

LOOP

The night is dark and moonless.

I am running.

I am running through the tangled undergrowth that looks like shadows before me. I have to throw myself into the shadows. I can't stop running. My heart is beating in my chest like a tribal drum. Each beat urges me to run faster and faster.

The sweat all over my body makes my clothes stick to my skin like a second, wet uncomfortable skin.

The air is thick with an eerie stillness that is occasionally broken by the rustle of leaves, the breaking of twigs and the sound of my feet hitting the ground.

My breath comes in frantic gasps as I stumble over gnarled roots, wet with evening dew and crash to the forest floor.

As I scramble to my feet, I hear the ominous grinding of my relentless pursuer's cogs and gears. Desperation grips me as I push myself to run faster still.

'Don't look back,' I warn myself.

'Looking back slows you down Karungi,' I tell myself.

My chest is burning with exertion and my feet are aching. I turn sharply but I hear the footfalls right behind me with faltering.

The undergrowth is getting thicker and wetter, and the ground, more slippery.

'Run until your legs give out,' I mentally yell at myself.

I refuse to surrender.

Every step is fraught with danger and every shadow harbours potential doom.

Suddenly, I hear a drum beating. A fast and urgent beat. At first I think it's my heart but the sound is coming from somewhere ahead.

There's a neon green glow on the leaves and I see before me a barrier.

Stretching between poles, thick ropes of dried banana fibre are woven intricately to make a lattice. Jagged stones, both small and large, are meticulously arranged at the base of the barrier.

As I get closer, I see spirals and glyphs have been carved into the stones and as I get closer still, the glyphs begin to glow a neon not unlike the glow on the leaves.

I ran faster and launch myself into the air poised to grab onto the lattice and climb.

As my fingertips brush the surface of the lattice, a tingling sensation ripples through my skin and a force drags me forward.

The last thing I hear is the sound of various metallic objects falling to the ground.

I am standing in a small white room. There is a stainless steel tray with stainless steel tools on it placed on a white counter. Next to it is a small grey tablet.

I am scared.

A small man with skin the colour of the earth walks in. He is wearing a white coat.

He gestures to the examination table behind me and tells me to sit.

I obey.

He picks up the tablet and taps away at it.

'You will be fifteen soon,' he declares, looks up at me and smiles.

When he smiles, deep lines get etched on his forehead, around his mouth and around his eyes.

His smile makes me unsettled.

'Two more weeks and we can start on your procedures,' he says.

He tells me to lie back and picks up a syringe from the tray of tools.

I want to run but there's no where to run.

He sticks the needle of the syringe into my neck and I feel my body become heavy almost immediately.

I am standing in a long and narrow corridor with doors along one side. There are no windows. There are spirals painted in black along the wall with no openings. I wonder whether I have seen them before.

Three pairs of eyes are staring at me. There is despair in those eyes. The eyes belong to three girls, who are all dressed small grey tunics. I look down at myself, I am wearing a grey tunic as well.

'My name is Karungi,' I hear a voice say. My voice.

'Thank you for finally joining us, Karungi,' I turn to look at the source of the mechanical voice behind me.

I see a tall beautiful woman with short braids held back and tied up in a bun.

She is no woman. Her skin looks like rubber upon closer inspection and there are glowing gold lines on her immaculate brown face cutting across her cheeks and meeting at her chin.

I like the gold lines. They remind me of sunshine.

'Follow me,' she says and starts to walk along the grey corridor.

She allocates a door to each of us and orders us to go into the rooms. The girls obey.

I stay in the corridor.

'What is this place?' I ask.

'It's your home, Karungi and I am your Shwenkazi,' She says and beckons me to enter the room along with her.

I am awake in the dark. I hear a silent grinding that sounds like gears moving. I wonder whether I have heard that sound before.

I blink rapidly in the dimness as I try to make out the features of where I am.

I see two gold lines coming towards me and I start to shrink away from them.

'Don't worry, it's just me,' Shwenkazi says 'You must sleep,'

She starts to hum slowly as I drift away into sleep while looking at the glowing gold lines and I dream of sunshine.

I dream of sunshine and rain and laughter.

