



The Book of Phoenix

By Nnedi Okorafor

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A fiery spirit dances from the pages of the Great Book. She brings the aroma of scorched sand and ozone. She has a story to tell....

The Book of Phoenix is a unique work of magical futurism. A prequel to the highly acclaimed, World Fantasy Award-winning novel, *Who Fears Death*, it features the rise of another of Nnedi Okorafor's powerful, memorable, superhuman women.

Phoenix was grown and raised among other genetic experiments in New York's Tower 7. She is an "accelerated woman"—only two years old but with the body and mind of an adult, Phoenix's abilities far exceed those of a normal human. Still innocent and inexperienced in the ways of the world, she is content living in her room speed reading e-books, running on her treadmill, and basking in the love of Saeed, another biologically altered human of Tower 7.

Then one evening, Saeed witnesses something so terrible that he takes his own life. Devastated by his death and Tower 7's refusal to answer her questions, Phoenix finally begins to realize that her home is really her prison, and she becomes desperate to escape.

But Phoenix's escape, and her destruction of Tower 7, is just the beginning of her story. Before her story ends, Phoenix will travel from the United States to Africa and back, changing the entire course of humanity's future.

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The Book of Phoenix By Nnedi Okorafor Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1105010 in Books
- Published on: 2015-05-05
- Released on: 2015-05-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.31" h x .85" w x 6.31" l, 1.00 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 240 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *The Book of Phoenix*:

“Okorafor triumphs over the perils of the prequel by making the inevitable feel newly dreadful. Blending **poetic passages with sharp observation** and the occasional cadence of a story told by firelight, *The Book of Phoenix* is an assured introduction not just to her world's myths, but to the process of mythmaking.” —*The New York Times*

“A gripping examination of the power of myth and of who is allowed to write and preserve history.... Okorafor's fantastical *The Book of Phoenix* has that ring of truth, a superlative adventure that addresses all-too-harsh realities.” —*The San Francisco Chronicle*

“Okorafor's inventiveness is as stunning as ever, and the ending is **nothing short of spectacular.**” —*The Chicago Tribune*

“Phoenix and her story exist in that shimmering space that marks **where science fiction and magical realism overlap**.... *The Book of Phoenix* hit all of my emotional checkboxes.”—BookRiot

“*The Book of Phoenix* isn't just well written, and it isn't just smart as hell; it's also **a damn good story**, and it kept me reading almost nonstop all the way through.”—Tor.com

“The book is grounded by its unflinching exposure of the brutalities of colonialism, racism, and greed, and **exalted by the beauty of Okorafor's prose.**” —*Library Journal* (starred review)

“This is a story of vengeance, a **fantastic epic battle between good and evil**; written as a fable for the future.” —Barnes & Noble Sci-Fi & Fantasy Blog

“While the grim logic of the plot makes it very clear early on how the plot must play out, the process is as entrancing as watching an avalanche sweep toward you, and Okorafor's prose is as ever, **enthralling.**”—*RT Reviews*

About the Author

Nnedi Okorafor was born in the United States to two Igbo (Nigerian) immigrant parents. She holds a PhD in English and is a professor of creative writing at Chicago State University. She has been the winner of many awards for her short stories and young adult books, and won a World Fantasy Award for *Who Fears Death*. Nnedi's books are inspired by her Nigerian heritage and her many trips to Africa. She lives in Chicago with her daughter Anyaugo and family. She can be contacted via her website, www.nnedi.com, or on Twitter at [@twitter.com/nnedi](https://twitter.com/nnedi).

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PROLOGUE

Found

Nobody really knows who wrote the Great Book.

Oh, the religious always have answers to explain the unexplainable. Some of them like to say that the goddess Ani wrote the Great Book and made it so that ten men and women who loved stories would find copies of it at the same time. Some of them say a mere woman with ten children transcribed Ani's words over ten years. Others say some illiterate half-witted farmer wrote it in one night after Ani blessed him. Most believe that the Great Book's author was a mad yet holy, always always holy, prophet who'd taken refuge in a cave.

What *I* can tell you is that two hundred years after it all went wrong an old man named Sunuteel was out in the desert. This man was one of those who enjoyed being out there for weeks on end, close to the sun, sand, and desert creatures. The time away from his wife made their time together sweeter. Sunuteel and his wife agreed on this. They were old. They had wisdom.

