

THE  
**BLOSSOMING**  
OF THE BIG TREE



**DILMAN DILA**

# The Blossoming of the Big Tree

by Dilman Dila



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# Chapter 1

When Adita was a child, she loved to lie on her back in the grass, daydreaming as she watched clouds twirl and morph into fanciful shapes, looking pretty against the blue heavens. Now, she glared at them. They looked more like balloons full of sand, stacked together to imprison the sun and prevent her from powering up her tractor. Yesterday, she forgot to charge it. *No. Not forgot.* Rwoot duty kept her too busy. It needed an hour of strong sunlight, but the rain-makers warned that the clouds would wrap her village in gloom all day, perhaps all week. To plough, she had to pedal.

Kolo!

The thought of pedalling made her knees to throb with a false pain, encouraging her to borrow a spare battery. But when she stepped out of the storage-hut, she walked only a few paces before stopping, her mouth twisted in revulsion as she glared at her nearest neighbour, Omita. His homestead was about a hundred meters away, the huts lurked behind the tall grass like monsters waiting to eat her. There were about ten huts in that courtyard, some two stories high, others three, all with mud-brown walls and green rooftops that gleamed like wet foliage. They dwarfed her huts, which were closer to the peasant shelters she had grown up in, for she lived with only five grand children and so they did not need gigantic houses. Palm trees stood stiff around her home, like sculptures of evil spirits waiting to pounce on her the moment she stepped out of her compound. She sighed. Omita, an amiable father of nine, would insist on sharing a cup of porridge and gossip before lending her the battery. Lakwena, the neighbour to her left with over fifty people in her courtyard, and about twenty huts, would invite her to snack

on roasted groundnuts and then narrate the entire plot of whatever silly TV drama she drowned in every evening. The other neighbour, Ogowapus, too far for her to see his homestead, would insist on bringing his tractor to plough her garden himself, then settle for a calabash of beer and loiter in her compound until evening. Kolo! Her bones might be seventy years old, but they could still pedal. Instead of thirty minutes with a battery, it would take three hours to clear the garden, perhaps five since she lacked the strength of youth. But it would be a good excuse to stay away from her vidisimu. *Oh, I was in the garden and didn't hear it ring, was it anything urgent?* No, of course no call is ever that urgent.

A temptation nearly overcame her to plug the tractor into a wall-outlet. *Don't!* It would drain the pokpot solar panels, which were made from a paste of leaves and algae. In weak daylight, they had a very low capacity to generate electricity via photosynthesis. In the night, they released the stored energy to power her homestead. If the clouds hid the sun for three months, they would use up all their proteins and die. Then, she would endure the month-long process of manufacturing new panels, with strong and bright sunshine being the only guarantee for success, and, in that time, how would she cook?

Kolo!

She trudged back into the storage hut and straddled the tractor, which had the frame of a bicycle, but with six long and spindly legs instead of wheels, and with a box-shaped trailer, which housed an engine and had solar stone-slats on top and a plough at the bottom. She flipped a switch from Power to Pedal, gripped the handlebars, pulled a lever, and the legs stretched, lifting her ten feet above the ground. She eased it out of the hut and walked it to her garden, only twenty meters behind her homestead, but it knocked the wind out of her. Kolo! *Just go to the neighbours!* They had larger families and bigger gardens, and a lot of spare batteries since they had the labour to manufacture them, but they also had very loose mouths and very nosy noses. She gritted her teeth, engaged the plough gear, and now when she pedalled, her legs were heavier than iron bars.

The garden, on about an acre of land, had two stories. The upper floor was twenty feet high, with rows of pots hanging on poles. She had planted

beans in them, and she wanted to plant potatoes on the ground-level, but it was overgrown. *Kolo! Pedalling is good exercise!* When she was a child her grandfather dug his garden with bare hands and a hoe, though he was about the age she was now, but her generation had become lazy because of machines.

She huffed and puffed and twenty minutes later she had ploughed only ten meters. Sweat filled her wrinkles and her knees screamed. She again looked over the grass to her neighbours, gritting her teeth, but could not find courage. She needed to recover from yesterday's meeting, which had lasted fifteen hours. She had talked, and talked, and then eaten with other people and even shared a calabash of millet brew with them, though their odours suffocated her. It was an argument over a wedding, and she had imagined it would require only a few hours to resolve, but the groom's side refused to contribute to the feast, and the bride's people threatened to stop their daughter from marrying into a stingy family. The bride insisted on marrying in a six days, and so Arita, being rwot, had to find a solution. By the time she returned home long after sunset, her mouth was full of sand and salt, crickets shrieked in her ears, and fingers of other people crawled on her skin like maggots, all night! She needed today to herself.

*Why did I accept to be rwot?*

The disc blades of the plough sunk into the ground. She huffed and puffed and pedalled, cursing her age, her joints creaked. Sweat drenched her clothes, as if she had fallen into a river. Her life would have been easier if she allowed adults to live in her homestead. They would have helped with this kind of work. *Kolo! Why am I like this?* She stopped, and again glanced at the huts in the distance, the solar pastes on their roofs gleaming like beacons, and it was a mystery to her why she could not just walk over to borrow a battery.

Something in the periphery of her vision distracted her. She turned to see a bruka, painted in the colours of a leopard, flapping its wings as it raced to her home.

*Kolo!* She cursed under her breath. *Let me work my garden in peace!*

The pilot was Ogen, a lawang rwot, technically her deputy but so full of indecision that she wondered why the village nominated him for the job. Oh, she could not understand why they picked her either! Perhaps the person who

suggested her name wanted to punish her with the most tedious role. Until recently, people campaigned for leadership positions, but this threatened to nurture the kind of corrupt system that Yat Madit had replaced. Though rwot enjoyed no material benefits, and had no political influence beyond the village, some people rewarded themselves once they became rwot, either by robbing the collective stores or making people work for them, so someone proposed a law forbidding campaigns. Instead, citizens nominated candidates and the village reached a consensus on who should lead. Strict laws were passed forbidding rwot or their family from accessing the collective store, or asking anyone to do any kind of work for them. When it became clear that the village thought she should be rwot, she hesitated to accept, but the job would give her an excuse to meet people regularly without engaging in small-talk, or gossip, or discussing melodramatic series over calabashes of beer. And no one would ask her that disturbing question; *Why are you always alone?* No one would think of banishing her because she did not enjoy the company of other people.

The ornithopter hovered above her homestead for a few moments and perhaps the children playing in the courtyard pointed out that she was in the garden for it turned toward her, and landed a few feet away. It was a small craft, just a little larger than the motorcycle her father rode. Some called it a flying bike, for like the tractor it used the frame of a bicycle, though it had an oval shaped body with bird-like wings on top. Ogen flipped open it's single door, but did not get out.

"Thank you," he said in greeting.

"I'm busy," she said. "Whatever it is, handle it."

"You didn't wake up very well," he said.

"When do I get to work my garden if I spend all my time on rwot duty?"

"Isn't there someone to help you?"

*No!* The retort could not escape from her throat, and she thought about proposing a law to ease the burdens of leadership. They could not expect rwot to spend all their time chairing meetings and leave their gardens unattended. But if she lived in a large family like everyone did, she would not have to work the garden. The young people would do the hard and dirty work while old

people like her sipped beer all day. After her husband had died, about ten years ago, she had subtly sent away other adults from her homestead, leaving her with only pre-teen children, and so she had to pay the price.

“You are my deputy,” she said. “Handle whatever it is.”

“There’s a gengo person in our village,” he said.

That knocked out the little breath she had left. She bit her lips to stifle the growing anger, and she tried to keep her voice friendly. She even smiled. As rwot, she merely chaired the committee that governed the village, but in delicate issues, like gengo, she had to participate in whatever decision the committee came up with. It was just bad luck that for two days in a row things came up demanding her presence, forcing her to endure the company of others. Still, she tried to avoid it.

“The rules are clear,” she said. “If he’s blocked he can’t stay. Throw him out.”

“He’s been here for three days already,” he said.

“Three days!” The words burst out of her mouth like fire out of a flame thrower.

“His mother tried to hide him....” he trailed off.

If word got out that Rac Koko, her village, hosted a person on gengo, the federation might block them as well. Then, in crisis, like when the clouds hid the sun for so long that all their batteries ran out, villages in sunny places would not help them to recharge. They were largely self-sufficient with enough food in their granaries to last about five years, but a gengo would deny them essentials they could not produce, like salt, or delicacies they had to import, like avocado, fenne, and gonja. And citizens of Rac Koko would be barred from attending festivities that brought together people from many corners of the federation. They would be blocked from downloading new melodramas, and music, and enjoying the social media feeds from other villages.

“What did he do?” she asked.

“He beat his wife,” he said.

Oi, she cried. The most heinous reason to gengo! Hosting such a person might get her village blocked for two years as punishment.

“Stay here,” she said. “Help clear my garden.” It was okay for her to ask

another leader to help her with work.

“How will you fly to the centre?” he said.

Good question. Her father had ridden a bodaboda for a living and all her siblings learned to ride as teenagers, but she could not concentrate enough to keep the motorcycle balanced, so her father stopped giving her lessons. Then she got married and the technological revolution happened and all of a sudden her village was full of machines, all manufactured locally using 3D printers, and she tried to learn to fly, but she suffered from the same disease. Daydreams that made her absent minded. The only thing she figured out how to drive was the tractor. She took it back to the storage hut, but left it outside in case the rain-makers were wrong and the sun returned.

Seven huts crowded her compound, but only four were in use. She lived in the largest with five grandchildren. To its left was the only multi-storied hut with three floors. She stored tools on the ground section and granaries in the upper levels. Behind the main hut were three guest cottages, which were always empty, and behind the guest wing was an enclosure for her cattle, goats, and a coop for her birds. The kitchen stood to the right of the main hut, and the smallest hut was the bath-hut, which was behind the kitchen for it used the same water recycling system. Though they had not yet experienced severe drought, they learned how to conserve water. They used composting toilets, an improvement from the pit latrines of her childhood for they did not have an odour, and they sent the waste to places where soil had lost fertility, or to fertilize the vertical gardens in the tall buildings of the cities, which no one lived in any more.

She went into the bath and stayed longer than usual, as though that would make the problem go away, as though to prepare her body for another long day of contact with others. Then, she discarded her work overalls for a formal dress with pointy shoulders, a cross between a t-shirt and a gomesi, which she took to all rwot meetings.

She gave the children breakfast, instructed them to go straight to school after eating, then climbed onto Ogen’s bruka. There being only one door, she went in first and took the back seat. His sweat stung her nose, but the space, though cramped, was thankfully large enough for her to avoid skin

contact. In a minute they were up in the air, the village sprawled beneath them, homesteads and gardens arranged in a seemingly haphazard fashion, but which created a spiral fractal design. A blue road snaked around the homesteads, twisting and turning, with other roads branching off randomly, creating a chaotic vein design. There was no main road, unlike in her childhood where streets were straight and arranged in grids, since they had no central planning office. People built wherever they wanted, creating a maze that, surprisingly, morphed into a fractal beauty.

“If this thing takes long, you have to help in my garden,” she said.

“I have to be there,” he said.

“Can you ask someone to help?”

“I don’t know anyone who is free,” he said. “What of your children?”

She did not respond. They descended into the centre of the village. In her childhood it was a collection of makeshift market stalls in front of small retail shops that straddled a dirt road. The buildings used to have red brick walls and rusty iron-sheet roofs, and the roadside vegetation was red with dust. Now, the road was blue with solar-stone-slats to generate extra electricity for their buses, and the buildings were made with ossified mud, rather than baked bricks. They were much taller, with two being seven floors high, and cylindrical rather than rectangular. They accommodated schools, a hospital, an indoor theatre and social centre, the collective store, and the 3D printer. The buildings encircled an open space, about the size of a football field, which they called wang oo, and in the middle of this space stood a giant tree. It had served as their meeting place since their ancestors settled there, a thousand years ago. During the full moon they danced there, and during harvest festivities people came from far away for religious rituals and to make merry. The tree was the Village Council’s meeting hall. Cameras hung on branches to broadcast sessions to all citizens and most people followed the boring proceedings on their vidisimu. But Adita found a large crowd of about three hundred people waiting.

