

There's something in the water

By Dara Ansa

"What is she doing?" Monica the bride's mom whispered questioningly to the lady beside her. She had been the first person to notice the only odd thing about an otherwise pleasantly normal wedding ceremony. Her daughter decided against her wishes to have a small beach wedding. She was vehemently opposed to the idea of her daughter being joined in holy matrimony anywhere other than the only official residence of God, but now that she was here she had to admit it wasn't a bad idea after all.

Before long, others began to notice and whispers slowly generated from the crowd of seated guests, interrupting the silence that had only previously been accompanied by the gentle crashing of waves on the shore.

Guests gave each other puzzled looks, shifting around in their seats, gesturing toward the beach altar and trying to see if anyone around them had answers to what was going on.

The priest had been focused on reciting the marriage rights until the growing commotion interrupted his sermon.

Asari, the last of the bridesmaids in line behind the bride, had left the bridal party at the stunning round wedding arch adorned with silk and pastel wreaths and was now slowly but deliberately walking towards the ocean. It took only a few minutes for everyone to piece together what was happening collectively and as they did, pandemonium erupted. By this time, however, Asari was only a few feet from the shore.

"Az!!" somebody screamed.

"Asari! Oh dear God what is happening?" an elderly voice shouted from the crowd of guests. It was as though everything happened in an instant, yet in slow motion.

Esi flung her bouquet, bunched up her wedding dress in one hand and dashed towards her friend who she presumed was having some sort of psychiatric episode. It was as though seeing the bride sprint away snapped everyone out of the spell of shock into action. Suddenly, two groomsmen and another bridesmaid followed Esi towards the ocean. By the time they got to her, Asari was already above ankle-deep in the ocean.

Esi trod water until she was in front of her friend, blocking her path.

"Az! Honey, what's going on? Are you okay?" she asked in a terrified voice, clutching both her friend's forearms and shaking her gently. Asari's eyes were fixed in the distance, pupils dilated, wide-eyed and not blinking.

David, one of the groomsmen was now at Asari's side. They had only just met for the first time at the rehearsal dinner. He had found her playfulness and quirky sense of humour rather endearing and as a result, found himself insanely attracted to her. There was something about her that captivated him. It may have been the way she seemed genuinely interested in what he had to say or the way she held his gaze with those almond-shaped eyes the colour of rich coffee. He had left the dinner that evening not being able to stop thinking about her and the eyes that held every fiber of his being hostage. Right now, those eyes stared blankly at the horizon. He looked into them and could not recognize the girl he had fallen for just days ago. "Asari", he said softly while taking her right hand in his.

“It’s ok, let’s get you back inside”, he spoke gently, tugging at her right hand but she didn’t move. Esi noticed David’s attempt to move her friend and tried to do the same thing with her other hand but Asari did not budge. David then took to attempting to scoop her in his arms. Her beautifully proportioned curves didn’t cause him to hesitate. He had expected it to be effortless, however, the reality proved to be quite different. It felt as though her feet were welded to the ground.

More members of the bridal party were now in the water, surrounding Asari and trying to move her. They didn’t notice the swell and surge of the tide inching its way toward the shore, predicting the imminent arrival of a wave. Tugging and pulling, some shouting her name hoping it might jolt her out of the trance, they all failed to move her even by an inch.

While all of this was happening, the atmosphere had changed. The water levels had begun to recede into the ocean and the beach became eerily quiet. One of the groomsmen while busy with activity accidentally took a glance at the distance, did a double take and let out a horrified scream. A wave had begun to form roughly a hundred meters from where they were all gathered. It was slowly increasing in height and inching itself towards them.

“A wave is coming, we need to get out of here”, he screamed at the crowd.

A few people gave their last feeble attempts at moving Asari but quickly abandoned the task and ran back out towards the beach. The wave was proving to not just be anything out of a surfer’s wet dream but a potential tidal wave. As it inched closer and closer, it kept getting higher and its crest getting larger.