“Go on,” his wife said with a smile. She took his old rough hand into her equally rough old hand. She was a beautiful woman, and Sunuteel found it easy to look into her eyes. “It is good,” she said. “I need the solitude.”

There had been an especially powerful Ungwa storm and the old nomadic couple had barely survived the dry thundery night of lightning. A bolt had struck near their sturdy tent, setting on fire one of the three stunted palm trees they'd camped beside. His wife had been peeking out of the tent when it happened. Thankfully, she'd blinked at precisely the right moment. She said the tree looked like a woman dancing in flames. Even as Sunuteel dragged her to the center of the tent where they huddled and prayed, his wife felt a presence. She was sure it was a premonition.

The old man was used to his superstitious wife and her odd intuitions. Therefore, he knew his wife would want to be alone to think and ponder and fret. When the storm passed and she gently encouraged him to take a few days to go and see what was out there, he didn't argue. He took the rolled up goatskin tent and satchel of supplies she handed him and kissed her on the cheek. He didn't say goodbye because in his tribe “goodbyes” were a curse.

“I leave my *chi* to keep you company,” he said. Each night he was away, along with her meals, she'd prepare a small plate of food for his personal god until Sunuteel returned. He clipped his portable to his hip, facing the tiny device inside his pocket. After one last, far more prolonged kiss, he walked away from his wife. Did she think an angel was coming to visit her? His wife's descendants were from the Islamic portion of Old Naija. She said that her father used to tell her all sorts of stories about angels and djinn. She'd passed these magical stories on to their own children as they grew up.

Minutes after leaving, Sunuteel brought out his portable and laughing to himself, called up the virtual screen and typed, “Hussaina, greet *her* for me when you see her, whether she's an angel or djinn.” Moments later, his wife Hussaina's reply popped up on the screen saying what she always said when Sunuteel went off, “And you make sure you bring me back a good story.”

•••

Two days later, Sunuteel came upon a cave full of computers. A tomb of old old technology from the Black Days, the Times of the Dark People, the Era of the Okeke. This was one of those caves into which panicked Okeke packed thousands of computers just before Ani turned her attention back to the earth. These computers were supposedly used to store huge amounts of information separate from digital repositories called virtual spaces. Little good this did; virtual or physical, it was all dead, forgotten, rotten.

“What am I seeing?” he whispered. “Can this be?”

He pressed a shaky hand to his chest, feeling the strong heartbeat of his strong heart. Standing here, he didn’t feel so old. No, not old at all. This place made him feel young as a babe. Sunuteel, who was Okeke and therefore a descendant of the evil that caused the goddess Ani to bring the deserts, knew of the poisonous Black Days and their most poisonous genius gadgetry. However, he had always wanted to see these ancient computers with his own eyes.

So, he went in.

The cave was cool and it smelled of dust, mineral oil, plastic, wires, and metal. There were ghosts here and Sunuteel shivered from the thought of them. Still, he approached these old machines. *This* was a story to tell his wife. The third computer that he touched sparked with life. Terrified, he snatched his hand from the “on” pad he’d accidentally brushed against and stumbled back. The grey hand-sized box, softly hummed. Then it spoke to the portable clipped inside the pocket of his dusty pants. The portable pinged softly as it wirelessly received a large file from the computer. Sunuteel blinked and then fled from the cave, sure a ghost had touched him.

When he made it back to his small goatskin tent beside a baobab tree, only then did he dare look at his portable. He held the coin-sized device in his palm and brought it to his face, for his eyesight was poor. He squinted at the tiny screen. Next to the file that contained messages from his wife was a black icon in the shape of a bird that seemed to be looking over its shoulder. He tapped it with the tip of his finger and a deep male voice began to speak in . . . English!

It was an audio file. Sunuteel sat back in his tent, grinning with delight. *My goodness*, he thought. *How strange. What are the chances?!* He knew this dead language, albeit the accent was very odd, indeed. He brought up the virtual screen. The visual words that appeared as the audio file played were tinted red instead of the usual green. He put the portable on the blanket before him. Then he watched and listened.

The voice read a table of contents as it digitally projected the words on the virtual screen in front of him:

“Section one, mythology. Section two, legend. Section three, mechanics. Section four, news . . .”

