s not anything close to who my father is. My father is an actual king, a good one.” Ebiyara laughed. “And what’s the meaning of GCHFVN, anyways?”

“Grand Commander of the Human Forces at War with Nature?” Kala-indi said, more confused than ever.

“Whoa! Kala-indi, that’s hilarious!” She giggled. “But ...” she continued, “... by all means, tell me about this ... war.”

Is she kidding me? What a hypocrite, he thought.

He went on to tell her, anyway. He told her how the human kingdom was dealing with the waters disrespectfully and with reckless disregard for the fish kingdom in violation of the peace that had lasted for centuries between the two kingdoms; how the fisherfolks were now indiscriminate about the sizes of fish their nets and hooks caught—that they no longer went after big, fat fishes alone as they used to, but went after small fishes also; and how they were using explosives and trawlers for fishing. Then he told her how the humans had also taken to discharging all sorts of substances and chemicals into the waters—ponds, canals, creeks, rivers, lakes and oceans.

“You no longer respect even our most sacred grounds. The places where your nets and hooks are not wide and long

enough to reach, the contamination has reached; the plastic has sunk deep to reach and cut our throats, and the oil has flowed into and blocked our gills. We now swim in fear and pollution instead of water.” He paused.

“My beloved grandpa, a jelly good fish, is one of the latest casualties of this stupid war you have waged, unprovoked, against the fishes. I have come to talk some sense into you and your king. This war is senseless!”

“This is really sad to hear.” Her countenance had become dull, she was no longer the giggling girl on the river; she was now a teary little princess.

“Oh, trust me, sad doesn’t begin to describe the fate of our lives and home. We are not even fighting. Don’t you see, don’t you see how the water levels at sea are rising? What do you think causes that and the floods? It is as a result of the many tears we have cried and the blood we have bled in this senseless war.”

“I don’t know if the sea level rise is as a result of your tears and blood, but that is immaterial. So, out of all the fishes in the water, they sent ... you?”

“Have you been listening to me? The fishes are dying, sick, or too afraid. When did the size of a fish begin to matter in this war, anyway?”

She was silent and lowered herself to sit on the floor. “So, will you please take me to King Polluter or not?”

“Kala-indi ... erm ... erm ... I think you have got something wrong here ... I don’t think King Polluter is a person. I mean, yes, but not a particular person. King Polluter is mankind. Mankind or at least the greater section of it, especially the corporations, is King Polluter.”

“What?” Kala-indi blurted his confusion.

“Yes. And yes, the war you speak of is indeed waged by mankind’s senseless greed.”

“So, you mean every human being is King Polluter? Even you and your family?” Kala-indi asked in bewilderment.

“Well,” she hesitated. “Some of us, like my family and this village, have learnt the consequences of the new norm, from the experiences of our neighbours; we have heard how the waters have been rendered undrinkable, how people have been poisoned to death from eating the poisoned fishes, and how the floods have covered whole villages. So, we have refused to give in to the greed. In fact, my father, the king of this village, is working so hard to preserve our environment. We still preserve our sacred fishing practices.”

“But you didn’t drop me back when your mother asked you to.”

“I am sorry. I ... I ... it is my first time catching a fish. It wasn’t so that I can eat you. I wanted to show father that I could fish. I am truly sorry.”

“It’s okay, Ebiyara. If all you have been saying is true, I am thankful it was you who caught me and not any of King Polluter’s ... I mean, not any other human. I can trust you. You have to help me stop this war so that my kingdom will experience peace again.”

“Oh yes, you can trust me, I will help you. I will help you talk to my parents, the king and queen, and we will do something to help, something more than all we have been able to do.”

“Thank you, Princess Ebiyara,” Kala-indi said feeling a little chirpy.

Ebiyara did not wait for morning to come before telling her parents about Kala-indi and his mission. The king and queen immediately asked to see him and when they did, they

had Kala-indi narrate again all that was going on in the fish kingdom. The royal family then promised to do everything within their powers to ensure that peace was restored to Kala-indi's home.

Before the royal family left him for bed, Kala-indi requested to say one final thing and when he was permitted, he asked: "If the fish was caught because it opened its mouth, what about the water- snail; why and how did it make it to the cooking pots?"

But Ebiyara and her family simply stood there unable to say anything, their eyes drooping as they looked down on Kala-indi, who swirled in the bowl of water. They did not stop wondering what kind of fish brain Kala-indi had in his head.