Back on the beach, the remaining guests also noticed the formation of this massive wave approaching them. Everyone scattered, running as far away from the beach as possible to safety. The swell was now just a few meters from where only Asari, Esi and David were stood. Esi tore her terrified gaze away from the wave back to her friend.

“Damn it! Az come on we have to go”, she pleaded, hoping against all hope that her friend would wake up and run with her. Asari stood transfixed with the same blank stare. Her eyes were beginning to turn cloudy in tandem with the growth of the wave. Esi turned to David. She didn’t want to leave her friend but she had to make a difficult choice. Without speaking, he understood what she meant to say.

“We have to run”.

Reluctantly pulling herself away from her best friend, Esi and David ran as fast as they could. away from the incoming wave.

“My darling child, you have come back to me. Oh, how I have waited for your return. My grief has been immense, my sorrow unending. Of all my ornaments, you were by far the most precious to me. My Asari, oh how I have missed you. My beautiful Asari. Come back to me.”

The last thing Asari remembered was standing in line with the other bridesmaids behind Esi. Everything went blank after that, except for the ethereal sound of a woman singing. Her voice was haunting, her song was heavy with deep longing. The unearthly harmonies of her song wove into the fabric of Asari’s soul, casting a spell on her senses. The woman’s voice beckoned

to her, enchanting and luring her to something that felt as familiar as home. The desire to find the source of the voice was unshakable as though everything joyful in the world, lay there just waiting to be discovered. Her search brought her to the base of an enormous wave. A silver silhouette began to take shape in the water. At first, it seemed like an illusion cast by the reflection of the sun on the ocean but as the swell reached its peak at thirteen feet, the form within it solidified. The figure materialised, revealing the contours of a being with the likeness of a human female. Its head reached the wave crest and its body spanned the length of the wave. Its form seemed to defy the boundaries of the natural world. Distinct facial features were not visible but one of its arms reached out gracefully towards Asari. At this moment, the spell broke. She gasped at the terrifyingly majestic sight, the sheer shock of the image before her causing her to faint. The silhouette held its breath for a moment and then with a soft sigh, the wave crashed enveloping Asari in its embrace.

Asari picked up her phone to call her mother. It had been over a week since they had last spoken to each other. Sunday catch-up sessions had become a tradition between mother and daughter ever since she moved out at twenty-two. However, their closeness had not always existed. Like most teenagers and young adults, Asari and her mother had been at loggerheads with each other throughout her undergraduate studies. Being an only child to a single mom meant her mother had been fiercely protective of her. Age, maturity and distance away caused Asari to eventually soften and empathise with her mother. It must not have been easy raising a child alone with an absentee husband. When Asari was sixteen and decided she wanted to study abroad like her friends, her mother kicked against it. They finally reached a compromise with her mother stating that if Asari was going to move abroad for University, her mother, would have to relocate with her. In her words, *“How can I let my heart fly halfway across the world to where I don’t know and where I cannot see it?”*

At the time, Asari laughed it off thinking her mother was being overly dramatic but would quickly realise she was not joking when she was asked to defer her plans to go to university until her mother also got her affairs in order in preparation for their move. Asari’s plans for freedom had been thwarted and from that moment until she graduated, the pair were constantly in conflict. On one occasion, their argument grew so loud that a neighbour called the police. These days though with Asari well into her thirties, she spoke to her mother about everything from relationships to career stress. They would often have mild arguments about personal political views but nothing *“You know I would still love you even if you grew a second head”*, could not fix.

Asari clicked on the contact image of her mother in a white dress, wearing a gold fascinator and looking dignified presumably at a party somewhere. Seconds later, she heard a familiar voice on the other end.

“Enh leave it naw. I have told her if she doesn’t want to buy it like that, she can forget it.”
Asari chuckled as she recognised her mother in business mode. She was a retired lawyer but at sixty-five, she had no plans to sit at home with nothing to do so she began a jewellery business.

She would buy gold from Dubai and Turkey and sell them to the African women in her community.

“Sorry my darling, these women can be so cheap. Can you imagine Mrs Alabi, haggling the price of a set with me? With all the money her husband has. I even gave her a discount and she was still dragging.”, she kissed her teeth and let out a sigh as if to rid herself of the bad juju of a bad customer.