I am dancing in the rain with my sisters. We are standing barefoot in the wet grass, our laughter echoing through as raindrops kiss our skin and soak our hair and clothes.

When the rain stops, we dry out in the sun. We are safe when the sun is shining.

When night falls, we lock all the doors and take turns keeping watch.

It is my turn to keep watch. I look out at the silvery moon and drift off to sleep.

I wake up suddenly because the air has turned cold. We are surrounded by men in grey clothes and two women with skin like rubber and glowing gold lines cut across their cheeks and meet at their chins. They bind our hands behind our backs and lift us into big grey trucks.

I wake up with a start.

It is not dark anymore and my mind is starting to clear up.

This is not home. The girls are my sisters. And we are being held captive here.

The door opens and Shwenkazi walks in carrying a tray with a glass of water and a plate of food.

'Your sisters are awake,' she says.

'Can I see them?' I ask

'Not now,' she replies. She sets the tray on a table and moves to stand by the door.

I am hungry.

I eat quickly and thank her for the food.

'We are going back to the white room today. I will be back to get you,' she says as she lifts the tray.

I am standing in the small white room. There is a stainless steel tray with stainless steel tools on it placed on a white counter. Next to is a small grey tablet.

I am scared.

The small man with skin the colour of the earth walks in. He is wearing the white coat.

I go over to the examination table behind me and sit.

He picks up the tablet and taps away at it.

'Very interesting,' he says and smiles his smile of a thousand etches.

'You will be out strongest one yet!'

I lie back while he picks up the syringe and sticks the needle into my neck.

I feel heavy.

I am standing in the long and narrow corridor with doors along one side. There are no windows. Five pairs of eyes are staring at me. There is resignation in those eyes.

My sisters have given up.

Their skins are pale and they have started to look rubbery.

I hear two sets of grinding gears and wonder whether I am imagining the sounds.

I look at the wall without openings and notice that that there are glyphs along with the black spirals.

I turn and look at my sisters again but they have started going to their rooms.

I look at the wall again and the spirals and glyphs have disappeared.

Shwenkazi takes me to my room.

I am awake in the dark.

I blink in the dimness. I know where I am.

I see two gold lines coming towards me.

'You must sleep' Shwenkazi says.

She starts to hum slowly as I drift away into sleep while looking at the glowing gold lines and I dream of the white room.

I am lying on the examination table. The air is cold and sterile. I look around me and see a set of syringes on the stainless steel tray. Each syringe contains a strange gold liquid the glows ominously. I try to move but my limbs are heavy and unresponsive to my desperate commands.

I feel like I have invisible chains keeping me tied to the table.

The small man with skin the colour of the earth walks in and picks one of the syringes. He walks agonisingly slowly towards me. My breath quickens as the needle pierces my skin sending jolts of icy pain through my veins.

I wake up with a start.

It is not dark anymore. My mind is clearer now and now I know what I must do. I must find a way out of here.

The door opens and Shwenkazi walks in carrying a tray with a glass of water and a plate of food.

'Your sisters are awake,' she says.

'Can I see them?' I ask

'Not now,' she replies. She sets the tray on a table and moves to stand by the door.

I eat quickly and thank her for the food.

I am standing in the small white room again. There is a stainless steel tray with stainless steel tools on it placed on a white counter. Next to it is a small grey tablet.

I am not afraid this time.

I pick up the syringe and wait for the small man with skin the colour of the earth to walk in.

The door opens and he walks in.

I walk over to the examination table and sit.

'Docile today. Very interesting,' he says.

He turns to pick up the tablet and I pounce on him. I am surprised by my speed.

I stick the needle into his neck before he says anything. I then pick up some instruments from the tray and run for the door.

I open it and look up and down the grey corridor. I know that I have been here in this moment before. I choose a direction and start to run.

I see a door at the end of the corridor and I run towards it. As I draw near it, it disappears, leaving an empty opening, that opens into a clearing surrounded by thick forest.

It is night time.

I hesitate but then I hear multiple footsteps behind me and turn to look at the sound.

Three sets of glowing gold lines are making their way quickly towards me.

I turn and go through the opening into the clearing. I run across the clearing and go head first into the thick forest.

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