How the water-snail made it to the cooking pots even with its mouth closed remained a mystery to Kala-indi.



9.
THE AIR OUTSIDE
(The End)

– Dieworimene Koikoibo

“Are we going to Mars, too?” Aka the young flower, somberly asked his older sister, Supru.

It was early in the morning in my garden—an organic bouquet of endangered plants. Only a few of us—humans—had one now, to preserve what was left. It was 6 am. I had just finished watering the cute little thing, Aka—the first and last plant I fed water each time. Aka was the observant type and must have eavesdropped on me while I was watching the “MARSODUS” show the previous evening—when those crazy presenters had, again, talked excitedly about the planned move to Mars, shamelessly flexing the countdown clock on the screen. The clock was counting down to the mass movement of the people of Earth, to Mars, and it was only about 400 hours away now. ‘Everything is already built; everything is set,’ the retards had gone on saying.

He could not wait for me to be completely out of the garden before starting the conversation with Supru. The question caught Supru unexpectedly. I noiselessly lowered the watercan to the ground, and squatted at the doorpost, carefully staying off the sight of the plants; I wanted to hear the end of this conversation without their knowing that I was listening in.

“I, I, I, nor know oh, Aka,” Supru stuttered, shrugging. She sounded sincere. Though she had probably wondered about it herself before, she barely knew what was going on. What was really the plan? What will become of Earth? She didn’t know.

“I nor know oh, Aka,” Supru said again, touching Aka’s leaves, and allowing him to touch hers in a slight movement.

“Anyhow, if I were you, I nor go dey bother about their leaving,” she lied.

“But, Supru, everything is set, everything is there, what is

left is for the humans to move, right? What about us, the plants of the Earth?”

“Look, Aka, human beings na crazy people. Dem nor dey think things through first.”

“I know. It’s so annoying. Well, will you go?”

“Omo, I nor sure oh,” she answered. “I’m not going to trust the retards that destroyed Earth to not make a mess of Mars sooner or later. We die here.”

That touched and unsettled my legs, and my right knee knocked down the water can, spilling what was left of the water.

I felt the garden’s eyes on me now. My organic bouquet was probably wondering whether I had been there all the while and probably disgusted by it. I stood upright, put my hands in the pockets of my jeans, and stared away through the greenhouse gas shield of my avenue, into the hazy and acidic streets.

Every house had had one of these protective shields fixed after the Great Breakdown of Earth’s Climate—G-BEC, back in the year 2050—when the planet turned into a literal abyss against itself and its inhabitants—the thing that took my family—sister, mother and father—away to the land of the Dead.

“Actually, some of us saw it coming. Some of us had warned the rest of us about the possibility of these times, but we refused to listen. We continued to put oil pipelines above people and nature; we continued to measure wealth by the size of our greed. We maintained the trajectory of reckless greed. Now, one needed a G-BEC safety suit (GSS), which had breathable oxygen, electromagnetic shielding, particle radiation shielding and many other shieldings, to walk the Earth beyond the shield that covered their house; if not, the atoms of his body would

disintegrate into nothingness as quickly as the blink of a sleep-deprived eye, just as it happened to my family.

“Don’t worry, Aka,” I broke in, in an attempt to save face as memories of all the times I had patronized big polluters and felt good about it, flashed before my now teary eyes. All the plastics I had recklessly thrown away. I knew I was complicit in the G-BEC.

But I could not say sorry. Sorry would not recover the clean air, fountains, rivers, rain forests, birds, fishes, mama coco and everything else we gave up for G-BEC.

Everything withered that came into contact with the air outside. The few things we enjoyed, like oxygen and water, were all now artificial. I do not know how those evil scientists did it—keeping us breathing within our house-shields, G-BEC suits, and cars—but they did it, and made us pay for it. No thanks.

“M—m-maybe w—w-when—” I stammered. “Maybe when the retards leave us; we’ll finally c-c-clean our home. We go dey alright, you hear?” I did not wait for a response. I just picked up the water-can and made for inside.

“Okay-oh. I hear,” Aka said dryly, and I felt his voice shatter on the floor of my mind, and its unending echo caused tears to burst from my eyes. I cried the way I had done the day I lost my family to G-BEC, the day I had helplessly watched the masses of their bodies disintegrate into particles of nothing.

I did not want to stay in the house anymore, or at least not at that moment. I wanted to escape the shield of my avenue—the guilt that now seemed immune to the protective shield and had become trapped in my house was slowly suffocating

me. I was in dire need of some fresh air to clear my mind—although, after G-BEC, getting fresh air had become no more than an expression.