He frowned as it read on and on. After a while, he decided to click on “Section thirty-eight, memory extracts” because the phrase rung a distant bell from when he was a child. In school, the teacher had spoken about the dark times hundreds of years ago, when human beings were obsessed with the pursuit of immortality. They had even found a way to pull out and capture people’s memories right from their minds so they could preserve them forever. “Just like a capture station sucking condensation from the sky to make drinking water,” his schoolteacher had said.

Sunuteel had been fascinated and quietly proud of just how *far* human beings had gotten in their technological pursuit. Nevertheless, his schoolteacher had discouraged him from further research. “Sunuteel,” she said. “This was what led us to receiving Ani’s wrath.”

And so the young Sunuteel turned away from the past and looked mostly toward the future. He loved language, words and stories. He'd gone on to become one of his village's most valued recorders and reciters. He could recite the most beautiful poetry in five different dialects of flawless Okeke, but also in the language and various dialects of the majestic and mighty Nuru people and the common language of Sipo. And most amazingly, one of the prominent village elders had been able to teach him English, too.

As far as Sunuteel knew, this elder, an old-timer in Sunuteel's village who'd always been called The Seed, was the only person who knew the language. The Seed was also the only light-skinned person in his village who was not albino. This man refused to call himself Nuru, insisting that he was "Arab," a term that had long become more an insult than an ethnic description of the Nuru people. The Seed preferred to live amongst the Okeke, the dark-skinned woolly-haired people. He'd built a house in front of one of the pyramids because it reminded him of home. When Sunuteel was a teen, The Seed looked no older than fifty, but Sunuteel's mother said he was actually much older.

"He looked the exact same when I was a little girl," she'd told him. She was right. Even now that Sunuteel was an old old man, The Seed still looked no older than fifty. Sunuteel was of a people who understood that the world was full of mystery. Thus, a seemingly immortal man living in the village didn't bother anyone. The Seed had an amazing command of the English language and though he was moody and reclusive at times, he turned out to be a wonderful teacher.

Sunuteel went on to read the only two English texts in the entire region, both of which were owned by the Seed. One was an anthropology book titled *Virulent Diseases of the Mars Colonies*, the other a book about igneous rock sediments. Despite the dryness of the subjects, Sunuteel loved the rhythm of English. It was a liquid sounding language, due to the way the words ran together.

"Memory Extracts," the voice announced in English. But then it began speaking another list and each item on it was in a different language, none of which he understood. Annoyed, Sunuteel listened for a while and was about to go back to the main menu when the male voice clearly said, "Extract number 5, *The Book of Phoenix*" in English.

He clicked on it.

At first there was a long pause and the bird icon popped on the screen. It rotated counter-clockwise. He counted thirteen rotations and when it kept going, he looked up at the sky. Blue. Clear. A large hawk-like bird flew overhead, soaring high in the sky, probably seeing him perfectly with its sharp eyes. *I will return to Hussaina in two days*, he thought. *That's enough alone time for her to stop thinking about premonitions and angels*. He smiled to himself. She would excitedly cook him a spicy meal of doro wat when he told her he had "a big big tale to tell." She loved a good story, and good stories were best told on a full stomach.

"Memory Extract Number 5," the male voice suddenly announced, making Sunuteel jump. "Title: *The Book of Phoenix*. Location Number 578."

And then a woman began feverishly speaking. Her soft breathy voice was like a powerful incantation, for as she spoke, it seemed that the old man's eyesight, which dimmed more and more every year, began to brighten. His wife would have recognized what was happening. However, Sunuteel was a man less open to such things.

Still, as he sat in his tent, gazing through the red virtual words before him and the open tent flap just beyond the words, outside into the desert, he realized he could see for miles and miles. Sweat prickled on his forehead and between the coarse hairs of his armpits. He listened. And the very first person to hear one of the many many entries from *The Great Book* was awed by the story he heard.

“There is no book about me,” the voice said. “Well, not yet. No matter. I shall create it myself; it’s better that way. To tell my tale, I will use the old African tools of story: Spoken words. They are worthier of my trust and they’ll last longer. And during shadowy times, spoken words carry farther than words typed, imaged, or written. My beginnings were in the dark. We all dwelled in the dark, mad scientist and speciMen, alike. A dear friend of mine would say that this time was when ‘the goddess Ani still slept’. I call my story The Book of Phoenix. It is reliable and short, because it was accelerated . . .”