The bruka landed on a rooftop pad, and they went down a lift then walked to the tree. On the way, Adita checked her vidisimu to learn about the wife beater. A lot of Rac Koko citizens had made posts to make it clear to other

villages that they did not know of his presence and that the moment they did, they had gathered to throw him into the bush. In the police portal, the Officer-in-Charge had posted a summary. The wife beater was Okong, and he lived in Amuria, about two hundred miles to the north. He had beaten his wife three times in six months and so he was stripped of citizenship and blocked on their data-dero. Every vidisimu was its own server, able to use the internet without a service provider, but it could not communicate with other devices if it was not part of a network. For three weeks, Okong wandered about looking for a new home, in vain. Hotels did not require payment and lodgers paid for the room and meals with work, helping to make beds, doing the laundry, cleaning the rooms, or, most commonly, working the gardens of the innkeeper. But a stranger had to make a booking through their vidisimu, and without network access, Okong could not get lodging. Whenever he showed up unannounced, hotel owners looked up the gengo list and on seeing him reported to the Defence Committee, who mobilized citizens of to chase him away. Okong slept in the bushes for no village let him sleep in their midst, not even on their roadsides. He walked, for no public transport would give him a ride. Eventually, he sneaked back into his mother's home and she hid him for three days until his sister reported him.

All twenty members of the Village Council sat on three-legged stools waiting for Adita, and the crowd stood around the councillors. As Adita neared, people stirred and come closer for now the session would start. The moment Adita was under the tree, one councillor spoke.

“Ah, rwot,” he said. “We didn’t gather to discuss. This is a wife beater. He can’t stay. We must all agree to throw him out.”

Adita had brought her own stool, like other councillors. She sat on it in the circle. Okong sat on the ground, his hands and legs tied, his eyes wet with a plea. She had known him when he was a jolly boy. His mother stood a few feet behind him, the plea in her eyes too. A long time ago Adita regarded her as a friend and now they exchanged nods in greeting. Unlike other villages that chased him out, people in Rac Koko had known him as a child and had not witnessed his wife-beating side. And how could she exile a man who called her aunty because his mother considered her a best friend? It had been a few years

since they last talked. They never fell out, but Adita had a hobby of dodging people who came close, until they drifted apart.

“Where shall we send him?” Adita said.

“Are you even debating keeping him here?” another councillor said.

“No,” Adita said. “Every bush belongs to some village. Wherever we take him, they’ll complain that we are dumping gengo people on them.”

“I’ve changed,” Okong said. “I swear three weeks in the bush has taught me a lesson. I’m now a good person! Please send me to prison! Please!”

Adita had never thought about what happened to people on gengo until now. In the past, they might have sneaked into a city and disappeared among the massive populations, but the Yat Madit revolution triggered a mass migration to rural after villages got all the luxuries of the big cities, but without the poverty and hard life. It was now nearly impossible for anyone to sneak into any community and live without someone finding out their past.

Prison was reserved for the likes of thieves and murderers, but with crime rates very low, since economic inequality no longer existed, they had only five underpopulated prisons in the whole country, and so sending a wife beater to one was a kind gesture. Banishing them to the wilderness to live like wild animals was the best punishment. This law evolved after Lokang, the person whose inventions sparked the revolution, made en technology free only to communities that shunned gender violence. As people became addicted to the vidisimu, they were bombarded with media that taught them to despise men who beat their wives and it eventually sunk into the general consciousness that the only way to punish such people was expel them into the wild.

“Please,” his mother said. “You all grew up with him, you know he was a good boy. Give him another chance.”

“He could have killed her!” a councillor said.

“Please take me to prison,” Okong said. “Jail me!”

Adita’s vidisimu bleeped, sharp cries like the police sirens in her childhood. Kolo! She already had a major crisis in her village, and now another was unfolding, at national level?

“I can’t ignore this,” she said to the council.

A needless explanation. She chaired the National Defence Committee and

that ring tone, though no one had ever heard it in real life, or ever expected to hear it, was in every vidisimu since anyone could become a rwot and serve in any of the national committees. She stepped away from the tree and took a hat out of her bag. She squeezed a button and the hat morphed into the shape of the motorcycle helmet her father had worn while riding his bodaboda, giving her total privacy.

The caller, Hamid, secretary of the Defence Committee, was two thousand miles away in what used to be southern Tanzania. Even after all these years, she oriented herself by placing people in their old countries.

“We are under attack,” he said.

“Eh?” she said.

“They invaded us twenty minutes ago.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Kenya!”

“Kenya?”

“And USA. Their warships are heading for Luanda.”

She gaped. A year after she became rwot, she volunteered for the defence committee since, as a girl she had wanted to become a soldier like her mother. She failed the recruitment interviews because of her height. When she became rwot and had to serve in a national committee, she thought defence was perfect. She volunteered to chair it for the job was easy. They discussed responses to disasters and coordinated food aid to Kenya and the countries in the Horn. Not war. No one wanted it. After two nuclear conflicts in the global North, there was a strong international push for peace. She never imagined war would come during her tenure, and now she realized who exactly she was. *Minister of Defence*. Without the fanfare such ministers enjoyed in other countries, without a platoon of bodyguards, without even an actual army, but still a minister of defence.

Kolo!

“What?” Hamid said.

*Did I speak aloud?* She used Acholi and the vidisimu translated into Swahili, but she uttered a slang word that wasn't yet in the system. Only a few people in her village swore that way, and so the translator gave Hamid all three formal

interpretations. A mat. Anger. A troublesome person.

“We are meeting in fifteen minutes,” Hamid added.

*You have to solve the crisis.* She could read it in the way his lips trembled. He was a tailor. Most likely, he too never thought of himself as a powerful person in a ministry of defence, but now that rested on them. *On her.*

“I have a crisis in my village,” she said. “A gengo person.”

“Oh that’s bad,” he said, and seemed not to know what to say next.

What should she prioritize, saving her village from getting blocked, or her country from invasion? But, her village was her *country*, one of the hundreds of thousands that formed a federation. When still a child, her village did not feel part of the nation, for the government largely ignored them in favour of big towns and cities. Only during elections would they be reminded that they were in a place called Uganda. The revolution ensured the village was what it had always been, a state within the state. Perhaps if they did not get involved, the invaders would not bother coming this far up North. Perhaps....

“What do they want?”

“Who knows,” Hamid said. “We give the Kenyans food. We give the Americans minerals. So who knows why they attacked.”

When the revolution started, as the *vidisimu* inspired people to get rid of dictators and central governments, Kenya banned the technology. The corporations that ruled USA had their African headquarters in Nairobi and so, along with the white settlers, they influenced the Army to shoot thousands of protesters to death, stopping the revolution. As the federation prospered into one of the few countries standing on their own against the climate crisis, Kenya descended deeper into poverty and oppression. A thirty-year long drought worsened the situation. Kenya threatened to invade to steal food from the federation, but the federation had defence pacts with thirty other countries as a deterrent. Still, they sent food aid to feed about a third of the population, and it was a kind of bribe to keep the hungry soldiers on a leash.

And they gave the American corporations minerals. They used *pito nyonyo* to grow minerals in a process no more costly than farming, making it easy to bribe the US and even her rivals, China and Europe, not to attack.

Yet, it had happened.

The federation had several hundred armies, each independent of the other, but they were not armies in the real sense. They did not have full-time soldiers, and they had weapons. They were mostly volunteers who saw the climate crisis as the enemy. Floods, droughts, wild fires, freak storms, someone had to clean up and patch up whatever damage the weather did to ensure people continued to live, and that someone called themselves a soldier. *How naive we are!* Without an actual army, but with a lot of food in their granaries and a lot of resources and secret technology like pito nyonyo, it was only a matter of time before someone attacked.

“We are meeting in fifteen minutes,” Hamid said again.

Adita sighed. She ended the call and returned to the tree, where the discussion was heated, for childhood friends of Okong had come to his defence.

“Things are bad,” she said.

“Not as bad as this,” a councillor said. “We must throw him out.”

“Kenya has invaded,” she said, and everyone fell silent.

No body seemed to know how to respond. Some people made some noises she could not understand. Grunts? Squeaks of terror? Or were they just clearing their throats? They looked at her as if they were at a wedding party and she had announced that there would be no food or alcohol.

“America as well,” she added. “Their warships are heading to Luanda.”

“Why?” several people chorused.

She shrugged. “Throw him out,” she said. “I have to handle the invasion.”

She did not wait for a response. She walked away, briskly, and Ogen, without being asked to, followed to fly her back home.

**(Advance Readers Copy)**

## Chapter 2

On the way back home, Adita looked up news of the invasion from reporters in the front line areas. Every village supported several independent journalists. Those who worked full time collecting news, like all who volunteered for social services like teaching and driving public transports did not have to farm for food, or for clothing and other necessities. They had free access to the collective store, to which every citizen contributed with a percentage of their harvest. Journalists supported by their respective villages had badges on their sites, and so Adita traced all news items to verify if they came from an official village reporter. The accounts varied slightly but the differences were minimal. Kenyan drones had struck several police stations and village centres, since the federation did not have military targets. Between twenty and thirty five people were dead, and over a hundred injured. The boarder villages, who lived with the constant threat of invasion, had manufactured unarmed defensive drones about the size of small birds. They rammed into the military drones to knock them out of the air, or they rammed into armoured vehicles, slashing tyres or drilling into their engines to disable them, but they did not have enough to stall the invasion, and they did not have anything against hand guns and thousands of foot soldiers. Kenyan troops had captured several villages already and were looting the granaries.

Why didn't the food bribe stop the invasion? Were the common soldiers fed up of the crumbs the generals threw at them? But she doubted that food was the primary motivation, since American soldiers were not starving, yet they had also attacked.

When the bruka landed in her homestead, she hurried into her hut without saying goodbye to Ogen. The rooms were built the traditional way, with a wall dividing the hut it into two halves, one being the sitting room and the other half was further divided into two bedrooms, one for her, the other for the grandchildren. The sitting room had a bright blue colour and the floor had colourful palm-frond mats with beautiful fractal designs. The only light came in from the door, and from two small windows, creating a rather dark ambience. She had transformed a corner into her office, with a cushion on a mat and a very low stool for her computer. She had never gotten used to chairs and tables. The computer looked like a round ball made from banana fibre, the kind she played with as a child. She pressed a button on it and the ball glowed, then a thin pipe jetted out and soared to a height of about two feet. The pipe split on either end and a screen unfurled itself, about four feet wide. She tapped an icon on the screen, and the Yat Madit logo played as the software initiated. It was an animated tree, very big and old just like the one in their wang oo, but this was a virtual tree under which hundreds of people spread over thousands of kilometres met to discuss national affairs. Their parliament. After ten seconds, the app had loaded, and she joined the meeting.

Four hundred people, just under half of the National Defence Committee, were already online, their avatars arranged in neat rows and columns. Hamid's face filled the screen as he had the floor, his lips trembling as if he had malaria. As chairperson, she had to keep her nerves for the federation relied on her leadership, but how could a peasant woman lead them against such an adversary? How, yet the only military experience she had was a mother who served in the army? She could not even identify modern guns. She knew the type her mother had carried, the AK47, but those of today were very different. Some looked like torches, others looked like human hands with each finger a barrel. How could such a person lead a country in a time of war?

"They want us to surrender," Hamid said, tears in his voice. "Ah, Chairperson has joined. She'll take over the session."

"We can't surrender," Adita said.

"We can't fight back," someone said. Their image popped up to reveal a uniform, they were in one of the hundreds of federation 'armies'. The tag

under their avatar identified them as Komugisha, in Makanga near Mount Rwenzori. They looked tough, but their words made their face look like dried mud, rather than rock. “We don’t have weapons. We don’t have the kind of training the invaders have. This uniform is for show.”

“Food is still our best defence,” a man said. “If we stop the aid they’ll starve within a week.”

“They know that,” Komugisha said. “Yet they still attacked. They know they can control all our granaries within a couple of days. We can’t defend ourselves!”

“We can hide our food,” a man from Kivu said. “I hear it happening already.”

“Let’s print weapons,” a grandmother from Katanga said.

Every village had a factory-level 3D printer to manufacture any tool, but its operating system was communally controlled and the code was written to prohibit printing weapons. Even innocuous tools like knives needed approval of people in many other villages. Those who lived along the boarder had fought long and hard for permission to print unarmed defensive drones, since Kenya constantly threatened to invade.

“Even if we print weapons,” Komugisha said, “when shall we learn how to use them? Eh? Even if we arm ourselves now, by the time we design the guns, write code, test them, and learn to use them, eeh, they would have captured all our villages.”

“Well then, let’s print clouds of unarmed defensive drones then,” the grandmother added. “We make them as small as bees and send the clouds –”

“That’s a weapon!” Komugisha said. “We can’t entertain such thoughts.”

“We have allies,” Adita said. “We have military pacts –”

“They won’t intervene,” someone said.

Her image popped up on the screen. Kabwita, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. She was in her late twenties and wore large earrings that touched her shoulders. Her lips were a bright purple, matching her outlandish outfit, which she had sewn herself for she was a tailor. The chair of each committee participated in the meetings of other committees, but the foreign affairs person had to be part of the defence committee for the two were complimentary. She was about two thousand five hundred miles away, in

Chibola Village in what used to be Northern Zambia. She had just joined the meeting, and Adita noticed that their number had grown to five hundred and thirty two.

