

ANANSI

Nearly forty-eight hours had passed since their boat hit the rocks and capsized off the Gulf of Guinea. The waters were calmer now, and only small patches of grey clouds remained in the sky. It was difficult to imagine that, not too long ago, all three fishermen were battling for their lives with the incredible force of nature.

The fishermen had all made this trip many times over their fishing years, but none of the men had ever experienced a storm of that magnitude.

‘God has kept us alive for a reason,’ the youngest of the fishermen said now. His name was Zed.

‘There is no God,’ the second fisherman huffed instantly. He was heavily bearded and had long matted locks. This was Tega.

‘Don’t say that!’ Zed stared at him as though he had just committed the greatest crime. ‘Look around, we are all God’s creation.’

‘Look around,’ Tega repeated in mocking imitation, throwing his skinny arm into the air. ‘If there was *a god*, all of this shit wouldn’t be happening, would it?’

‘That’s rubbish,’ Zed continued. ‘Life is a test. God tests us every day and I believe this is one of those tests.’

‘What do you think?’ Tega asked the third fisherman.

Both men turned to the huge, dark-skinned man lying on the edge of the wooden plank. The man had said nothing so far and said nothing now. He didn’t even acknowledge that he had just been spoken to. Instead, he continued to stare, arms behind his head, into the sky. He was called Tvka. The three men didn’t know each other per se. They were fishing contractors, and every day they would go to the marina in search of work. And for a daily fee,

they would join a fishing boat that went deep into the parts of the sea where fish were aplenty.

So, every day, each fisherman met a different fisherman from the ones he had met the day before. Occasionally, you would meet the same men, maybe even know their names or become friendly. But not to the point of distraction. Out on the seas, everyone was for themselves and themselves alone. The more fish in your net, the more money, so Tvka had never cared to know faces, names or be friendly.

Every morning before sunrise, he would be at the marina, moving from pier to pier, looking for the best fishing boats to join so he could do what he did best – fish.

Experienced fishermen knew what to look out for when selecting their conveying boats. After all, that was part of the trade. The fishing boats were all skippered by androids, so looking out for the helmsman would not help a fisherman's decision. But one could tell from the hull of the boat. The markings and lines on it could tell you all you needed to know – like how many times the boat had ventured out to sea and how well it had fared in the storms it faced. That was all a good fisherman needed, as long as he had good hands too, of course.

At the start of their journey, their android had displayed the passenger's headshots on the wonky screen as it called out the names of all the fishermen on board, and announced all safety protocols and emergency procedures. Over a dozen men had been onboard; now only three remained.

'We could've easily been one of our fallen compatriots, but God kept us alive,' Zed said to the man on his other side.

Not for long though, Tvka thought. They had not been able to salvage any food or water from the sinking boat. No other fishing boats had ventured anywhere close to them in the last two days and it was only a matter of hours before the high tides or another storm

came to finish the job. He raised his wrist to his face. *Quarter past five*. The face of the old leather brown watch was now severely cracked and bits of water had slipped through the glass, but otherwise, it had survived the ordeal.

This watch, this beautiful precious watch that he'd received as a gift several years ago. He'd never really fancied timepieces, especially ones he had to keep strapped to his skin, but this one, he loved this one. He valued it beyond everything else he owned and would cherish it forever...or for whatever time he had left.

'Are you saying this god of yours kept you alive because you're better than the others?' Tega asked with a raised eyebrow. The sarcasm was clear as day in his voice.

'No, but he kept us alive because we have a purpose.'

'And the other eleven men didn't?' Tega asked again; this time one could sense the growing irritation inside him.

'Perhaps their purpose on earth had already been fulfilled.' Zed sounded convinced by his own words. 'Ours is just starting. Either that or we've been given a second chance.'

Tega sighed and he too turned to face the sky. 'Well, if there is a god, I'd love to see him get us out of this one. I'll need proof to believe. Sorry.'