CHAPTER 1

SpeciMen

I’d never known any other place. The 28th floor of Tower 7 was my home. Yesterday, I realized it was a prison, too. I probably should have suspected something. The two-hundred-year-old marble skyscraper had many dark sides to its existence and I knew most of them. There were 39 floors, and on almost every one was an abomination. I was an abomination. I’d read many books and this was clear to me. However, this building was still my home.

Home: a. One’s place of residence. Yes, it was my home.

They gave me all the 3D movies I could watch, but it was the plethora of books that did it for me. A year ago, they gave me an e-reader packed with 700,000 books of all kinds. No matter the topic, I consumed those books voraciously, working my way through over half of them. When it came to information, I was given access to anything I requested. That was part of their research. I didn’t know it then, but I know it now.

Research. This was what all The Towers were about. There were seven, all in American cities, yet they were not part of the American government. Not technically. If you dug for information, you would not find one governmental connection on file.

I had access to information about all the towers, and I read extensively. However, Tower 7 was where I lived, so I studied this tower the most. They gave me many “top-secret” files on Tower 7. As I said, I was always given what I asked for; this was part of the research. But also, they did not see me as a threat, not to them. I was a perfectly contained classified “speciMen.” And for a speciMen, knowledge wasn’t power.

Tower 7 was located in Times Square on the island of Manhattan, United States of America. Much of Manhattan was underwater, but geologists were sure this part of it was stable enough for Tower 7. It was in the perfect position for top surveillance and security. I’d read about each floor and some of the types of abominations found on them. I’d listened to audios of the spiritual tellings of long-dead African and Native American shamans, sorcerers and wizards. I’d read the Tanakh, the Bible, and the Koran. I studied the Buddha and meditated until I saw Krishna. And I read countless books on the sciences of the world. Carrying all this in my head, I understood abomination. I understood the purpose of Tower 7. Until yesterday.

Each tower had . . . specializations. In Tower 7, it was advanced and aggressive genetic manipulation and cloning. In Tower 7, people and creatures were invented, altered, or both. Some were deformed, some were mentally ill, some were just plain dangerous, and none were flawless. Yes, some of us were dangerous. I was dangerous.

Then there was the tower’s lobby on the ground floor that projected a completely different picture. I’d never been down there but my books described it as an earthly wonderland, full of creeping vines covering the walls and small trees growing from artistically crafted holes in the floor. In the center was the main

attraction. Here grew the thing that brought people from all over the world to see the famous Tower 7 Lobby (*only* the lobby; there were no tours of the rest of the building).

A hundred years ago, one of the landscapers planted a new tree in the lobby's center. On a lark, some Tower 4 scientists who were there to visit the greenhouse on the ninth floor emptied an experimental solution into the tree's pot of soil. The substance was for enhancing and speeding up arboreal growth. The tree grew and grew. In a place where people thought like normal human beings, they would have uprooted the amazing tree and placed it outdoors.

However, this was Tower 7 where boundaries were both contained and pushed. The tree grew ravenously and in a matter of weeks it reached the lobby's high ceiling. Tower 7 carpenters constructed a large hole so that it could grow through the second floor. They did the same for the third, fourth, fifth. The great tree eventually earned the name of "The Backbone" because it grew through all thirty-nine of Tower 7's floors.

• • •

My name is Phoenix. I was mixed, grown and finally birthed here on the 28th floor. One of my doctors said my name came from the birthplace of my egg's donor. I've looked that up; Phoenix, Arizona is the full name of the place. There's no tower there, so that's good.

However, from what I've read about the way they did things there, even the scientists who forced my existence don't know the names of donors. So, I doubt this. I think they named me Phoenix because of something else.

I was an "accelerated organism," born two years ago. Yet I looked and physically felt like a forty-year-old woman. My doctors said the acceleration had stopped now that I was "matured." They said I would always look about forty, even if I lived to be five hundred. To them, I was like a plant they grew for the sake of harvesting.

Who do I mean by "them," you must wonder. *All of THEM*, the "Big Eye"—the Tower 7 scientists, lab assistants, lab technicians, doctors, administrative workers, guards, and police. We speciMen of the tower called them "Big Eye" because they watched us. All the time, they watched us, though not closely enough to realize their great error and not closely enough to prevent the inevitable.