“We signed defence pacts,” Adita said.

“No one wants World War Five,” Kabwita said. “USA promised our allies that if they don’t interfere, there won’t be World War Five, and since everyone knows we don’t have an army.... Well, only Chile, New Zealand, and Panama agreed to help us but the US has sent nuclear warships to their shores. If they try to help us –”

“Is the US working with the Kenyans? Is this a coordinated attack?” someone said.

“Obviously,” Kabwita said. “The Kenyan army depends on Slember. The US corporations have influenced them to attack and they have promised Kenya food for as long as the war lasts, which they say won’t be more than a week.”

“But why?” Hamid cried. “We give them all the minerals they want. Why?”

“They want pito nyonyo,” Kabwita said.

The thing that made their utopia a success, that enabled 3D printers to manufacture anything. It was a process that still confounded Adita for it meant ‘growing metal’ the way she farmed beans. Her daughter Acen, an engineer who had built a spaceship, had explained the process in broad strokes. Lokang discovered it by accident while researching artificial production of spider silk. It involved a worm called lanyingnying, which produced a type of silk. First, they fed the worm with dregs of ocuka brew, and this lined its stomach with a bacteria, which then infected the silk glands. Then, they fed the worm grains of a mineral, any mineral, which it could not digest, but which the bacteria sent to the silk glands and, instead of silk, the worm churned out threads of the mineral. The threads were then pulverized and used to make 3D printer ink, which everyone in the federation had free access to. Lokang kept the ingredients of the process a secret, so while everyone knew how it happened, no one knew what bacteria, or even the exact species of lanyingnying, or if en used genetically modified organisms.

Lokang refused to share it with rest of the world arguing that other nations would produce any kind of weapon they wanted. En insisted that unless

every country came under Yat Madit, with decentralized governance in non-capitalist systems, en would keep it a secret. In the beginning, en made the world believe that the process was pure magic, much like a lot of the technologies en invented, and so this did not attract the attention of the world's superpowers. The US, China, and Europe, particularly received enough minerals, whatever they wanted, and they largely assumed that the federation perhaps had mining techniques to extract whatever metal they needed. And since the deals meant that their corporations did not need to actually own and run mines for them to receive the minerals they wanted, they left the federation alone. But in recent years, word seeped out that pito nyonyo was actually a scientific process, and that must have inspired the colonizers.

"China and Europe are hesitant to help us for they don't want another war," Kabwita said. "But if they see us holding on, they'll come to our aid. We have to hold on for about a month."

"How!" Komugisha shrieked. "Before nightfall, we'll run out of drones to keep out the Kenyans. What shall we do tomorrow? Eh? What shall we do when the American's land in Luanda in two hours time? We thought military pacts and bribes will keep the bad guys away, but look! Eeh, just look at what is happening!"

Adita thought she had an idea. The invaders relied on centralized systems, their command came from a single source. A CEO. A president. A politician. A single corporation, Slember, controlled all the weapons of the US, of Kenya, and of half the armies in the world. If they could hit at that source of power, if they could disable Slember systems, they could win the war. Right? It seemed like a fanciful idea for during the Third World War, cyber warfare was a key weapon, and they bombed each other's servers to disable their armies. The war became analogue, then nuclear. After that, armies built their servers in secret locations, some deep underground or in the oceans, others, it was rumoured, in space. The US claimed to have backup servers on the moon. It did not seem like a viable option to go after that single point of power, but the thought nagged at her. *That is the enemy's weakness.*

"Are you suggesting we surrender?" Kabwita said. "Eh?"

"A ceasefire," Adita said. "We ask for a ceasefire."

“Why would they agree?”

“We can’t give them pito nyonyo while they are bombing us, can we?”

“Eh?” Kabwita said.

“You are joking,” someone else said.

“Lokang will never agree,” Kabwita said.

“Do we have other options?” Adita said.

“We starve them!” someone said.

“Yes! Kenyans are hungry!” someone shouted. The tag identified him as Mayeku, from Lwakaka at the foot of Mount Elgon. “They look at our country and see how nice it is and they want such a life. So, let’s hack into their media and feed them messages to incite them against their army, eh, you see, we make them see that they can have such a good life –”

“That’s why they invaded!” Hamid cried.

“The soldiers invaded,” Mayeku said. “Not ordinary people. I’m talking about ordinary Kenyans, eh, they are tired. We incite them and, eh, riots blow up in their streets and their army will be too distracted to continue the invasion.”

“How many Kenyans will die?” Adita said.

“They rioted before,” someone said. “The soldiers shoot them dead – remember when they killed two thousand in a day? Kenyans have not protested since then.”

“My brother died in that protest,” Mayeku said. “Ten years, three months, and two days ago. I still feel the pain. I have close relatives in Kenya and I know if we light fire –”

“Uhm, wait” Adita interrupted him. “Are there any viable options for defence?” she said.

“You can’t decide for us!” Kabwita said.

“We give it or we perish,” Adita said. “We can’t defend ourselves. They know it. Everyone knows it. We can’t.”

The idea struggled to take shape, but she could not blurt out what nagged her. There were now seven hundred people in the meeting, and if they all heard the plan, then the enemy might also know and her scheming would fail. *Really? An idea to defeat the mighty army of USA? You? A peasant woman?*

The federation had stayed on its feet this long because no one had tried them with a conflict, and Adita could not see how could they fight back with nearly a thousand people discussing the plan. Peasants, tailors, cobblers, potters, school teachers, actors, musicians, ordinary people. There were no national secrets. The enemy would catch wind of whatever plan they came up with.

“If the US doesn’t agree to an immediate cease fire,” Adita said, “then we give pito nyonyo to someone who will defend us.”

“This is not a good plan,” Kabwita said.

“Do you know why those military pacts have not helped us? We only offer food and minerals, which they can get from anywhere. Can’t they?”

“And if we give them pito nyonyo,” someone said. “What will become of us?”

“Do we have other options?” Adita said. “If we don’t give it away, we die. If we give it away, we die, only later. If someone has another option, eish, speak up.”

“Let me see if I can get the ceasefire.” Kabwita sighed, her earrings clinked as they dangled.

“I need to talk to Lokang,” Adita said. “In person. I must convince en that this is the best option, but I have to do it with a War Council. I want volunteers.”

They had never needed a war council, but when formulating their constitution they had understood it would be impossible for hundreds of people to coordinate a war and so they created room for a council of twelve people to speed up the decision making process. The danger was that such small numbers could lead to centralism, to a few people making decisions that affected the entire federation, so the War Council had to update the Defence Committee every day.

“The War Council will discuss how we can ensure no one ever invades us again. So, if you want to volunteer, tap the box. The first twelve tappers will be in the council.”

She needed time for her idea to take shape, but she couldn’t tell everyone that this was her actual plan. One of them might go back home and their husband would ask what they were doing to save the federation, and this person would say that they were tricking the enemy into agreeing to a ceasefire so they can

buy time to defend themselves. Then the husband would tell a neighbour and just like that word might reach the enemy.

*Can you really come up with something to save the federation? You, a mere peasant?*

Their enemy might be listening. She had to assume they had planted spy gadgets somewhere, perhaps even in her house, perhaps the fly buzzing just outside her window was a spybot. She had no way of detecting, but Lokang, who had kept pitonyonyo a secret for five decades, surely had a way.

“The federation won’t like it,” Kabwita said. “We give up at the sound of the first shot?” She logged out with a jeer.

Several hundred people followed suit, and within a few minutes social media would burn with talk of a surrender, of giving up the one thing that made them prosper, without a president, without the needed for money, without poverty and suffering. It would all end because the chair of the defence committee was just a peasant who did not know how to defend the nation. The pop-pop-pop sounds of hundreds logging off imitated bullets hitting her chest, but twelve people volunteered for the War Council, and that was enough.

*Can you really save the nation?*

“Thank you for volunteering,” she said, struggling to keep her voice calm, though the tremble inside her was worse than that of Hamid. “We must meet physically.”

“Why?” came a chorus.

“Because we’ve never faced a war before,” she said. She checked the metadata on each person’s window to see how soon the furthest person could reach. “We have to talk to Lokang, so let’s meet in Otoboi in two hours. Eyi? Get on your bruka and start flying, now.”

That, she knew, sent mixed messages to the enemy, in case they were listening. People ready to surrender did not make plans to meet in person, especially as all government meetings were online. Even those that happened under real trees had cameras recording each and everything. Whatever the national committees discussed automatically became public after twelve days, or at most after thirty days if it was a sensitive matter. After all, every citizen was a parliamentarian and they deserved to know what the ministers discussed.

The enemy would become suspicious when they reached Otoboi and their meeting went offline, but she had to take a chance. The enemy would also know that they would not surrender until the entire federation reached a consensus, which perhaps would never happen.

“Pack a bag,” she added. About two hundred people remained in the meeting and they were all silent as though they had difficulty processing her words. “The negotiations might take many days. Eh, you heard? Okay, I now close this meeting until the we meet in two hours.”

Protocol required for her to wait for consensus but she ended the meeting, for everyone, and she remained staring at the Yat Madit logo as if she did not know what it was.

“Mego Adita!” A voice made her jump. Ogen loomed at the doorway. He had not flown off, he had lingered outside the hut to listen, which made her believe that the enemy was listening too. “We are surrendering?”

She wanted to tell him her plan, but the bee buzzing just behind his ears could be a spy. Her chest contracted and a river rushed through her ears. The world spun and Ogen looked like smoke. She closed her eyes, hoping they were not tears. When her vidisimu rang, she jumped again, thinking it was a robot insect, but the caller’s avatar froze her bones. Lokang. The person who ushered them into this utopia that they called “the federation”. En did not look happy. En wrinkles accentuated the fury on en face.

“What is this I hear?” en said. “Who are you to surrender on behalf of everyone?”

“Some things can only be understood when spoken over a calabash of kongo,” she said, the words gushing like water out of a burst pipe.

“Eh?” en said. “There is a war and you want to drink beer?”

“I’ll reach your village in thirty minutes,” she said. “The rest of the War Council will be there within two hours. Please, don’t turn us away.”

En gave her a long look, and perhaps en understood her fears. Perhaps en had fought off spies all en life, for surely, there was no way en would keep pito nyonyo a secret without a way of detecting insectoid bots. En face relaxed, the frown of fury gave way to raised eyebrows, and then en nodded.

“Okay,” en said. “I’ll listen to you.”

En ended the call. Air gushed out of her mouth and now she breathed as though she had pedalled a tractor over a hundred acres. *What am I doing? What will I tell en?*

“Uhm –” Ogen said, hesitant. “I’ll fly you there.”

**(Advance Readers Copy)**

## Chapter 3

She left for Otoboi an hour later. She had to wait for her daughter to come babysit the grandchildren, for she expected to be gone for more than a day and she did not know want to send the children back to their respective parents. They might delay to return, yet they were the only company she could tolerate. She had no problem living alone, but people considered it abnormal and other village citizens might gengo her for being a witch.

Following news of the invasion, the children returned early from school, and she waited with them in the kitchen. They were on a mat in the middle of the room, eating an early lunch. She leaned against the central pole and tried to focus on their conversation, something about seeing anyeri in the bush the previous day and what traps they could use to catch it. When she was about their age, anyeri were rare. Now they were as numerous as their smaller cousins, rats, for the people had this superstition about allowing the wild to thrive would appease jok and stabilize the weather. Each village adopted an animal totem, and for Rac Koko it was acak, a small green lizard. With storied huts and multi-level gardens enabling their villages to hold the populations of the big towns and cities of her childhood, a lot of land was left to return to the wild.

She nibbled on a gonja, but struggled to finish it for something sat in her throat, blocking the food. *Peasant pretending to be minister of defence!* She put the pieces she had not touched in the fridge. Then, she threw the half-eaten plantain in a recycle pot, along with left overs from supper and fruits and vegetables that were going bad, and she shoved the pot into the food processor. The machine whirred and a hot light glowed, drying up everything in the pot.

After about five minutes, she put the pot in another chamber of the processor and an electric pestle pounded it into a powder, which she would donate as food aid. Perhaps the Kenyans were tired of eating powdered left overs.

The flapping of a bruka, almost like the wings of a stork, announced the arrival of her daughter, Acen, who lived in Onyuk, a ten minute flight away. Her ornithopter was blue, with orange wings and tail, and white geometric designs that seemed to glow, creating the illusion of a futuristic craft. Acen had blue hair, with white beads on her cornrows imitating the designs on the bruka. Her jumpsuit had the same colour and patterns. She taught programming at her village's high school and was one of the three thousand engineers who maintained Yat Madit, but she dreamed of the stars and so led a project to build spaceships. The geometric designs was their club symbol, and she liked blue for it was the colour of the sky, while the jumpsuit was her favourite attire since film astronauts wore jumpsuits. They had sent an autonomous vehicle to the moon and to an asteroid, but had failed to make a ship big enough to accommodate a human in space.