I got into my GSS, unlocked my house-shield, slipped out of it and quickly shut it behind me. But once I was on the other side of my shield, out in the open, I realized I did not have anywhere in mind to go to.

Yet I found myself raising my feet in a slow forward march, progressing into the dense-aired space outside, to nowhere in particular.

The air outside was thick. The scientists had said it was filled with immeasurable amounts of carbon dioxide, methane, chlorofluorocarbons, and others they were yet to identify. They made the air thick and poisonous. Sometimes, the air was so thick that it blocked my way if I did not shove it aside —nor could I move forward, if I did not pull to my sides and behind me—like this, with my gloved hands, as if swimming in the river. I was not in a river but I was walking, or swimming, on the street.

As I pulled and shoved forward, the conversation in the garden still occupied my mind. It had brought back forgotten pictures to my mind. Pictures of Earth as it then was. Pictures that were in sharp contrast with what I was seeing before me through the screen of my Gas Mask. The chirping of birds, the tenderness of the afternoon breeze on your skin as it passes by you. The sight of a rainbow, and many more were all now only imaginable.

The sun was not visible outside as nobody had been able to see the sky since the occurrence of G-BEC, having been covered by a smokescreen of the poisonous gases floating, floating in the air. Beams of light only managed to penetrate the thick air, and served as lamp to my feet.

I soon pulled and shoved my way to the front of a house on the street, where my eyes caught a little girl standing there inside the house shield. She had her face pressed against the shield's screen, with eyes evidently longing for the outside.

I stopped to stare; then I waved —and the girl, the corners of her tiny lips receding towards her ears but stopping halfway at the cheeks in a smile, waved back at me.

"You did this," she said, with a relaxed but dense voice that I thought was an effect of the shields. Her tone suggested that she knew I was not going to debate it. I was not going to debate it.

"You did all of this." This time she said it with emphasis on the 'all'. Again, I agreed in my soul, body and spirit that I shared responsibility in the occurrence of G-BEC, however little, although I knew that when she said 'you', what she meant was my kind— mankind.

Embarrassed and guilt-filled by the realization that her generation may never get to enjoy what my generation had all because of our greed, I shyly dropped my hand. But my gaze stayed on her as she continued to smile guiltlessly.

"She longs to come outside and play and leap and run on the streets, to feel me the way kids her age used to do in the years before Breakdown," she continued, her voice growing denser and croakier with each word while her smile remained. It was then I realized that it was not the little girl who spoke— her mouth was not moving at all. It was Air! Air was in the atmosphere, but so mixed with the thick gases that I could barely recognize her. Air was speaking to me, blaming me.

"She wants to know what it feels like. She's tired of only reading about it in your virtual tabloids. But she can't, and it's all your fault." She stopped and coughed, attempting to clear her gas-filled throat.

Then I seized the moment. “But you know who has played a greater role in all of this—the governments and corporations. They are currently planning to go to Mars, to live there. You know them, and you know what they will do to Mars. Why don’t you breeze into their shields and deal with them the way they have dealt with you?”

“You know I don’t—”

“—you don’t pay evil with evil. Right,” I cut her short. “Maybe that’s what got us here in the first place. The really bad guys keep getting away with it!” I snapped.

“You know I don’t operate in that manner,” she completed her sentence, completely ignoring my outburst, establishing that I should have been patient enough for her to complete it the first time.

“When will you understand that this place and time is for making choices? The time and place for judgment will come. The breeze will blow when it will.”

“A time for choices, and a time for judgment. Okay. So, we wait here while they get into their spaceships heading for Mars?”

“Enough of your questions!” the Air outside stirred as she snapped, clearly fed up. “Your work is cut out for you. Continue to water your garden. The day will come when every man will be judged according to his works. The day will come when the flowers will no longer need the shields to bloom; when I will no longer be feared and avoided by the children. A day is coming when the sun will be revealed.”

I wanted to ask about my family, to know whether a day will come when I would see them again but I knew better than to press on and upset her the more.

I simply smiled at the little girl whose smile had not flickered even once, and waved bye-bye, then turned to go

home. As I pulled and shoved my way back to my avenue, back to tell Aka and Supru my experience with Air, I resolved to continue watering my garden till the day every man will be judged according to his works and the flowers will again bloom outside the shields, and the day the children will no longer be afraid of the air outside.