I could read a 500-page book in two minutes. My brain absorbed the information and stories like a sponge. Up until two weeks ago, aside from mealtimes, gazing out the window, running on my treadmill, and meetings with doctors, I spent my days with my e-reader. I'd sit in my room for hours consuming words upon words that became images upon images in my head. Now they gave me paper-made books, removing the books when I finished them. I liked the e-reader more. It took up less space, I could reread things when I wanted, there was a lot more to read and the e-pages didn't smell so old and moldy.

I stared out the window watching the cars and trucks below and the other skyscrapers across from me as I touched a leaf of my hoya plant. They'd given the plant to me five days ago and already it was growing so wildly that it was creeping across my windowsill and had wrapped around the chair I'd put there. It had grown two feet overnight. I didn't think they'd noticed. No one ever said anything about it. I was so naïve then. Of course, they'd noticed. The plant was not a gesture of kindness; it was just part of the research. They'd never cared about me. But Saeed cared about me.

Saeed is dead, Saeed is dead, Saeed is dead, I thought over and over, as I caressed one of my plant's leaves. I yanked, breaking the leaf off. *Saeed, my love, my only friend*. I crumpled the leaf in my restless hand; its green earthy smell might as well have been blood.

Yesterday, Saeed had seen something terrible. Not long afterwards, he'd sat across from me during dinner-hour with eyes wide like boiled eggs, unable to eat. He couldn't give me any details. He said no words could describe it. He'd only held my hand, pulling at his short dark brown beard with his other.

"What does your heart tell you about this place?" he'd earnestly asked.

I'd only shrugged, frustrated with him for not telling me what he'd seen that was so awful.

"*Behiima hamagi. Xara*," he muttered, glaring at one of the Big Eye. He always spoke Arabic when he was angry. He leaned forward, lowering his voice. "You read all those books . . . why don't you feel rebellion in your heart? Don't you ever dream of getting out of here? Away from all the Big Eye?"

"Rebellion against whom?" I whispered, confused.

"I'd even settle for being a mild speciMen," he muttered. "They are fucked up, but not *that* fucked up. At least the Big Eye let them go out and live normal lives like normal people."

"Mild speciMen aren't special," I said. "That's why the Big Eye release them out there. I'd never want that, I like who I am."

He laughed bitterly, touched my cheek and lightly kissed me, looking deep into my eyes. Then he sat back and said, "Eat your jollof rice, Phoenix."

I tried to get him to eat his crushed glass. This was his favorite meal and it bothered me to see him push his plate away. But he wouldn't touch it.

"I can live without it," he said.

Before we returned to our separate quarters, he asked for my apple. I assumed he wanted to paint it; he always painted when he was depressed. I'd given it to him without a thought, and he'd slipped it into his pocket. The Big Eye allowed it, though they frowned upon taking food from the dining hall, even if you didn't plan to eat it.

His words didn't touch me until nighttime when I lay in my bed. Yes, somewhere deep deep in my psyche I *did* wish to get out of the tower and see the world, be away from the Big Eye. I *did* want to see those things that I saw in all the books I read. "Rebellion," I whispered to myself. And the word bloomed from my lips like a flower.

• • •

They told me the news in the morning, during breakfast-hour. I'd been sitting alone looking around for Saeed. The others, the woman with the twisted spine who could turn her head around like an owl, the man with long-eyelashed expressive eyes who never spoke with his mouth but always had people speaking to him, the three women who all looked and sounded alike, the green-eyed idiok baboons who spoke using complex sign language, the woman whose sweater did not hide her four large breasts, the two men joined at the hip who were always randomly laughing, the woman with the lion claws and teeth, these people spoke to each other and never to me. Only Saeed, the one who was *not* of African descent (aside from the lion lady, who was Caucasian), spoke to me. Well, even the lion lady was part-African because her genes had been combined with those of a lion.

One of my doctors slid into the seat facing me. The African-looking one who wore the shiny black wig made of synthetic hair, Bumi. They always had her deal with me when I had to experience physical pain, so I guess

it made sense for them to send her to break upsetting news to me, too. My entire body tightened. She touched my hand, and I pulled it away. Then she smiled sympathetically and told me a terrible thing. Saeed hadn't drawn the apple. He'd eaten it. And it killed him. My mind went to one of my books. The Bible. I was Eve and he was Adam.