The children crowded out of the kitchen, pushing and shoving, though they had not finished their food. Some carried half eaten gonja in their hands. They screamed 'mama!' on seeing Acen, though only one came out of her womb. They ran to greet her as though she was a long lost relative, though they had seen her just three days ago. She was their favourite mother.

"Why are we surrendering?" Acen growled, ignoring the children. She was pregnant, her belly threatening to spill out of the jumpsuit. "We have to fight!"

"You baby sit," Adita said, picking up her bag. "And when I return my garden better be ready for planting."

"Eish!" Acen said. "You called me to dig your garden?"

"She forgot to charge her tractor," Ogen said. "You'll have to pedal."

"Noooo!" Acen shrieked. "I won't dig for a rwot!"

"To you, I'm not a rwot," Adita said. "I'm your mother, and if I don't find my garden ready, eish, just remember I can still use my slipper."

The children chuckled, and Acen scowled. The children broke into 'granny bye' chants as Adita climbed onto Ogen's bruka. She smiled and waved. Acen waved back, her scowl already gone. She would not dig the garden. Being a

techie she did not grow her own food, but she did not rely on the collective store. There was always a person with a gadget that needed repair, a vidisimu whose coding needed an upgrade, a vehicle that needed reprogramming. Anyone could grow plants to make ink for the 3D printer, but not everyone could design and print, and so they paid techies with food and ink plants. She would have no problem calling up a person who owed her a favour to plough the garden.

Adita once belonged to an awak, a concept that regained popularity after the Yat Madit revolution. With everyone growing their own food, people formed groups to work on each other's gardens, but there was mandatory socialization after the work, to make it different from the kind of paid jobs people did long ago. Her elder brother, who used to work in a bank, said awak was like having the annual staff party every working day. They met early, spent an hour on the garden, then settled for a communal breakfast. When the work was a lot during harvests, with machines being of little use, they worked all day, eating together, and in the evening they shared calabashes of kongo. The whole thing would repeat the next day in another person's garden, and another person's after that, until everyone in the awak group cleared their farm work. But it would give Adita terrible insomnia and a week of it left her mentally exhausted for a whole month. *Why am I like this?*

The bruka soared, wings flapping with a whoosh-whoosh-whoosh that made her wonder if birds could hear the sound of their own flight. Did the fluttering drown out all other noises, and did the slipstream cocoon them in a fantasy cloud? Could abiba hear the fire jetting out of their anuses as they flew in the dark nights, looking for a person to curse? Her vidisimu bleeped, distracting her from with news from the front lines, and so she did not slip into daydreams. US Navy ships had arrived in Kinshansha and a drone battle had broken out. The Kenyan army had captured more villages, though they were finding them empty, the granaries either ferried away, or burned down rather than let it fall into enemy hands. Her timeline was ablaze with talk of the surrender, and the heat surged out of the screen to engulf her.

"We must gengo Adita and her village!" A man with a fancy beard ranted in a post. He was the rwot of Amuria, where Okong beat his wife. "People of Rac Koko are not good. They want to keep a wife beater? Eh! They should

have thrown him right away into the bush, but no, they are debating it. Why? Hmph! mbu he grew up in their village. What does that say about them? Eh? And then, their rwot surrenders. Even before we lose. Eh! Eh! You see? Block Rac Koko! Block Adita!”

She closed the vidisimu with a jeer. Ogen pretended not to have heard. He kept his eyes ahead, and his hands gripped the bruka handlebars tight. He had not asked her about her true plans, perhaps he too suspected they were being watched? Or was he just being too polite not to shove it down her throat that she did not have any plans?

Below, the land appeared serene, a green expanse, too quiet, as though war had not come upon them, as though people were not raging mad at the decision of a peasant woman playing minister of defence. From this height, the green roofs blended with the vegetation, blue roads twisted and turned in intricate patterns, like embroidery. In the bushes, youth roamed about gathering fruits and wild roots, and hunting anyeri. They never let any fruit go to waste, to ensure they had plenty to eat. They dried whatever they could not consume, saving them for a time when food would be scarce and to send aid to Kenya.

They flew over Gulu city. The buildings were as she remembered, rectangular, tall, but the streets were devoid of the throngs of people. The roads had long been turned into solar-farms, the tall buildings were now vertical farms with fertile soil from composting toilets.

The day grew brighter as the clouds thinned, and then they were under a bright and hot sun, soaring above River Nile, which had grown so fat that it was now a long lake. Strange settlements floated on its surface as people refused to give up their ancestral lands, even as the water rose higher and spread wider and drowned graves of their grandparents. They lived on floating buildings and grew crops on flat boats, and they hoped one day the Nile would return to normal and they could resume life on their land.

They passed a herd of about three thousand elephants. Many individuals had such long tusks that Adita gawked, and Ogen took the bruka a little lower for a better look. Villages flourished in these parts, which once was a game park. The citizens learned how to live with the wild to appease the jok of wild beasts and get protection from disasters. Motion sensors and robot-scarecrows

drove animals off their homes, and sudden bright lights in the night would keep hyenas and lions away. As drought ravaged the kidepo area, they helped animals migrate, and volunteers frequently filled the dams there with water from the Nile to give the remaining animals a chance.

They left the wilderness and human settlements once again became numerous, each village a walking distance from the other, with small forests in-between and with rural homesteads gathered around centres that passed for towns.

“Kolo!” Ogen said.

Adita turned to him with a start. She never heard him swear. Had she influenced him? His battery beeped in warning.

“I charged it in Morikiswa the other month, but they used a dying pokpot and it spoilt my battery. Now even if it’s fully charged it drops to zero without warning.” He would need anywhere from one month to three months to manufacture a new battery, and perhaps he was too occupied with the fun of living to be bothered.

Otoboi was seven minutes away, and the bruka needed an hour for a full charge. She checked the bus schedules of the nearest village and saw that she could reach Otoboi in fifteen minutes, so he landed in a brukapad close to a bus stop.

Hardly a minute later, a red bus coasted down the blue road, its engine made almost no noise. It was a twenty seater with five pedallers. The pilot sat in front and the other four pedallers, all passengers, each sat above a wheel. They idled for the sun was strong enough to power the bus, but the pedallers sat in position for any emergency. They built the bus with lightweight materials to make it easy to pedal, for as the climate crisis worsened and cloud cover sometimes meant months without the sun, they had to reduce dependence on batteries.

She muttered a farewell to Ogen and walked to the bus, but as she climbed in, the driver turned to her with a scowl.

“Adita?” he said. He was an old man, perhaps her age, with all white hair and red lips from waragi. He said something else, but he spoke in Ateso, a language she did not understand, and so she took out headsets from her bag

and turned on the translator.

“Are you Adita?” he said again.

She nodded, her stomach curled with the imposter syndrome. Only people she had lived with for many decades were supposed to know her, not strangers. Was she smiling at him? Her lips twitched and she clenched her teeth. He did not smile back. His eyes had a glint, like metal catching the sunlight, and his wrinkles made him look angry. Oh, he was angry! Was he among those screaming for her blood?

“Does this bus go to Otoboi?” she said, needlessly, for she had checked the schedule and knew where it would end up, but she had to break the ice. She spoke in Acholi, and he already had translator headsets on.

“You can’t board,” he said. “They want to gengo you.”

A sound escaped from her throat. She wanted to protest, but her muscles relaxed and she thought her knees would crumble under her own weight. A wind blew and she felt herself sway, like a weak tree. Her lips parted with a dry sound and the words did not come out. She swallowed hard, bracing to explain her plan to this stranger, just so that the anger would fade from his face, but a butterfly floated into the bus. Insect or a spy? A bee came close behind it and perched on the driving mirror, prompting her lips to seal themselves. She staggered back to Ogen, to wait for his bruka to recharge. Hopefully, word would not go round the village to provoke a mob to come for her.

“What happened?” Ogen said.

She did not respond. The bus driver poked his head out of the window, glaring. Two people across the street now stared at her. It would not take long for a mob to form and throw her into the nearest bush. How then would she reach Otoboi? She sat on the pavement, suddenly too tired, her bones throbbing with pain from pedalling the tractor that morning.

Ogen walked to the driver and they spoke for a moment. *Don’t say anything!* There was the bee, or the butterfly, they were not what they seemed. She looked away. What did it matter? She did not really have a plan.

A group of children played football on the other side of the street, making a racket. She watched them and wondered if history would remember her as the woman who betrayed the federation. Perhaps no one would remember that

they could not fight back, and they would all blame her for surrendering their utopia to savages.

The bus honked and she looked up. Ogen was walking back with a grin. The driver beckoned her to board. *What had they talked about? Why did she not have this gift to chat up strangers and make friends?*

“He understands that someone has to negotiate the surrender,” Ogen said. “He doesn’t like it, but he’ll take you to Otoboi.”

She wanted to refuse, to insist on using the bruka, but the two people across the road were looking at their vidisimu, then at her, and speaking to themselves....

Her knees creaked as she hurried into the bus, and now the driver did not acknowledge her presence. She sat far from the pedaller seats, and hoped other passengers would take them up and do the hard work in case they ran out of battery. A group of youth came aboard, chattering loudly about a concert, and they gladly took over the pedaller seats, and then the bus sped off.

They passed the village’s wang oo where dozens of people were constructing a stage and stepped benches to turn the space into a stadium. The youth yapped about a celebrity coming to perform. The village had picked three cows to reward the musician, two would be grilled at the fête, and the musician would take the third one back to their home. She did not know whether to rejoice that the invasion had not killed their festive plans.

Eight minutes later, as they approached the last village before Otoboi, the bus stopped. About twenty villagers barricaded the road. They were armed with sticks and they shouted at the driver, but she could not understand them until she put on the headsets.

“Adita is on this bus!” one yelled. “You can’t enter our village with her on board!”

“We voted to block her village,” another said. “If the bus is to enter, she must get out.”

“Yes!” another person said. “We’ll throw her into the bush!”

The passenger youth now turned to her, and she feared the anger would infect them. This village blocking Rac Koko would not have much impact since they were too far away to affect each other’s day-to-day life. They would lose

social media interactions, and they would not enjoy any music or video dramas made in this village, but the gesture was dangerous. It might encourage those in her neighbourhood to gengo, and that would be really bad.

“If you are going in Nyarikeng, get out now,” the driver said to the passengers. “They’ll give you a lift into town. If you are reaching to Otoboi, we’ll use the river route.”

All other passengers now glared at Adita, frowns distorting their faces.

“Why is she on the bus?” one said.

“She still chairs defence,” the driver said. “She has to do her work. There’s a war....”

He drifted off as the passenger stormed out, jeering. All the others followed, perhaps afraid of being put on gengo because they shared a bus with her. Then, she was the only passenger left.

The driver made a U-turn, and drove a short distance before swerving into another road that ran beside a small river. She wondered if the village that owned this bus would fire the driver. Perhaps he took the job because he did not like working the garden, and if they fired him, did he have a family to support him?

They drove through a small forest and came out in Otoboi, the oldest village in the federation for it was the home of Lokang. She expected grand buildings, something out of the ordinary, but the only difference with other towns was the amount of technology. A pedal-powered bruka flew overhead, and it looked like bicycles with wings. They had succeeded in creating one! It would make flying much more commonplace, and not just for those who could afford to spend two or three years growing the plants necessary to print all the parts of the ornithopter.

A young boy, perhaps still a teenager, watched as she disembarked, his eyes like intense bulbs. She looked at her map for Lokang’s homestead, hoping to get there before a mob formed. When he came up to her, she thought he would say something mean, or tell her to get out of their town, or raise an alarm for a mob to throw her into a bush, but he smiled with all his teeth.

“Lokang sent me,” he said, pointing at a car parked behind the bus.

She thought it was a car for it looked like a sedan from her childhood, but

when she got in there were pedals under each seat. Two other people were already in the vehicle, one in the back seat, and the other at the front passenger seat. They gave her warm smiles and mumbled welcomes in their languages, her headset translating. She hid her fear behind a smile and sat on the back seat, squeezing herself against the door so as to avoid body contact with the man next to her, wishing she had won a long sleeved blouse, then it would be her cloth, not skin, touching him. Both passengers had volunteered for the War Council and since they lived in nearby villages, the boy had picked them up from their homes.

“Lokang is not home,” the boy said. His voice sounded as if he were about to laugh and she wondered how he could remain happy in the face of the invasion. “So we first go to eat.”

“I’m not hungry,” she said.