The gases of thoughts that had fogged my mind back in my garden had greatly reduced. It was something close to a breath of fresh air.

PART B

Learning from the Wise

Tales by Sunlight

When you tamper with the land like that—digging and drilling, you tamper with our being-ness and minds, and it affects the way we relate with each other—we become shadows of ourselves. This is because everything is connected, and the law of Nature is that of sowing and reaping.

—Comrade “Che” Cheta Ibama Ibegwura.

It was Thursday, 24 February 2022, and oil production, gas flaring and oil spills had remained, snugged down in the Niger Delta. On that day, a fully boarded sixteen-seater bus set out from Port Harcourt, heading to the Erema Community of Egi Clan in ONELGA (Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area), Rivers State, Nigeria. The purpose was to spend quality time learning with Comrade “Che” Cheta Ibama Ibegwura. It was going to be an interesting episode of the Health of Mother Earth Foundation’s Learning from the Wise. The passengers were about to scoop from the fountain of Comrade Che’s knowledge and experiences in the national and environmental struggle. They would later on share that knowledge with friends and network on Twitter and other social media platforms—to rejuvenate the youthful, revolutionary spirit of the present generation of Nigerians.

“Did you carry the microphones?”

“Are your phones charged?”

Last minute checks were made as the bus began to move. The journey through the East-West Road greeted the travellers with rather drab sights of lakes bleeding with crude oil, bushes fuming with thick smokes, and atmosphere clearly impure with soot. The scenery would change upon arrival in Comrade Che’s home—a paradise in many senses.

It was about 10 am when the eager learners arrived. They were first welcomed by sights of various economic and fruit trees— cherry, mango, orange, oil palm and others—all standing in the vast compound—their lushly leaves shading the compound from the full blast of Erema’s scorching sun.

The sandy ground in the compound was speckled with yellowish, fallen leaves of the trees. The compound was neatly swept with minuscule mountains of debris, formed from gatherings of mostly dry leaves, here and there in the corners of the compound. The many green leaves that still held on to the branches, wafted soft breeze, fanning the peace that wrapped its arms around the compound.

Yet this paradise had also not been spared from the obnoxious clutch of the oil industry. Despite the leaves shading Comrade Che’s compound, it was hot as hell! Heat from the many flare stacks that besieged Erema and its environs seeped in uninvited to the venue, amplifying the sun’s heat, and almost scorching the visitors’ skin.

But the more the heat singed their black skins, the more stoked their burning thirst for the fountain of knowledge became. They had come for learning, and were not about to let even the gates of hell stop them. Immediately, they set their mats under a section of the canopy-like fruit trees and prepared the setting for the event while waiting for the ‘Last Militant’,

Comrade Che to step out from his rusty-roof, humble-looking bungalow, to welcome his visitors.

It took a while, but the 90-year-old Comrade Che finally came out, moving delicately; supported and guided by some members of the learning party. He was led to his seat right in front of the banner that carried the words, Learning from the Wise and bearing HOMEf's logo. A certain solemnity, on the part of the keen learners, greeted the old Comrade's entrance. Having taken his seat and noticed soft buzzes, like the stern yet forbearing old school teacher, he shushed the excited participants, drawing their attention.

The prepared learners seated on mats in clusters of threes and fours, with their writing materials in hand, had all their attention on Comrade Che; ready to drink from the fountain that was most willing to pour out. Even the trees appeared to have become still, ears pressed against the gathering.

The Executive Director of HOMEf, Nnimmo Bassey, the leader of the learning party, then introduced Comrade Che as his 90-year-old mentor who was "still more radical than people who are in their 20s." He said Comrade Che was another living ancestor like himself, considering that they both have lived for over 60 years, in a region where the average life expectancy was 40 years or thereabouts.

Indeed, it was true. Comrade Che may have aged, but his spirit was unwrinkled; it was still that of a young revolutionary. This could be spotted in the vehemence with which he spoke and in his ability to recall with fascinating specificity, dates and events that went as far back as the 1960s.

A bio of Comrade "Che" Cheta Ibama Ibegwura would best reveal his magnificent personality.

Comrade Che was born on 16th November 1932 in Erema.

He is the only child of his parents, Apostle Robert Ochaa Ibegwura and Mrs Mayina Adakosa Ibegwura. He attended a school run by the Seventh Day Native Church (SDNC) where he completed Standard Five. While in the missionary school, he was nicknamed "Saraswati or Wati for short" after the Hindu Goddess of Knowledge and Arts, for his outstanding brilliance. He later left for Government School Ahoada where he acquired his school-leaving certificate. As a young man, Comrade Che had the dream of becoming a lawyer, but could not fulfil his dream because of a lack of sponsors.