“How are you Mummy? You know I’ve told you not to let these things bother you. State your price and they can take it or leave it. Don’t let them upset you”.

“My dear I am trying oh but these people want me to talk until saliva dries from my throat.” Asari laughed.

“ Mummy, is that one of your direct translations from Efik”, she teased.

“Please leave me. How are you, my dear? You abandoned me just like that, not even a text?”

“Sorry Mummy, you know I told you we’ve been busy planning Esi’s wedding.”

“Oh yes, you did say so. It’s so sad that I won’t be able to attend. You know I have that trip to Morocco planned. When is the D-day again?”

“It’s in two days, we had the rehearsal dinner last night.”

They went on to chat about the wedding preparations and gossip about which of Esi’s family members were not invited to the wedding and why.

“It was so difficult for some reason to find a priest who agreed to carry out the ceremony on a beach.”

“Beach ke? What do you mean? Who is getting married on a beach?”

“Oh, I didn’t mention? Yeah it’s going to be a beach wedding”

There was silence on the other end of the line. Asari’s mother’s blood ran cold. She had been so careful to keep her daughter away from bodies of water her entire life. The reason for their big fight which the police were involved was that Asari had decided she wanted to learn to swim. She had not let her child anywhere near water ever since the day she found her.

Asari’s mother had been a young bride who had not been able to conceive for a decade. One evening her husband had come home drunk as usual. While in a heated argument, her husband began to punch her. He raised a nearby stool, ready to hit her but she managed to crawl away just in time. As the stool crashed to the ground, she ran out the door of their tiny one-bedroom apartment in Calabar and knew something had to change. She ran until she found her way to the bank of the river. She sat there on a tree stump for hours crying and praying to no one in particular. Just as the sun began to set she whispered in one shaky breath, “I can’t do this anymore, give me what my heart desires and I’ll do anything you wish.”

Suddenly, she heard a faint noise coming from the shrubs a few feet behind her. She got up to investigate and as she drew closer, she heard the unmistakable sound of a baby crying.

Eventually, she happened upon a baby swaddled in a light blue blanket with silver embroidery. “Someone must have abandoned this baby here”, she thought. Perhaps a teenage mom who wanted to conceal an unplanned pregnancy. She picked the baby up and rocked it gently till it fell asleep. It was the most beautiful baby she had ever seen. It had soft dusky skin that glimmered in the twilight and the fullest head of jet-black coils.

“Will I have to start combing your hair this early?”, she whispered to the sleeping baby as she gently caressed the luscious coils and she chuckled to herself at the thought. Her heart was so

full of awe and joy that she didn't even think about what she would say to her abusive husband or the neighbours if they asked where she had gotten the baby from. To her surprise and relief, her husband was not home when she arrived. He had vanished, never to be seen again.

Asari's mother contemplated forbidding her daughter from going to this wedding that was to be held at the beach but was reluctant to get into another giant argument with her. After all, Asari had eventually learnt how to swim and nothing happened.

"My sweetheart, you know how I feel about your being around water. I don't want anything bad to happen to you. Please be careful, I won't stop you from attending your friend's wedding."

"Thank you mummy", Asari replied even though she had no intentions of skipping the wedding had her mother objected to it. She never understood her mother's intense phobia of water.

The tsunami had been devastating. The destruction of property and casualties were the worst in recent history. A week later firefighters were still working hard to rescue people from the floods. Most of the bridal party was still missing but Esi had thankfully been reunited with her mother at one of the hospitals treating casualties. Asari woke up in a hospital bed with no recollection of the events that had taken place before the tsunami. The doctors said she had amnesia due to trauma to the head. She had been unable to speak and every time she closed her eyes, she had the same dream over and over again. Complete darkness and silence followed by a burst of orange iridescent light. It felt like she was floating and all she could see was that face. The woman. She mouthed something. Next was a high-pitched scream and then she would wake up. The woman, she had called her Mother.