“Oh that’s chichichichi –”

Static scratched against her ears and she removed the headset in sudden panic, looking at it in surprise. Her daughter printed it just two weeks ago as she needed a new one for meetings, and it was already malfunctioning? She had used the previous one for six years before it stopped working. The boy dipped his hand into a bag, and gave her another pair. She shook her head, and put hers on again, but the constant stream of static drilled into her ears like a bee.

“Kolo!”

Now she had to wear one that another person had used, perhaps their sweat was still on it. The boy held it up in one hand, as the other steered. The other passengers pedalled.

“Here technology too many,” he said, in her language, struggling to put the words together. “Headset no work other village.”

She hid her frustrations behind a smile and accepted his offer, wishing she had a hanky to wipe it clean first. Did she smell another person’s perfume on the headset, or was that their hair oil? And all that muck would end up on her skin? Nope!

“Wear,” the boy urged, no longer smiling. “Important. Wear. We talk.”

She caught the subtext. Isn’t this why she came all this way, because the

enemy might be listening? Perhaps these headsets were safe.... She wanted to say kolo, but put them on, trying to make it not touch her skin. When the pads pressed against her ears, she bit her lips and her neck stiffened. *I'll take a long shower to wash it off.* That did not stop her skin from throbbing like a drum under the hands of a drunk musician.

“Thank you Abita,” a voice greeted, and it was not a person in the car. “Don’t reply, pretend you are listening to Karama.” They were noise cancellation sets. The boy yapped on about something, his lips moving but the words did not reach her. “They are listening,” the voice added.

They! She was right, yet she felt like a traitor. She should have known they would target her, being the defence chair. She should have asked Acen for something to detect bugs.

“There’s a device on your shoulder. Don’t look at it, we want to fool them.”

A tailor made her the dress in exchange for a hen. The top part was a cross between a t-shirt and a gomesi, with pointy things on the shoulders. She loved the design and yet her sense of fashion had betrayed the federation. The tailor had put pads on the shoulder to hold up the puff, and so she could not feel the spybot. But how had they gotten it onto her clothing? Did they use insect-sized robots that crawled into any space?

“There’s a bird following you,” the voice continued. “The thing on your shoulder sends signals to the bird, which relays it to their satellite. We don’t want them to know we found it, so when the car stops, water will splash on you, like an accident, and you’ll have to change clothing.”

The voice went off, and now she heard the driver-boy talking about the town, giving a history of every building. He stopped at a three-storied hut, which workers were painting.

“The finest hotel in town,” he said. “You have a whole apartment. You won’t work to pay for the stay since you are on important federation duties.”

She stepped out, looking around, wondering where the water would come from. The only source had to be the painters up on the scaffolding, giving the hotel a –

“Kolo!”

Paint. A bucket of it fell, splashing her. She wanted to scream out that they

had promised water, not paint, which slid on her skin like goo. *You sons of wild pigs!* The boy apologized, though he too was splashed, and the painters apologized profusely. Someone came out from the hotel, muttering sorry like a chicken clucking at the ground. She ripped off the headsets so she could not understand them. She risked a glance at her shoulder. It was drenched in paint.

They led her to a room, carpeted with palm-frond mats and with a mattress and cushions spread on the floor at one end. There was a basket with fresh clothes. She could not risk wearing anything she had come with. The enemy might have deposited tiny devices, maybe replaced her buttons, just as they did in the dramas when people spied on their cheating partners. She stripped off the dress, changed into something from the basket, and then gave her dress to the boy, who waited outside the room purportedly to have it washed.

“The War Council will meet in twenty minutes,” the boy said. “At lunch.”

Then she closed the door. Her heart beat erratically. She had twenty minutes to herself, but it was not enough time. She wanted the whole day.

**(Advance Readers Copy)**

## Chapter 4

The War Council gathered in the restaurant, a room large enough to sit three hundred people. They merged tables to create a circle for the committee. The rwot of Otoberoi, though not part of the Defence Committee, chaired for she was their host, and her village was responsible for protecting pito nyonyo. When she spoke, Adita recognized her as the voice in the headset. Her name was Namugula and she was about forty with streaks of grey in her dreadlocks, and with prominent jaws that gave her a tough look. Three residents of the hotel had cooked lunch. One was visiting relatives, another was a long term visitor studying engineering at Otoberoi University, and the third was a tourist, a former rwot who had also served in the defence committee about six years ago. Kabwita showed up too, for as chair of the foreign relations committee, she had to be part of the discussions. Anger still distorted her face. She was the only person attending remotely, and a screen was placed at the table where she would have sat. Lokang came in last. Adita did not know what to do with herself when en walked in. She had encountered en only on screen and seeing en in person felt surreal. *How do you behave in the presence of jok?* She half-rose from her seat, thinking it respectful to stand and greet en, but no one did, although a hush fell upon the room, and so she slumped back onto the chair hoping no one would notice.

Lokang rejected the status of jok and got angry when anyone mentioned it, but the rumours persisted since en physical appearance hinted at the supernatural, neither male nor female, with the beards of a man and the breasts and hips of a woman, with a voice that changed from masculine to feminine within a sentence. It helped that her language used the 'en' pronoun

for everything, male, female, humans, animals, plants, non-living things with a persona, and so Adita could think about en without worrying about en gender or nature. En beard was long, dangling in front of the chest like an animal's tail, and hair grew out of en wrinkles like a wild bush smothering ditches. Grey beard, grey hair, a lot of wrinkles, and yet still looking younger than her, timeless, ageless.

"Why must I give up a secret that I've kept all my life?" en said, the voice having both male to female qualities, as if several people spoke at once, which Adita took to be a good sign for she had heard that if en was angry, en voice had a masculine tone.

"To stop unnecessary death," Adita said.

She could not hold Lokang's stare, and her eyes darted to a woman at the other end of the table, who wore a yellow dress and large wooden earrings in which the enemy had planted bugs. They did not remove it, or even tell her about it, to make the enemy believe everything that transpired in the meeting. Adita found herself looking at the earring, and it occurred to her that she might be looking right at whoever was watching. That might give away the game. She looked away, but again her eyes fell on another person with a bug, a man from a nearby village. The enemy had replaced the buttons on his shirt. Both would only attend meetings intended for disinformation.

The boy-driver had told Adita on the way down from her room that outsiders had stopped sending spybots to Otaboi about five years ago. A network of sensors around the village easily picked out any device that emitted electronic signals the moment it entered the village, but only those that neared pito nyonyo farms, or Lokang's residence, which was like a village within the village, were intercepted. Both of those locations were about six miles away from the village's centre, so the enemy would not wonder why the other bugs had not yet been discovered.

"Our best option is to incite the Kenyans," Mayeku said, and Adita felt better for though she had no plan, she could not insist on something so silly. "What Kenyans need is hope. We give them that, and they'll distract the invaders long enough for us to build our own weapons."

"Kenyans will die –" someone said, but Mayeku slammed his fist on the

table.

“Including my brothers and sisters!” Mayeku said. “And if we don’t do anything and they march in here as if they are coming for an evening drink, how many of us will die?”

“A lot more people will die if we give them pito nyonyo,” Lokang said, taking his seat. “They want to make weapons more deadly than nuclear.”

“Let’s give it to other countries,” Adita said. “On condition that they defend us.”

Lokang scratched en beard, and en wrinkles deepened as a frown overtook en face. She risked a glance into en eyes, and looked away almost immediately for there was something watery in there, something that caught the light in a strange way and made her think of fish eyes. Jok eyes.

“Okay,” en said. “Let’s talk to them and see.”

#

Nobody knew where en came from. The most popular story was that en fell from the sky, like a character in the folk tales, that one day a woman saw a gourd falling out of the clouds and she broke it open to find a teenage boy asleep inside. Another had it that en came from a tree, that one day an axe struck the trunk only for the woodcutter to hear a cry of pain. The man fled. The next day, people found the tree had opened itself and a five year old child sat on a root, crying, one hand bleeding from an axe wound.

Adita liked the more rational story, that en was an orphan child whose aunt mistreated en so much that en ran away and lived in the streets, where an old, homeless woman taught en the secrets of plants. At fifteen, en opened a hospital after discovering a cure for AIDS and cancer. Corporate pharmaceuticals pressured the government to force en to give up en secrets, but en insisted the medicines were spiritual, for en feared corporations would use the medicine to enrich themselves. En treated thousands of patients and when they left the hospital, they had a new understanding of life for en gave lectures every evening. En did not charge a fee and instead asked for in kind payments, food to feed patients and staff, labour in the herbal gardens and in the hospital, and en gained a godlike status. En disciples opened more hospitals. Traditional healers, herbalists, medical doctors, health workers,

they all abandoned their careers to establish hospitals, and within five years half the country relied on them for health care.

En established a university that taught technology, and most of the students were school illiterate, but they grasped new dimensions of knowledge and it ignited the revolution. The man who invented the *bruka* was a bicycle repairer. The woman who invented the pedal-tractor was a peasant, just like Adita, who wanted something to ease her work. En unlocked the secrets of bioelectricity, inventing a plant-based solar panel that anyone could easily set up on their roof, and the unlimited energy powered their rapid transformation. Then En figured out *pito nyonyo*, and eventually En invented a factory-level 3D printer, and overnight gadgets flooded villages, electric stoves that were cheaper than a cup of tea, refrigerators that even a twelve year old could design and print, food processors that turned left overs and rotting fruits into edible powder. Then came the *vidisimu* to replace smart phones, and the world truly flipped. Rather than rely on the programming languages that powered phones, a software engineer, upon learning from mathematicians that binary code had its roots on a divination system that was common all over the continent, studied the mathematical theories of divination. With the help of En, they unlocked a new language that enabled devices to talk to each other without needing service providers, or centralized servers.

En focused on improving life in rural areas, where seventy percent of the population lived and yet the government spent most of its resources in cities and big towns. By the time En was twenty five, the quality of life in the rural areas had become very high, triggering a mass migration and soon, almost overnight, the cities and big towns were empty.

As this happened, the third world war broke out, distracting the former colonial powers who would have interfered with the revolution. After the war, power in the country had shifted from a dictator, who had ruled for over forty years as a puppet of the former colonisers, to a direct democracy. The dictator had imagined a system similar to China, with people enjoying social development but not political freedom, until he organized an election and no one came to his rallies. The government had ceased to have a meaning for people provided themselves with all the social services that they needed.

They managed their own schools and hospitals, they built their own roads and came up with laws to govern their daily lives. The dictator ordered the army to restore the old order. Too late. Soldiers had tasted the good life! They ousted him and the country fully transitioned into a federation of semi-autonomous village.

In the early days, Lokang set up a company that sold the vidisimu and other gadgets globally. Since the vidisimu offered free calls and unlimited internet access, demand was very high and it quickly replaced the smart phone. Lokang became the richest person in the world, but en used that money and the social power from being thought of as jok to influence neighbouring countries. They too adopted Yat Madit, and in a few years eight countries in East and Central Africa had joined the revolution. Another war and the climate crisis distracted the colonial powers, who might have stopped the dissolution of the borders they had created.

#

Grumbling, Kabwita called the US Secretary of State and the Kenyan Minister of Foreign Affairs, and added them to the meeting. Each had a screen set up for them at the table. The grin on the State Secretary's face confirmed they had fallen for the bait.

"I'm not happy about this," Kabwita said. "But my people will give you pito nyonyo if you agree to an immediate cease fire."

"Give it to us and we stop shooting," the State Secretary said.

"We don't want pito nyonyo," the Kenyan said. "We want food."

"We already give you food!" Kabwita said. "Half the food you eat comes from us!"

"You give us left overs," the Kenyan said. "We want fresh food. So our soldiers will occupy your country and make sure you give us all the food we want."

A groan surged through the room. The State Secretary's grin grew bigger.

"Very well," Kabwita said. "We'll give pito nyonyo to the Chinese, or the Europeans." A fourth screen had been set up around the table, and the Chinese foreign minister popped up on it. "He is on hold, he can't hear us or see us, but you say ngwe and I add him to this call."

The Kenyan chuckled. “Okay, we shall cease fire,” he said. “But our army will stay in the territory we have captured until we work out a deal.”

And the State Secretary said, “Once we get pito nyonyo, we leave Luanda.”

“Pito nyonyo is a process,” Kabwita said. “We can’t just hand you files. There’s spiritual stuff that goes with it, so even if we told you to use this or that plant and this or that worm, you’ll just end up with goo. We can’t teach you all that while you are shooting at us.”

The State Secretary looked like he did not believe, but then he glanced at the Chinese man.

“Okay. We will issue an immediate ceasefire –”

“And the Kenyans leave our territory immediately.”

“No,” the Kenyan said. “We stay.”

“Then I’ll talk to the Chinese.”

“The Kenyans are already on their way out,” the State Secretary said.