He engaged in hunting, farming, fishing and wrestling before Paul Kill, an American timber trader, employed him as a clerk. After Paul Kill's company winded up, Comrade Che moved to Port Harcourt in search of greener pastures. It was in the city of Port Harcourt that Comrade Che's class-consciousness was awoken. The awakening resulted from his routine witnessing of police extortion from petty criminals, harlots, drunkards and the unemployed, who had been arrested on trumped-up charges. Thereafter, he became a Marxist and a dye-in-the-wool trade unionist, enraptured by revolutionary ideas on transforming the Nigerian social situation. He went on to walk the radical paths, with the likes of Ken Saro Wiwa, Dr Obi Wali, Dr Mofia Akobo, Tunji Otegbeye, Paul Lartey, etc, as his co-travellers. He was subjected to incessant harassment and surveillance by security operatives. During the Nigerian Civil War, he was caught in the middle of the two sides of the war, and tossed into detention by both sides on false allegations of espionage.

Comrade Che chose the life of an activist to call for the basic rights of workers and his community; was present in the struggle for Nigeria's independence, good governance and

justice, all the while suffering the pain and discomfort that came with the struggle. He was no opportunist. He is the Last Militant.

The Last Militant began the learning session by decrying the appalling state of Nigeria's education system, noting that during his days, schools were scarce and achieving Standard Six was no child's play. He did not mince words as he juxtaposed the quality of education obtained back in the days with what is available at the present time. He tied the weak aptitude of nowadays students to the lack of freedom.

One could write cross-border letters, and stand on any podium, with that basic qualification. But nowadays, so-called graduates can hardly communicate clearly and properly, because we are no longer free. When you are not free, your mind is also not free; you think within the box. Knowledge can be acquired, but not common sense. Today's education does not teach us how to think; they teach us how to become workers. They turn you into industrial slaves.

His eyes carefully searched the faces of his pupils, who sat facing him with their attention glued to their teacher.

Recollecting his thoughts and dishing them out, old Che continued:

*Poverty is depressed thinking. It is of the mind
and a byproduct of possessive individualism.
Equity and justice are what make people happy.
Take from each according to his ability, and give
to each according to his need. That is a basic law
of Nature. What is corruption but abuse of justice?
Power is not corrupt. Corrupt people corrupt power.
It is organized power; the origin of modern*

*governments, that corrupts and corrupts
absolutely.*

The sagacious Comrade picked up another carriage in his train of thoughts and then asserted that the history of all struggles involved land and resources. "The capitalist will pay any price including taking your life, to grab your land," he said. "This is because he knows that land is invaluable," he explained.

"Hold onto your land; there lies the road to your freedom," he advised in strong terms.

The Last Militant let loose the faucet of the fountain of his wisdom even more, as he continued to illuminate the now charged minds of his audience.

*It is the workers who generate the wealth in the
fields, and the elites distribute it in parliaments.
It is the civil service that helps the government to
dupe the people, and that is why only direct action
involving the civil servants can bring the
government to its knees. But the civil servants are
slowly losing their place to the peasants.*

Minded to conscientize his keen young listeners, he said, "The oppressor is acting. To change the equation and bring him down, you must react. For, only with the reaction from the contact of two opposing forces will there be a change. Negation of negation, and discontinuity of continuity."

He presented language to the learners as the weapon to battle the oppressor. He, however, warned that language could as well be a means to enslave. Thus, "You must understand the power of language and harness it," he said to his listeners.

He alluded to a situation which enslaves people in the present era and has turned many into the destructive elements

that they have become.

In Nature, there is no Applicant—no jobless person. This was something the natives understood. The natives worked only to satisfy their basic physical needs—food, shelter, and clothing. Nowadays we work to accumulate wealth. That is why Earth is being stampeded for her resources. It's a byproduct of possessive individualism.

The solution was simple.

Once you understand that Nature would always provide for your basic needs, you are a free man; you will not allow yourself to become an industrial slave, working long hours to get so little. Go to Nature, she has all you will ever need," he uttered in a calm and penetrative voice.

Before a break was taken, it was incumbent on the shrewd Comrade to send home a loud and clear message on the baseness of the destructive exploitation of Mother Earth. He, therefore, asseverated,

When you tamper with the land like that—digging and drilling, you tamper with our being-ness and minds, and it affects the way we relate with each other—we become shadows of ourselves. This is because everything is connected, and the law of nature is that of sowing and reaping.