'Do you believe in love?' Zed asked Tega.

'What is the correlation?' Tega said, eyes still glued to the sky.

'Do you believe?'

'Yes,' Tega said calmly.

'Why then, you can't see it, can you?'

'Oh yes, I can.' Tega faced Zed once again. 'I see it in my woman's eyes. I feel it when she touches me or when I call her name and she answers. I can't say the same about your gods.'

'*The* God,' Zed corrected him quickly. 'Again, I tell you to look around, my friend.'

Tega sighed wearily. 'Evolution and science built this. We built this.'

'Only because God gave us the wisdom in the first place,' Zed said, undeterred.

'Whatever. I guess if that makes you sleep better at night, then fine.' Tega adjusted his weight on the floating plank as he spoke. 'As for me, I'd rather spend my final hours thinking about my woman's kisses than a mythical sky-daddy.'

'You are married?' Zed asked.

'I am to be in three weeks,' Tega said with a small smile. His smile faltered and his tone betrayed some notes of bitterness. 'I waited too long to ask her. I kept frolicking around with other women even though I knew she was the one. I was a fool.'

'Ah, look, my father had a saying, better late than never.'

Tega scoffed. 'Your father didn't come up with that though. You know that, right?'

Tvka snickered and the two men turned to him in surprise. However, he still refused to meet their gaze.

'But I'll tell you what,' Tega said in a renewed tone of seriousness. 'Maybe I'll invite you to the wedding if your god manages to keep us alive.'

As the sun slipped under the horizon and night came, the tides grew just as they had expected. The thick wide plank that held the men from death bobbed up and down with the growing restless waves. Their faces lost colour as each man battled hunger and thirst in silence. There was also no escaping the chill that surrounded them.

'What do you reckon will get us first?' Tega asked amid icy breaths after many hours of silence.

'Huh?' Zed muttered.

He clearly hadn't been paying attention. He seemed to be shivering the most.

'I said what do you think will kill us first? Hypothermia, thirst or sharks?'

Zed remained quiet for a bit, then he began to sob. Tvka appeared or at least pretended not to notice, but he too was shivering slightly.

Tega spoke out again. 'I'd say hypothermia.' He frowned as though he were deep in thought. 'Thirst would be a close second in my opinion and definitely way less painful than being shark food.'

Zed sobbed even louder now and, while Tega remained poker-faced, Tvka finally turned to him and spoke in a deep, calm voice.

'There're only tiger sharks in these parts, and they won't attack humans. Also, you can last another day without water.'

Both men turned to look at him, relief apparent on their faces.

'So, hypothermia it is,' said Tega.

'Why has no boat come by since?' Zed asked. He was no longer sobbing, but one could hear the defeat taking over his voice.

'We're way out of any fishing zones,' Tega said as a matter of fact. 'No one comes this far out.'

'But I thought the androids send out SOS signals to the marina in times of danger.'

'Ha! Not when the boat is that old,' Tega said slowly. 'I'll bet everything I own that the alarm system for that boat wasn't even working. It was one of the oldest boats in the marina.'

'I always thought I knew had to look out for the good boats.' Zed sounded even more broken. 'Clearly I was wrong.'

'Man, none of us saw this coming. *Andromeda* was a damn good boat, even though she was old. I've used her many, many times,' Tega continued in all seriousness. 'That storm wasn't normal. No new boat would've pulled through that, even if she had the latest android system.'

‘What if we swam? We’re all excellent swimmers, right?’ Zed asked, turning to both men as he spoke.

‘We won’t make it very far. We haven’t eaten in two days.’ Tega bit his lip as he finished. His teeth were chattering.

Zed pressed on. ‘We’ll only have to swim until another boat finds us.’

‘We’d die within hours. The water is too cold,’ Tega said dryly. ‘Also, how many people fish in the middle of the night, man?’