“And stop spying on us,” Adita said. “We don’t have national secrets and whatever we discuss will always be public.” She nodded at the driver-boy, who brought the bug, a ball with a dozen tentacles, some were pinhead-sized cameras. “This was in my dress.”

The State Secretary laughed. “You found it,” he said. “Pinky promise, we aren’t spying any more.” He held up his pinky finger and winked. “So, lets work out a deal, all right?”

“Unlike you who report to CEOs, we have to convince the entire federation to accept this deal,” Kabwita said. “Every citizen must agree to it. So give us time. Three days.”

“Fine,” he said. “We ceasefire, and in three days, we start negotiations.”

#

Shortly after the meeting, Adita met with Lokang and Namugula in her room. They sat on mats. Lokang and Namugula were eating their lunch, but Adita had stones in her throat. She could not swallow anything.

“What’s your plan then,” Lokang said.

My plan.... She smiled, and knew how stupid she sounded even before she spoke.

“They rely on centralized systems,” she said. “We find their servers....”

“That won’t work,” Namugula said, smiling hard the way she would smile at a child who wanted to touch the rainbow.

“Then come up with something,” Adita said. “Pito nyonyo was to buy us time, so if you think my idea is useless – but remember Kenya rents its guns from Slember, eh, and if they don’t pay, Slember disables the guns. Eh? You see? So if we enter somewhere and flip a switch...”

“They have cyber defences,” Lokang said. “We can’t beat that.”

“Then think of something,” Adita said. “We have three days.”

“She has a point,” Namugula said. “We need to physically get to their system – the satellites communicate to their servers, so if we get to a satellite – you understand?”

“I’m listening,” Lokang said, when Namugula hesitated.

“We curse their weapons.”

Lokang leaned forward, the wrinkles creasing as though they had a life of their own. En bit en lips, perhaps to stop the words that Adita could see bubbling in his throat like lava.

“We are not using those spiders,” Lokang hissed.

“Do you have any other option?” Namugula said.

“I won’t allow! No!”

“So, what, eh, we just sit here and perish. Eh? Is that it?”

“I’ll think of something,” Lokang said. “But we are not using the spiders!”

What are the spiders? The question could not jump out of Adita’s mouth, but as she followed the argument she got a new understanding of Lokang. En was no jok. Though a genius who unlocked a whole new world of knowledge, en brain was eighty years and could not come up with something new to defend the federation.

“Let’s call the council,” Namugula said. “If we reach a consensus to use the spiders, eh, will you still say no?”

En wrinkles twitched and twirled as though anxious to escape from en skin.

**(Advance Readers Copy)**

## Chapter 5

Cogoyot, a bubbly woman in her early thirties, created the spiders. Her fashion sense imitated what her ancestors wore, and she led a movement to decolonize dressing. Her skirt was a cipceno, with the cip being a thin apron that covered her vagina and the ceno being another thin strip of cloth covering her butt, a string of waist beads attached the two pieces. She did not wear a bra or knickers, but she had a large bead necklace that covered her breasts since some people were not ready to see bare-chested women in public, not even fifty years after the revolution.

“You want to use my spiders?” Cogoyot said, when they met her in her homestead.

She was an ajwaka. The calling came when she was fifteen, after a leopard in a dream led her into a bush and showed her new plants to treat new diseases. She became a famous diviner shortly after and some people suggested she would carry on Lokang’s work in medicine. She moved to Otoboi village about ten years ago to learn from en and she had since made it her home.

They sat on papyrus mats under a tree in a private wang oo in the middle of Cogoyot’s homestead, which was a complex settlement with over fifty huts, each three stories tall, and over half of them were hospital wards, while the other half accommodated families of health workers, her relatives, and a place for guests. She did not call it a hospital, though. Adita could not imagine living in such a place, the noise from children alone would drive her mad. It was a small village within the village, with over three hundred residents, with its own wang oo, which was a dusty space ringed with abila. Unlike some people whose shrines resembled miniature churches or mosques, a hangover

from the old religions, these abila were small structures of grass and sticks, hardly two feet tall, and the only indication of their purpose was the remains of sacrifice, grains, feathers, crumbs of millet bread. Chicken loitered about, pecking the ground. If a chicken went into an abila to eat whatever someone had left in there, it was a sign that jok, or ancestors, or whoever the shrine was dedicated to, had accepted the offer. Some abila had sacrificial grain that had been there for so long that they were sprouting. Cogoyot's hut was to the east of this wang oo, and it had balconies that made Adita dream about basking in the morning sun.

"My spiders are not a weapon," Cogoyot said, casting an uneasy glance at Lokang. Perhaps she thought it was a test.

"You should not have made them," Lokang said, en voice flickering with anger.

"They are my personal assistants," Cogoyot said.

"If we give the enemy pito nyonyo, they'll create deadly weapons," Namugula said. "If we resist, they'll kill us. But your spiders can stop them, and it will send a message to the whole world that we can defend ourselves."

Adita thought the spiders were a kind of jok, though she could not imagine jok being deployed on a large scale to fight off thousands of invaders. The common practice was for individual soldiers to get good luck charms. There were two stories, however, where a single charm protected an entire army against enemy bullets, during the maji maji rebellion against colonizers in the early 1900s and during the Lakwena uprising against a dictator in the 1980s. How would these spiders help? Were they like the kifaro that evil diviners, lujok, gave their clients to kill or cause sicknesses on other people? But such medicine could only work against individuals, not an entire army. The poisoner used a personal item of the victim, clothing, poop, spittle, hair, anything that the lajok could turn into a kifaro. Acen believed these medicines relied on DNA, as they only affected the targeted victim, who would suffer a mysterious sicknesses, or death. Were they talking about the DNA of an entire army to create a kifaro? It was possible since each soldier's gun was programmed using their DNA to stop the enemy from using captured weapons. Even war planes and tanks required biometric access of some kind. There had

to be a huge database of DNA in a server somewhere. Was this the plan then? Get this DNA and send a kifaro against the entire army?

“I’m not a lajok,” Cogoyot said, shaking her head.

“I told her I could think of something but she won’t listen,” Lokang said.

“I’m listening,” Namugula said. “But we don’t have weeks. We don’t even have three days. How long can we keep this to ourselves? Already too many people know that we don’t intend to give away pito nyonyo. Too many. We can’t keep secrets in our federation.”

“I’m not a lajok,” Cogoyot said. “Lujok will be happy to do it. Not me.”

“What if we use it on machines?” Namugula said.

“Machines? Not people?”

“Yes,” Namugula said. “We disarm them.”

A smile broke on Cogoyot’s face, but it lingered for only a second before she bit her lips in deep thought.

“That I can do,” she said. “Let’s go to my abila.”

Cogoyot led them at a brisk pace to her hut, and they went up a narrow flight of stairs that made Adita’s knees scream in protest. She expected a shrine, but it was more of a robotic workshop full of spiders. Even after fifty years now, Adita struggled to comprehend this mixture for she grew up with a clear distinction between what ajwaka did, and what schools called science. She once visited Acen’s classroom and saw children learning code by throwing shells and bones onto a goatskin mat, and translating the resultant chaotic shapes into mathematical strings. Acen had then told her how it had come about, how the software engineer and Lokang acted upon knowledge that binary code was rooted in divination, and so they figured out new mathematical principles. But she could still not wrap her head around it.

A programming table sat in the middle of the shrine-workshop, with a mirror-like top, and instead of shells, bones, coins, and other divination items, the jami tyet were small electronic objects. A forty inch glass pane was attached to one end of the table.

Namugula put the spybot they had removed from Adita’s clothes on the table, but it did not cast a reflection. When Cogoyot leaned over to pick it up, the mirror did not catch her reflection either. Only the electronic jami tyet

had images. Cogoyot plugged a cable into the spybot, punched a button on a table, and the glass pane turned into a screen. The Yat Madit logo flashed for a second, and then two different coloured windows popped up. The grey one showed the jami tyet arranged in geometric shapes, and the blue one was blank. Cogoyot shook the jami tyet in her palms and cast them on the mirror, and the shapes they made appeared on the grey window. She moved the objects, creating new shapes, and alphanumeric data popped up on the blue window.

“They use the same code language on all their devices and servers,” Namugula said to Adita, and Adita wanted to ask her to shut up for she had figured that out already, but she was glad that finally someone was explaining something to her. She nodded. “That is the DNA....”

The only problem was that a kifaro, or its milder form called a lugaaga, could not harm a person unless the victim came into physical contact with the charm. The victim might unknowingly step on it while walking from their garden to home, or even jump over it, but there had to be some kind of closeproximity contact for it to take effect.

“It won’t work,” Cogoyot said. “This is no longer connected to their servers.”

“There are other spybots,” Namugula said. “The earring and the buttons.”

“But the moment we touch them they’ll know,” Adita said. “They’ll get suspicious.”

“And they fear cyber attacks,” Cogoyot said. “They might cut connection before the spiders do anything.” She paused, and then added. “Its very likely that these spybots are not communicating with their main systems, you know, as protection againstcyber attacks. We need a new target.”

“I thought kifaro only needs to touch the victim,” Adita said.

“My spiders are not kifaro,” Cogoyot said, her voice screeching with repressed anger.

“Sorry,” Adita said. “I mean –” she trailed off.

“They are a mix of jok and code,” Cogoyot said. “They can’t work as if they are only jok. Contact alone is not enough. We need to transmit code into their data streams.”

“So the satellites,” Namugula said. “If we can access one.... How do we do

it?”

“Do you see what you are doing?” Lokang said before Adita could mention Acen. “Putting living code into weapons of mass destruction. Don’t you see the danger?”

“My spiders are not kifaro,” Cogoyot said.

“Jok is not to be played with like this,” Lokang said. “Jok is –”

“Ladit,” Namugula cut in, using the honorific word for male elder, in spite of the ambiguous gender of en. All available words of utmost respect were gendered. “You taught us this –”

“I didn’t teach you to play with jok!”

“You translated divination into mathematics,” Namugula said. “That’s the language of jok and you translated it and created that,” she pointed at the jami tyet. “Sooner or later jok would learn the translated version, then what would happen? Eh? Cogoyot quickened the process. She taught jok mathematics and programming, and now jok controls her spiders.”

Adita looked at the spiders as their true nature hit her hard. Sentient robots? People had tried to create truly artificial intelligence without success. There were autonomous mechs and war drones and self-driving vehicles, but they were not conscious. Some argued that they could never be for they did not have tipu, like every human, or jok, like every other living thing. They could not even be alive the way rocks and rivers and mountains were alive, but if Cogoyot had put jok in a robot, it was sentient for it had a *spirit*.

“Jok can’t be both good and evil,” Cogoyot said. “It takes one side and never changes.”

“And she controls them,” Namugula added. “I’ve never heard of ajwaka failing to control the jok in their shrines.”

The silence that followed filled the room with a thick dust such that everyone held their breathe, watching Lokang, waiting for the next word from en, but en closed en eyes and expelled air out of en mouth like akettle letting out steam.

“We need your help,” Namugula said. “We need a vehicle to take a spider to space. Can you give us something within a day?”

Acen had told her that space programs were not popular because most scientists were taught to solve present problems, and space exploration had no

foreseeable benefits. They did not use satellites for communications, unlike their enemy, and their weather instruments were well below the Karman line. Acen kept her achievements low key, thought her vehicle had visited the moon and asteroids, for fear of a backlash putting a stop to the program. Adita cleared her throat to tell them about it, but then Lokang spoke.

“I never thought of such a thing,” en said. “And I can’t come up with anything overnight because it’s not something I think about.”

Perhaps because there were no plants in space, and so whatever jok en had, or en was, could not give en ideas about spaceships.

“I could ask my daughter,” Adita said. They all turned to her, their brows raising in question. “She sent a vehicle to the moon.”

Lokang’s face twisted, and Adita wondered if it was in fury. The most famous sermon of en had it that capitalism, and all its associated evils, arose because scientists pursued knowledge, not for the betterment of the community, but for private and personal reasons.

“Why would anyone waste resources on spaceships?” en growled, and the voice was mostly masculine now. “How do spaceships help us?”

“It will save us now,” Adita said.

“And they got pito nyonyo for that?” Lokang said.

“We don’t have time to argue whether it’s right or wrong,” Adita said. “Let’s call her.”

She avoided their eyes and stared at the jami tyet, as if to decipher their complex geometric shapes. Perhaps en suddenly realised that the world would not revolve around en forever, that perhaps in a hundred years, or even in ten years, people would abandon en principals and follow their hearts and dreams.

“We’ll send people to her,” Namugula said. “We don’t know if they are listening to your daughter, and so we can’t just call her.”

Lokang walked out, leaving en anger behind. Adita risked a glance into Cogoyot’s eyes, and got a shrug.