The learning party then took a break to munch, analyze and consolidate all that they had heard.

A question and answer session followed for about 40

minutes. By this time, fruits freshly plucked from Comrade Che's compound sat on plates and everyone picked and licked.

Some of the participants wanted to know how Comrade Che was able to resist the allure of money. In response, the sage said, it was about a personal decision. "To hold your ground, you must conquer yourself: fear, poverty, and death. Death is a lie, for there is no death in Nature, only transformation," he said. "Do not give money power over you; disrespect it, only then will it respect you. Nature will take care of you as long as all you desire are your needs and not the accumulation of wealth," he admonished.

The sage then cited an example of how, far back in the days when he was a young activist, an executive of Shell had approached him and sought to bribe him with a "blank check". Comrade Che had refused the bribe and responded by telling the man, 'When you give the community what is due to them, I will have my share in that.'

"The stakes are clear," he said. "Either you follow the new norm or you lose your life. Jesus is a perfect example," Comrade Che adjured his listeners.

"The people turn against conscious people," he warned.

At the end of the learning exercise, the learners made various pledges such as being more committed to advocacy and activism; conquering themselves and killing their love for money and spreading the knowledge they had gained from the event with their friends and networks.

The learning party took group photos with Comrade Che and thereafter, a two-course meal was served and the party of learners, having had a lot of food for their thoughts, began munching food for their stomachs.

Gratitude, greetings, expressions of goodwill and goodbyes

were exchanged between the host and the visitors. And the company once again boarded their bus, and headed back to Port Harcourt.

As the bus slowly put Comrade Che's home behind it, some of the participants said that the heat from the gas flare would be the only thing they will not miss about the paradise they had just experienced.

"Comrade is a thinking-talking-walking resistance and his entire life embodies this," someone in the moving bus said.

At the Feet of the King

Fishes used to nibble at people who go to bathe in the river. Nowadays it's different; the fishes no longer come to play.

—His Royal Majesty, King Bubaraye Dakolo (Agada IV)

The sound of the king's bugle announced the majestic entrance of His Royal Majesty, King Bubaraye Dakolo (Agada IV), the Ibenanawei of Ekpetiama kingdom. The philosopher-king, ex-soldier, author and environmental activist, was greeted by the guests, comprised of youths and the HOMEF team led by the quintessential Executive Director, Rev. Nnimmo Bassey. The stage was set for learning to take place at the feet of the king. It was yet another episode of HOMEF's Learning from the Wise, held in the garden of His Royal Majesty, within the secured royal gates of the Gbarantoru palace.

The HOMEF team had set up under the ambient shades of the guava and palm trees that dotted the compound creating just the right atmosphere for learning. The youths, some from communities across Bayelsa State, sat on mats under shades, clutching their writing materials as they awaited the king.

When seated on his beautiful throne that had crocodile markings, the king, through the palacespokesman, offered thanksgiving and welcomed the HOMEF entourage, albeit in Izon language, according to the custom of the palace. Embellished with Izon proverbs and courtesy, the exchange

between the palace's spokesman and HOMEf's set a joyful tone for the occasion as the guests (Izon speakers and non-Izon speakers alike) watched in admiration. It was only on the passionate appeal of HOMEf's spokesman that the king permitted the use of English in the conversation.

"Only this one time," he said.

Rev. Nnimmo Bassey then introduced the team and informed the palace of the purpose of the visit. In his remarks, the architect, poet, and environmentalist said, "One thing we have learnt is that no matter how much info we pack, it's all useless if we do not know what information is important and how to use it." He stated that the visit was arranged to allow the youth to not only note but also interpret and take action on the issues plaguing the region.

"Education in the present is being accessed in hostile environments and is mostly centred on the wrong things. We need diverse spaces. We should be talking of multiversities, not only universities, or polytechnics. This is why we are here, to tap from your knowledge, wisdom and your ambient environment," he explained.

The king spoke with grace and humour as he flexed his royal knowledge of the history, people, seasons and festivals of Ekpētīama in particular and Izons in general. He alluded to how the people had always been a part of history—from slave trade to palm oil trade and the coming of the missionaries; appetizing his visitors and causing them to salivate for the session proper.

Ekpētīama Kingdom, according to the king, is located within the radius of Agadagbabou, the point of arrival of 'Prince Izo the Great' to the delta, and of dispersal of the Izon clans into the delta.