Both men fell silent once more, gazing up at the stars in the endless sky. If the circumstances had been different, it would have passed for a beautiful night. So far, there had been no sign of another storm. That was a good thing; it could buy them at least another day of survival. Perhaps until a travelling boat passed and rescued them or they died from one of the impending dangers. Whichever came first.

The wooden plank bobbed gently as small waves splashed its sides. Eventually it would become weak from all the water it had soaked up and they would drown anyway. It was a miracle it had held their weight thus far. The night grew colder and while all three men were now shivering, Zed appeared to be suffering the most. He would sob occasionally but didn’t stop shivering, so much so that the other two feared his unsettling vibrations would sink them faster.

Tvka removed his coat and wrapped it around the young man.

‘Th-thank you,’ Zed managed.

Tvka barely let out a grunt in reply as he warmed himself uselessly with his large veiny hands.

‘My wife is expecting our first child. I needed to make more money before our baby arrived. That’s the reason I started coming out to sea seven days a week,’ Zed told no one in particular. ‘I can’t believe I won’t be there for them.’

‘I thought you swore God was going to keep us alive because he has a purpose for us all?’ Tega said.

It was hard to tell if he was being honestly hopeful or downright condescending.

‘If God existed, he won’t have let this happen,’ Zed said, his voice teary. He was still shaking as he had been earlier. ‘If God exists, he shouldn’t make me beg for a chance to at least say goodbye to my wife.’

Tega said nothing and, after a while, he too removed his coat and lumped it upon Zed, who was now quiet. Silence fell upon them once more as clouds gathered above and sent all the stars into hiding.

‘What about you, big man?’ Tega asked after Zed had fallen asleep. ‘Any woman in your life?’

Tvka’s face gave away no emotion. It was impossible to know what he was thinking. Arms still wrapped around himself, he took short loud breaths but remained silent.

‘I’m sure a fine-looking man like yourself must have a woman anticipating his return, eh?’ Zed asked with a knowing smile. ‘Ah, I see, several women, then?’

But Tvka continued to warm himself in silence, eyes transfixed at the ever-growing dark clouds.

‘Or maybe you’re all alone because all you did was fish,’ Tega pushed. ‘That’s alright. I know some fishermen that are married only to the trade.’

Still, Tvka said nothing. Instead, he turned to his side, so that all Tega could see was his broad back.

‘Fine then,’ Tega said calmly. ‘Let us just die in silence. Sound way to go.’

They were awoken a few hours later by thick painful drops of lashing rain and, not long after, heavy gusts of wind that threatened to blow them off the plank. Drenched and confused, all three men sat upright on their floating saviour, each thinking of his own end. A

streak of lightning ripped through the sky, revealing nothing but vast seas for miles on end. The loud thunder that followed took the shape of the wind and spoke with authority. Its voice was calm, even though the waters were not.

‘I can deliver a message for each of you,’ the wind said. The voice was neither male nor female. ‘What shall it be?’

Zed, who had been weeping since he awoke, spoke out first. ‘Tell my wife I want her to know how much I love her.’

The wind made a rushing sound of acknowledgement and Tega went next. ‘Tell my lady I am sorry,’ he said, staring wildly at nothing. ‘I am sorry for wasting so much time pursuing money and not spending my days with her.’

The wind made another rushing sound, but nothing further came. The two men stared blankly at Tvka who, again, had no readable expression on his face.

‘Surely, you must have someone waiting to hear from you?’ Zed asked the silent man. But Tvka said nothing.

‘He has no one,’ Tega informed the waiting wind. ‘He was married to the sea.’

‘So be it,’ came the powerful voice of the wind.

‘Wait!’ Tvka called as they felt the wind turn with a sigh. ‘I have a message for someone.’

The other two fishermen turned to him with looks of sheer curiosity as the wind waited.

‘His name is Anansi,’ said Tvka, looking quite defeated. There was unmistakable panic in his voice. ‘Tell him I’m still at sea, but I’ll be seeing him soon because God will bring me back to him.’