“It hurts to see your child growing into something you don’t agree with,” Cogoyot said. “We will always respect en, but en doesn’t have solutions to every problem we have.”

“We just have to ensure we don’t lose what en taught us,” Namugala said.

CHAPTER 5

“We can’t allow corruption to derail us, so after this, we’ll have to talk with your daughter about her space program.”

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## Chapter 6

There were too many spybots in Adita's home, so they faked an emergency to draw Acen away. Her husband called to say he broke his arm in an accident, and she raced back to her village, taking all the children. On reaching, she found Karama waiting, and they flew for an hour to Ororoo, where she had built a dog-polo, a word she coined to mean the gateway to the sky.

Ororoo had a lot of free land. In the federation land ownership was communal, with committees set up to allocate usage. No village would have given Acen all the land she wanted to build her dog-polo, but Ororoo had a very small population of eight hundred people. It was a valley that was flooded for about thirty years. When it dried up, a few families bothered to return. It worked perfectly for Acen because of a legend about a rock formation in the middle of the valley. Huge boulders, which were flat and almost circular, were piled on top of each other, and from a distance they looked like a coiled snake with a raised head. Legend had it that a snake fell from the sky and it had a single horn like that of rhino, and it had arranged these rocks as its home. It became an important clan joke, and in the past people had brought it sacrifice of thanks after every bountiful harvest. No one had seen the snake in more than two hundred years, but the lore inspired Acen's quest to visit the stars for she believed her ancestors had had contact with a world up there.

Adita had never been to the dog-polo. From the air, it was a collection of six giant domes encircling a small, square building. The domes were so huge that each could accommodate fifty huts and five gardens. Only one dome was complete, though, with a glass-like wall creating a special atmosphere within.

"I see why Lokang hates such things," Cogoyot said. "How does this help

us?”

Adita had flown on her bruka from Otoboi, and now they stood on the rooftop of the square building, gaping at the dome. A few moments later, Namugula’s bruka landed, and she and Lokang stepped out. En still had a scowl, even after the thirty minute flight, and the sight of the dome made en ears to twitch in fury. Adita wanted to say something to defend her daughter, but could not think of anything.

A man came up to meet them. He introduced himself as Okwateng, the caretaker of dog-polo. He spent most of his time alone in the premises, keeping it neat and tidy with the help of robots. Adita wondered if he was like her, a person who did not like to socialize, and she wondered if she could talk to Acen about relocating here.

“Robots?” Lokang said.

Okwateng appeared to be intimidated by the presence of a physical jok, and he shrunk away. His hand swept about haplessly, as though to say ‘Can’t you see?’. Three humanoid robots sat on the edge of the rooftop, solar panels on their backs spread out like wings, sunlight gleaming on them. Acen believed that for humans needed robots to succeed in space. Now, Adita wondered what would happen if Cogoyot put her jok in these ones.

“Robots?” Lokang hissed.

En probably thought the humanoids were worse than the spiders. They were about five foot tall, with spindly legs and round torsos, with faces that resembled wooden spirit masks.

“We are making the same mistakes,” Lokang said. “Everything we’ve built will go to waste if we.... Why? Why do we need these?”

The caretaker kept pointing, and Adita realized he was showing them a shelter at one end of the rooftop. It looked like a mix between a bus stop and a café. Perhaps Acen intended it as a lounge for space passengers. She walked to it quickly, to get away from Lokang’s anger, and Cogoyot and Namugula followed her, their slippers slapping the stone roof.

She went behind a small counter, to a shelf that had a tea pot on an electric stove. She lifted the lid and the smell of ginger and lemon soothed her. She could use that! She turned on the stove and the pot simmered. Cogoyot and

Namugala sat on stools, and Lokang walked over to them.

“We should pass a law stopping this kind of thing,” Lokang said. “Every research must be approved by – by – by other people.”

“That already happens,” Cogoyot said. She tapped on a stool, inviting him to sit, but he remained standing, and scowling. “If someone wants pito nyonyo,” Cogoyot added, “they need a hundred people in at least five different villages from each region of the federation to approve their request. She must have demonstrated their usefulness to get the approval.”

“What’s the use of these abominations?” Lokang hissed. A bit of saliva drooled off en beard. “Who is ever going to live in space?”

“I can find their request,” Cogoyot said.

She tapped on her vidisimu and a paper thin screen spread out to about thirteen inches. She typed Acen’s name in a website and all her technologies came up. She clicked on ‘habitable dome’ and then on a tab that said ‘purpose’. Since the climate was unpredictable, and worsening, the dome might come in handy. Some people predicted total climate collapse in another twenty years, that it would be too hot for people to live outside, and so creating domed habitats for planets that could not support life would be essential for survival. The robots might be helpful to carry out tasks outside the dome.

Lokang’s mouth opened to retort, but en wrinkles moved like ripples settling down on a water’s surface. Adita could not tell if en was ashamed of the outburst.

“Tea?” Adita said as the kettle came to a boil.

Nobody responded. She still poured it into four mugs, and each took one and sipped. Adita walked about on the rooftop, to get away from them, and she was thankful that no one followed her. About ten minutes later, Acen’s colourful bruka appeared.

“Ah, there she is,” Adita said. “My daughter.”

She clutched her now empty cup tight, and she did not mind that sweat soaked her armpits. She stood in the sun as the bruka landed, and then she felt the others beside her, with en anger wafting about like a lost cloud. Acen jumped down, and her eyes opened wide.

“Lokang!” she whispered, her voice trembling. “It’s you, really you?”

Lokang grunted a response and in mood killed off Acen's excitement. She turned to her mother, but before she could speak, Adita blurted out.

"Have you ploughed my garden?" Adita said.

"It's ready for planting," Acen replied, laughing, and she showed Adita photos of the garden. "But we are not here to look at photos, eh, let's go see the spaceship."

They followed her to a lift and down to a workshop, which looked like the garage Adita's father frequented when his motorcycle had issues, with greasy metals and machine parts scattered about. In the middle was a vehicle about the size of a table and shaped like a gourd, or rather like a fat bottle with a very long neck. It had two bird-like legs.

"We call it opokotuk," Acen said.

"A what?" Cogoyot said.

"The flying gourd," Acen said. "The story of Kiir, he came from the sky in a gourd."

"It's good to connect with our past," Lokang said. "But what's the relevance of this thing?"

Acen took a step back, as if unsure how to respond to criticism from a person she worshipped, instead of a pat on the back. When she spoke, her voice stuttered.

"The climate might make life hard," she said. "Opokotuk collects data from space and helps us to design the dome –"

"I suggest we get down to business," Namugula said, interrupting. "We have to send her spiders up there and question is, can this thing do the job?"

"It has made four trips," Acen said, her voice still trembling. "Twice to the moon, where it stayed for a month each time. And twice we landed it on asteroids, which was much harder since they are small and travel at a great speed. But we fig–"

"We'll take your word for it," Namugula interrupted her again. "If you landed it on an asteroid then you can land it on a satellite, right?"

"Yeah, but how will a spider survive..... we've never taken a living thing up there."

"Let's get started," Cogoyot said.

Acen pointed to a room at the far end of the workshop. She called it wang-polo, the centre of the sky, where they monitored all their space trips.

#

Namugula convinced Lokang to return to Otoboi as en presence was not necessary, and en, still fuming, was a distraction. Adita could not contribute anything, but she could not go back home and she did not want to spend another hour in a bruka with another person. Acen told her enough about the dome that she could not resist the temptation of spending the next few days there, perhaps even the next few years. It promised her isolation.

She avoided going online, though Acen filled her in on what was happening. Her village had finally sent Okong away, dumping him in a bush far away from any nearby village, but that did not stop other villages from blocking Rac Koko for *considering* to harbour a wife-beater. Some villages near Rac Koko were now thinking of a block, as they blamed her for the surrender, but the federation had split into two with some people saying she had done the right thing to save lives. Before heading back to Otoboi, Lokang went online to plead for calm in a speech that sympathized with Adita, and en said they all wanted to avoid bloodshed. The enraged side did not listen. They instead pushed for permission to print weapons, arguing that if every village made something, overnight they would have enough for defence. This argument gave Adita hope that they could ask the invaders for more time, since the federation needed a consensus. And they needed time for opokotuk was not built to land on satellites. It required grappling arms and the ability to cut openings for the spider to slip through, so its body had to be modified a bit.

“We could send the spiders to the navy ships,” Adita had suggested. “It seems easier.”

But chances of failure was higher. The ships and other ground-based targets were heavily guarded, with scanners looking out for spybots. Satellites did not have such protection.

When Adita stepped out to walk around dog-polo, she noticed a lot of people milling about. Someone had failed to keep a secret and, other than the fifteen people who made up Acen’s crew of engineers, there were thirty more idlers, going by the number of bruka on the rooftop. *Kolo! This is how they failed!*

She would have to ask them to stay and not go back to their homes, and especially not to use their vidisimu. But as was with everything in the federation, it would need a consensus, and if they could not get it quickly, then it would be put to a vote, and if the majority said they wanted to leave, what would she do about it?

She walked into the finished dome. It had three walls to seal off its atmosphere, and she had to pass through two tunnels and three gates, each tunnel being an opportunity to sanitize and disinfect. Acen had said it was not very strict like the airlocks they would have in space, but it was closer to what it would be like when the climate deteriorated so much. There were birds, goats, cattle, butterflies and many insects inside, in an ecosystem that had sustained itself for a year. The next phase required putting people in there, and she was looking for volunteers who would lock themselves away for a year. A very tempting prospect!

She sat down on a log in a garden to watch butterflies chase each other. Her muscles relaxed, now that she was alone and did – ugh? Was that a cough? Shoes crunching twigs? Kolo!

“Ah lamego!” A voice said, male, young. She did not turn around to look at the speaker. “I saw you sitting here by yourself and thought you need company, so I came to chat.”

She forced a smile. He looked to be in his early twenties, with a beard struggling to prove he was an adult. He sat on a log a few paces away, but she stood up, abruptly, and walked away. *Idiot.*

She went into the first hut she came upon. The doors were open and it was furnished, but it did not have any personal belongings so she figured it was for show. She locked the door and slumped onto the bed, and stayed there until night, unable to sleep, her joints hurting from pedalling the tractor that morning, her skin tingling from mingling with others all day. Okwateng came at some point after the sun had set to tell her about supper, and she was starving, but she just lay staring at the roof. She dozed off to troubling dreams, and jerked awake when Acen knocked on the door at about midnight. Apparently, word about her behaviour had gotten some people worried. Acen brought food, juice and roasted gonja, which Adita devoured, and then slept.

But it was not peaceful, for she dreamed that she was in a pit full of other people, like bodies in a mass grave, only that they were all alive, wriggling like worms.

#

The redesigned opokotuk was ready. Acen and her team had stayed up all night designing and printing for it arms. The number of idlers at the dog-polo had doubled, but Namugula had taken care of things. She forbade anyone from leaving by taking away their bruka ignition keys, and she confiscated all their vidisimu. There were protests, but when put to a discussion they quickly came to a consensus that her actions were necessary to keep the secret. She put four people to scan for bugs and spybots. *She should be defence minister*, Adita thought. *I'm useless.*

She had breakfast with Acen, whose eyes were swollen from lack of sleep, but who did not seem about to put her head on a pillow. They had to send opokotuk up, though she was not sure it was ready, for the mission had become even more urgent with Slember insisting on sending a team to Otoboi that day, rather than wait for the three days the Secretary of State had agreed to. The 'team' comprised of about a thousand soldiers.

"They are ruthless," Acen said. "That's how they control half the armies of the world."

Slember started as a communications corporation, providing satellite internet. Then, its CEO bankrolled the election of a US president and Slember won a contract to handle all communications of the Department of Defence. Gradually, it controlled the military communications of close allies of the US, and as its riches and power grew, it bought up defence contractors and weapons manufacturers and any company that supplied the US Army, becoming a monopoly defence contractor. After that, it was unstoppable.

World War III begun when the US annexed Greenland so that Slember could build new military bases. Europe came to Greenland's aid and the two former allies went to war. Canada joined on Europe's side while Russia sided with the US, shooting nukes into Europe, and Europe responded by nuking Florida, bringing the war to a stalemate. By then, the world was afraid, and Slember convinced more than thirty countries to subscribe to its defence systems.

Countries like Kenya could rent weapons way beyond their means, including autonomous mech-units armed with nuclear weapons, as long as they paid a subscription fee. Eventually, with half the armies of the world depending on it, Slember become the richest and most powerful corporation.

And Adita had wild thoughts. If the jok code got into their system, it would disarm half the planet. Question was, why stop there? Why not get into the system of every other army, since they all had digitally controlled weapons, to enforce true world peace? But the spiders could not infect all armies at the same time and the others would see what was happening and throw a nuclear bomb at the federation.