It is, expectedly, quite difficult to talk about the peoples of the Niger Delta, of which the Ekpetiama Kingdom is a part, without a discourse on oil and gas; same goes for Nigeria. “To begin to talk about the issues in Nigeria we must add the oil and gas equation!” His Royal Majesty stated expressly. “In whatever you do today, you must factor in the oil and gas equation. We are all affected by it— deny it all you want. This is a major factor in the ways and manners people behave themselves these days,” he went on admonishing the participants. “Even the Civil War was practically a battle for control of oil fields,” he reminded the attentive audience.

Deprecating the changes brought about by the presence of oil and gas structures, the king stated:

Our communities have ceased to be communities. Our structures have been eroded—gone. Young people have become not just young people but ‘criminal young people’ due directly or indirectly to the fossil industry in our terrain. Oil has destroyed the fabric of our society. They took our communities and turned them into other people’s oil fields. For example, Ekpetiama is administered under OML 28; and it seemed that the only way you could qualify to get a license was that you were not from here or you were paddy- paddy with the powers that be.

He went on in a rueful tone to talk about the impact of the oil and gas sector in Gbarantoru, stating that the industry has affected the environment, lives and livelihood of his people. According to him,

Ekpetiama, Gbarantoru in particular, co-hosts the

CPF (Central Processing Facility) for oil and gas, aimed at producing gas for the Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) plants at Bonny. Shell runs this facility on behalf of NNPC"Shell and other Joint Venture partners. It is also the most valuable Shell-run onshore facility in Africa and costs billions of dollars. It produces about 6, 000 barrels of crude oil equivalent of gas daily, which amounts to well over one billion naira. Ekpetiama is sitting on one of the largest gas fields in Africa.

The king regretted that the fish catch in Ekpetiama had gone low because of the oil and gas industry. "Fishes used to nibble at people who go to bathe in the river. Nowadays it's different; the fishes no longer come and play," he said on a rather sad note.

The people of Ekpetiama, had, however, tried to conserve their environment through customary rules and, particularly, through the Okolode festival which holds every 5th June in celebration of their major crop, water yam.

"Water yam is medicinal," the king said, "and a natural bane to diabetes. Diabetes was uncommon and only a recent phenomenon in Ekpetiama community due largely to what we eat nowadays, thanks to the oil and gas industry which has made our local agricultural practices unattractive."

As a way of restoring fish resources, community folks were allowed to fish in sections of their water bodies only on 5th June each year. This was so that the fishes would be allowed to regenerate and replenish before the next fishing season. But even at that, the fish catch has remained low.

Taking his portrayal of the harms of the oil and gas sector away from his community and into the broader Niger Delta,

he reverberated, “The Niger Delta communities, apart from being at the receiving end of the ills of the oil industry, have also been at the begging end of its benefits.” The king, in illustrating this, cited the Aiteo oil spill at Nembe, in 2021, which lasted for 38 days. Several months passed after the spill, and nothing happened in terms of clean up and liability despite the ongoing harms to and pleas of the people.

He charged the youth to pay attention to what is happening around them”to strive to acquire knowledge. “If nonsense is going on around you, and you are not part of it, speak up – or else, it will be taken that you are part of the problem,” he pointed out categorically.

Buttressing his charge, he said:

If we have stupid old people, then we had stupid young people.” A wise elder was the one that made a wise decision at his/her young age. Today, enthusiastic, smart, young people are in the minority. You may be cutting your feet without even knowing it if you do not cherish knowledge.

With the talk on knowledge came along the hot-button issue of the nation’s education system. “In the 70s, 80s and even 90s, what we had as school those days were far better than what is obtainable these days! How are the young ones growing?” He rhetorized.

Bearing in mind the challenges of today’s youth, in the face of eroding cultural values, due to both the presence of the oil and gas sector together with the ‘civilization’ mantra, His Majesty made a linkage to the militarization of the Niger Delta. He acknowledged:

The destiny of the youth was stolen in every coup

that took place in Nigeria. Since 1966 till date, this place has been militarized. Our attitudes have been shaped by the high level of militarization. Here you have to shout or fight to get anything done for you. It means that you have to consciously demilitarize yourselves, or you will blow up.

Rebuffing militarization, he counselled:

Thus, if your enemy is behaving like the enemy they are, you have to behave in a way that the enemy will become useless to you; develop yourselves, form groups, be proactive, and operate in a manner that you send the message—be yourself because the enemy will always be himself. Put your oppressors on the defensive!