They hurried into wang-polo right after breakfast, but found it packed. A lot of people were just idling about, curious to see how it unfolded. Adita sat at the table, but the bodies pressed into her space, their skins spraying sweat into the air and drenching her –

“Okay, everyone, get out!” Acen said, physically pushing people out of the door. Had she seen her mother’s discomfort? “If you are not working on this thing, out, we’ll set up an observation screen for you in the workshop. Get out!”

Namugula and Cogoyot joined her in pushing people and in a few seconds, only six people directly involved in the mission remained. To Adita, she had the whole room to herself. Acen gave her a cup of ginger tea.

“Okay,” Cogoyot said. “Let’s begin.”

Slember had four hundred thousand satellites, so many that they did not have to look hard for a target. Opokotuk flew out of the workshop and soared at two hundred kilometres an hour. It needed just one and a half hours to reach the target, ninety minutes of biting lips and crossing fingers. Was the enemy watching their airspace? Would they raise an eyebrow if they detected a vehicle going up? Would they shoot it down? Opokotuk was not designed for fighting, nor did it have tricks to evade missiles, but it was not the only thing in the air for a lot of bruka flew about, and hundreds of weather observing equipment floated at the fifty kilometre mark. Being too small to carry a human, it could pass for a weather gadget. They might suspect something is off once it kept going, but by then it would be out of shooting range. Hopefully.

It was a good thing the enemy had not used planes in the invasion, perhaps because the federation had no air force and no military targets to hit from afar. They kept the war planes waiting on aircraft carriers off the coast of Luanda, and surveillance planes that patrolled their skies, but none was close to Ororoo for it was not the centre of attention. Acen set up a query to monitor social media posts from around Luanda, in case anyone reported planes lifting off. Hopefully, by the time they did, opokotuk would be far out of firing range.

“It has a good luck jok,” Cogoyot said. “It will reach.”

Adita was more worried about the battery. If she needed to recharge her tractor after just one round of ploughing, how much battery did this thing have? She narrowed her eyes at Acen in question, and Acen giggled.

“We discovered an algae,” she said. “There’s a pot full of muck, and a bulb on the pot’s lid gives it light for photosynthesis to generates ten times what the panels on your roof–”

“Why don’t I have it on my tractor?” Adita said.

Acen giggled. “It took us almost two years to grow that pot,” she said.

Adita wanted to tell her to focus on such pots so that tractors could enjoy endless power-supplies, but Namugula squeaked.

“They sent planes!” Namugula said, holding up her vidisimu. Someone in Luanda had just posted that six planes had taken off from a ship.

“Doesn’t mean they are after our gourd,” Acen said, though uncertainly.

Opokotuk was now over seventy kilometres up, and that must have triggered the enemy’s response. The federation did not have specialized radar equipment, but their weather gadgets could detect fast flying objects, so Acen called up a screen, and looked at data from the Luanda network. She then tracked the path of the planes and saw that they were racing after opokotuk at nearly a thousand kilometres an hour, about five times the speed of the flying gourd. But they had set off after it had passed the seventy kilometre mark, and now it approached the Karman line.

“Good luck is on our side,” Cogoyot said.

The planes fired missiles. Could they hit it? The missiles would catch up with opokotuk in about a minute.

“We have good luck,” Acen repeated Cogoyot’s words, holding her breathe.

“Their missiles are not meant to shoot things going into space!”

Still, they sat in silence and tracked the trajectory of the missiles, and only when it became apparent that they had missed by a very wide mark did they all let out a celebratory yay! Cogoyot hugged Namugula and Acen clapped like a delirious child. In roughly an hour, their spaceship would reach the target.

Adita’s vidisimu rang. She knew who it was even before she saw the caller ID. Kabwita. The enemy must have now known something was up and had called her. Adita’s vidisimu was not bugged, as it was impossible to put spy ware on it, but Namugula’s team had checked it just to make sure. She accepted the call, keeping her cameras off. Kabwita’s angry face popped up.

“What is this I’m hearing that we are shooting at their satellites?”

“What are you talking about?” Adita said.

“The American called saying they see a strange vehicle going to space, and they want to know what it is, otherwise they resume the war – with nuclear weapons.”

Kolo!

“I’m not aware of anything!” Adita said. “Why should they break the ceasefire just because someone working on some silly space program sent something up? My daughter has such a program, she sends things to space all the time.”

“Are you playing with our lives?”

“Eh?” Adita said. “And what would one aircraft do against hundreds of thousands of satellites? Eh? What? Can you make them see sense?”

“No,” Kabwita said. She was for a moment distracted by someone off screen, her face going from angry to burning like a volcano. “They’ve attacked!”

With nuclear? The words stuck on Adita’s throat and her lips hung agape. Kabwita ended the call. The others turned on their vidisimu, and yes, there was news of the invaders preparing to resume fighting. Their drones were up in the air, their troops were jumping into vehicles, and the mech-units were hurling missiles at villages, indiscriminately.

*What have we done?*

Acen must have seen the expression on her face for she hugged her. She was her daughter, and so the touch was not as revolting as when a stranger did it.

She was defence minister, she had to marshal her troops into action. But what could she do? What could she tell the federation? To start fighting yet she had told them to give up?

“Can we tell people about our plans now?” she asked Cogoyot.

“We can’t risk it,” Cogoyot said. “They might disconnect the satellites within range of opokotuk, and that will defeat us.”

“If they do that,” Namugula said, “they won’t be able to communicate either. They rely on those satellites.”

“We can’t risk it,” Cogoyot said.

So Adita went online, pleading with the invaders. “We agreed to give you pito nyonyo,” she said. “Why are you fighting?” She urged the citizens to use whatever little strength they had to defend their villages, and then she summoned the War Council for an emergency meeting.

Hopefully, the enemy would not use nuclear weapons for another hour. That’s how much time opokotuk needed to reach a satellite. An hour. *Hopefully.*

“We have good luck on our side,” Cogoyot said. “We must sit tight and swallow whatever they throw. Forty more minutes.”

Five minutes later, Adita met with the War Council, and she said that since the enemy had not respected the ceasefire, they had to arm themselves. They would let the federation vote, since consensus did not seem likely, and eight members agreed it was a good way forward. One person volunteered to speak to the federation since many villages had blocked Adita and would not see anything she posted. The council also urged Kabwita to open talks with the Chinese and Europeans to come to their defence in exchange for pito nyonyo. Hopefully, this would calm down the enemy enough not to use nuclear weapons. *Hopefully.*

Then, Adita turned off her vidisimu and everyone in wang-polo did the same. The minutes passed very slowly, and mostly in silence, with their eyes on opokotuk’s cameras as if they were watching a thriller film. A satellite came into view and opokotuk went straight for it. Acen speculated that they could not know which satellite opokotuk targeted, for they could not track it once it crossed the Karman line. Their radar systems faced the ground, not space. To track it from the ground, they would have needed to know its path

well in advance. So hopefully they had not disconnected this satellite from their system.

Opokotuk's arm stretched and a suction cup grabbed at the satellite, then another arm did the same, and now it rode the satellite like a boy on a bull. One of the new arms had a saw, which cut a hole just big enough for a spider to crawl through. Then, it sealed the hole with a paste.

The spider ran around, searching, and did not have trouble finding the motherboard. It attached itself onto an empty dataport on a data card, and injected jok code into the system.

On the programming mirror, jami tyet moved about on their own, forming new geometric shapes, and on the screen, more shapes appeared, and then alphanumeric data. Then a map of the world popped up on a new window, with all countries that subscribed to Slember marked in green. Cogoyot, though certain of the goodness of her jok, though confident it could never do anything she did not ask it to do, had asked it to transfer control of Slember to her, and now, she could disable any weapon. And it would not be the same as Slember flipping a switch when someone did not pay in time. She formatted the data cards of every weapon, of every server, of every computer in the Slember system. Most likely they had off-line backups, but it would take days, hopefully weeks, to get their systems back the up and running, and to remove the jok code. By then, the enemies of Slember would have seen an opportunity.

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## Chapter 7

They could not know the results until the reports came from the front lines, of the mech-units and drones shutting down as if they had run out of battery. There were videos of soldiers looking at their rifles in bafflement, slapping them as if that would bring them back to life. Namugula, Cogoyot, and Acen shouted in celebration, and everyone in the dog-polo screamed in joy. Cogoyot had promised to work on a more powerful jok code that would not require physical interaction with a system, but she feared of stepping into the dark side.

Adita messaged Hamid to convene the Defence Committee, and then went to another room for some quiet. Hamid started the meeting, and as they waited for other members to join, shock made his lips tremble, his eyes to open wide like that of an owl.

“What did you do?” he said.

“We defended ourselves,” Adita said.

“But how?”

Plopping sounds, like bubbles, announced several dozen people joining.

“What am I hearing?” Mayeku said the moment he got in. “Kenyan soldiers – their guns are dead? I don’t understand – What’s happening?”

Before Adita could respond, Kabwita burst in, fuming.

“You lied!” she yelled. “You lied to us!”

“If I told everyone the plan,” Adita said, “the enemy would have known.”

“You lied!” Kabwita screeched. “We are not supposed to lie!”

“I did not work alone,” Adita said. “Instead of being angry, tell the world that we have ways of defending ourselves. We have disarmed the armies

threatening us, Kenya and –”

“You what!” Kabwita interrupted.

“Eh!” Mayeku said. “The Kenyan army is disarmed? How!”

“I can’t say it,” Adita said. “The enemy sent spybots and they are listening to everything we say. So until we clean every committee member’s house of spy bugs, we can’t say more.”

“Who is we?” Kabwita hissed. “Are we now creating little cliques who –”

“There are over sixty people here,” Adita cut in. “There are perhaps a hundred more outside this village who knew what we were doing. We will tell everyone everything –”

“Just tell me,” Mayeku said, interrupting her. “Is the Kenyan army disarmed? Eh? So we can now incite Kenyans to revolt? Eh? Tell me this, please confirm it.”

“It is true,” Adita said.

“Then I can’t stay in this meeting,” he said. “I have work!” And he logged off.

Adita did not know if there was anything more to tell the defence committee. About five hundred people were now online, and the bubble sound kept going of as dozens joined every second. Half of the armies in the world were disarmed, and the rest would now look at the federation as a threat. They had to assure them that they acted only in defence, to assure them that they had no intention to disarm others.

#

The US had offline weapons, and it hurled intercontinental ballistic missiles to wipe the federation off, but they were from older systems, and it’s enemies shot them down before they could do any damage. The Sixth World War had begun, though everyone knew it would be very short, and the world was thankful to the federation for giving them a chance to subdue the US, a country that had caused the last two world wars just so a corporation could increase its profits. With Slember disabled, China, Europe, Canada, Mexico, and Brazil now quickly moved in to make certain that the US did not destabilize world peace ever again.

#

Three hours later, Adita rode back home on Acen's bruka. She was spent. She wanted a very long shower. People had hugged her in celebration, and even when she locked herself in a room somewhere, they somehow got in and hugged her as if she planned the whole thing on her own. Now her skin crawled with their maggoty fingers. The villages that had blocked her apologized while unblocking her, and promising never to distrust their leaders again, but some people picked up Kabwita's cry of 'She lied to us!' Rwtot were never supposed to lie, no matter the circumstance, and they had to find ways of ensuring it never happened again. Already, discussions were vibrant and new laws were being proposed to ensure the lessons from the recent experience would only strengthen the federation.

Once home, Adita stayed offline, keeping her vidisimu off. When people streaked in to congratulate her, she knew she would not have peace for a very long time. She had to go somewhere quiet, perhaps sneak back into the dome and help Acen's experiment. That would mean giving up rwtot duty, and the grandchildren, for she could not keep them in a dome for a year, but it would be nice to spend the rest of her old age in some peace and quiet. Perhaps, once everyone knew exactly how she won the war, Acen's space program would make a lot of sense and people would embrace it. Then she could put out an open call and other people who understood what it meant to want to be alone would respond. Surely, she could not be the only one like this.

END

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## About the Author

Dilman Dila is a writer and filmmaker. His books include *Where Rivers Go To Die*, which was shortlisted for the Philip K Dick Awards (2024), and *The Future God of Love*. He was shortlisted for the BSFA Awards (2021), the Nommo Awards for Best Novella (2021), and the Commonwealth Short Story Prize (2013), among many accolades. His short fiction appeared in *The Best Science Fiction of the Year: Volume Six*, and in *The Best of World SF V.2*, among many anthologies. His first novel, *Dreams of a Yellow Balloon*, is coming in 2028. His films have won multiple awards. For more of his life and works, visit [www.dilmandila.com](http://www.dilmandila.com)

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