The request for the youth to organize themselves in formidable groups brought to the king's remembrance the formation and status of the IYC. His Majesty, thus, recalled how various community youth movements were formed in the Niger Delta, particularly the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC). According to him the IYC was conceived at No. 13 Agudama Street in Port Harcourt and birthed in Kaiama, present-day Bayelsa. Of great interest to him was how such groups were replicated elsewhere in Nigeria. He then launched into a homily on culture, stating that: "Culture is dynamic, built in a way that helps to find ways around challenges. No matter how loose it may have become, there are always the residual strands—we can always reweave it, we just have to be willing."

After the king's eloquent delivery on pertinent issues that the younger generation must take cognizance of, the keen

young learners were then allowed an interlude. The participants had time under the shades to masticate and ruminate on the many foods for thought dished to them in the magnanimity of His Majesty, before returning for the final lap being the question and answer session.

Before then, *kekefiyai* (also KKF), a traditionally prepared plantain porridge dish of the IZONS, was served to facilitate the digestion of the foods for thought, and the formulation of questions. The participants interacted among themselves while munching the palace food till the short recess was declared over and the meeting reconvened with His Majesty back on his stool.

In response to questions on how to respond to burning issues, His Majesty reconstructed the meaning of violence as an activity that takes different forms and is not necessarily the use of firearms. To explicate further, he stated:

The way the soldier would react to a situation would not be the way a writer would react, although they both may cause violence to their object of focus. We have to be creative, calculative, subtle, organized, reasonable, and progressive; you don't act on impulse.

For the king, if the Health of Mother Earth Foundation (HOMEF) were to be around when oil exploration started, perhaps, the government and IOCs may have been convinced to keep the oil in the soil. He, however, noted that it was not too late to do so now. Dismissing allusions to the possible counterproductive effects of halting oil exploration, he stated unequivocally, “The oil economy is in fact a hurdle to the achievement of the SDGs. Oil pollution takes away people’s livelihood and pollutes their water. As long as it is oil, the other

sectors of the economy suffer neglect and destruction. So, no, it will not be counterproductive!”

Responding to queries on knowledge expansion, the king asserted, “If there is a willing student, there will be a willing teacher. If there are not enough spaces, you can create more.” He alluded to the fact that the sharing of knowledge is not the exclusive responsibility of a set of persons. On safeguarding the environment, the king reinforced the imposition of customary rules:

...I know of my kingdom as having customary rules that aim to preserve the environment. I also know that most African societies, before the destruction ever began, had such customary rules that preserved and improved nature in the form of consecrated forests, water bodies, fishes and so on.

To everything that has a beginning, there must be an end. Bringing the session to a close, the king invoked the theme of the bane of oil and gas in an emotional peroration read from his book, *The Riddle of the Oil Thief*:

...Soon the truth will be revealed. In Africa, there is a common saying that the worst place to mess up is underwater. With water everywhere in the Niger Delta environment, upthrusts would always bring messes to the surface.

The messes keep washing up!

ABOUT HOMEF

HOMEF is an ecological think tank and an advocacy organization promoting environmental/climate justice and food sovereignty in Nigeria and Africa. Our main thrust is to examine the roots of the exploitation of resources, peoples and nations. We nurture movements for the recovery of memory, dignity and harmonious living with Mother Earth.

HOMEF believes in the rights of Mother Earth. As an advocacy organization, HOMEF equips communities to push back oppression, and campaigns for environmental justice, the protection of food systems and natural cycles at every level of policy engagement. HOMEF believes in contextual solutions over externally generated and imposed ideas, and is firmly rooted in the ideals of solidarity and dignity.

Our core values are:

- Justice & equity in all circumstances
- People and the planet in harmony and free from exploitation
- Dignity (respect)
- Action (solidarity)
- Knowledge



This book presents the voices of animals, fish and other beings that are routinely being sacrificed at the pleasure of humans. It is our hope that these stories convey how climate change has turned the world upside down and make us see the need for urgently propelling a just energy transition.

The title, *Akamba Mfina*, is an Ibibio phrase meaning Big Trouble. For humans and other beings!

“This is an inspiring collection of stories that has the potential to transform how we relate to our living beyond the human. I can imagine families sharing these stories and reflecting on what we might be or what we might do henceforth.”


—Ama van Dantzig,
*social innovator, creative entrepreneur, facilitator,
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SHORT STORIES

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