I could not eat. I could not drink. I would not cry. Not in the dining hall.

•••

Hours later, I was in my room lying on my bed, eyes wet, mind reeling. Saeed was dead. I had skipped lunch and dinner, but I still wasn't hungry. I was hot. The scanner on my wall would start to beep soon. Then they would come get me. For tests. I shut my eyes, squeezing out tears. They evaporated as they rolled down my hot cheeks, leaving the skin itchy with salt. "Oh God," I moaned. The pain of losing him burned in my chest. "Saeed. What did you see?"

•••

Saeed was human. More human than I. I'd met him the first day they allowed me into the dining hall with the others. I was one year old; I must have looked twenty. He was sitting alone and about to do something insane. There were many others in the room who caught my eye. The two conjoined men were laughing hard at the sight of me. The idiok baboons were jumping up and down while rapidly signing to the woman with lion claws and teeth. However, Saeed had a spoon in his hand and a bowl full of broken glass before him. I stood there staring at him as others stared at me. He dug the spoon into the chunks of glass, scooped out a spoonful and put it in his mouth. I could hear him crunching from where I stood. He smiled to himself, obviously enjoying it.

Driven by sheer curiosity, I walked over and sat across from him with my plate of spicy doro wat. He eyed me with suspicion, but he didn't seem angry or mean, at least not to the best of my limited social knowledge. I leaned forward and asked what was on my mind, "What's it like to eat that?"

He blinked, surprised. "'What', she asks. Not 'Why'." He grinned. His teeth were perfect—white, shiny, and shaped like the teeth in drawings and doctored pictures in magazines. Had they removed his original teeth and replaced them with ones made of a more durable stuff? "The taste is soft and delicate as the texture is crunchy. I'm not in pain, only pleasure," he said in a voice accented in a way that I'd never heard. But then again, the only accents I'd ever heard were from the Big Eye doctors and guards.

"Tell me more," I said. "I like your voice."

He'd looked at me for a long time, then he smiled and said, "Sit."

After that, Saeed and I became close. I loved words, and he needed to spill them. He could not read, so I would tell him about what I read, at least in the hours of breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Sometimes, he grumbled with annoyance when the current series of books I was reading were romance novels or what he called "woman tales," but he couldn't have disliked them that much because he always demanded to hear these stories from beginning to end as well. "I like the sound of your voice," he said, when I asked him why. He may have, but I believe he liked the stories, too.

Saeed was from Cairo, Egypt, where he had been an orphan who never went hungry because he could always find something to eat. He ate rotten rice, date pits, even the wooden skewer sticks of *kebabs*; he had a stomach like a goat. They brought him to the tower when he was thirteen, six years ago. He never told me exactly how or why they made him the way he was. It didn't matter. What mattered was that we were who

we were, and we were there.

Saeed told me of places I had never seen with my own eyes. He used the words of a poet who used his tongue to see. Saeed was an artist with his hands, too. He had the skill of the great painters I read about in my books. He most loved to draw those foods he could no longer eat. Human food. Portraits of loaves of bread. Bowls of thick egusi soup and balls of fufu. Bouquets of smoked lamb and beef kebabs. Oniony fried eggs with white cheese. Plates of chickpeas. Pitchers of fresh-squeezed orange juice. Piles of roasted yellow corn. They allowed him to bring the paintings to mealtime for everyone to view. I guess even we deserved the pleasures of art.

Saeed could survive on glass, metal shavings, crumbles of rust, sand, dirt, those things that would be left behind if human beings finally blew themselves up. They tasted delicious to him. Nevertheless, eating a piece of bread would kill him as eating a giant bowl filled with sharp pieces of glass would kill the average human being.

The first time he kissed me, we were sitting together at dinnertime. I'd just finished my own meal of fried chicken curried rice. I was telling him the chemical makeup of the flakes of rust he was eating and speculating on how green rust would probably taste different to him. "I think you will find green rust tastier because it's more variable and complex." We were sitting close, a habit we'd gotten into when we'd realized that my natural body temperature was usually warm and his was cool.

He took a deep gulp of water from his full glass, turned to me, cupped my chin and kissed me. All thought of iron oxide and corrosion fled my mind, replacing it with nothing but amazed shock and the soft coolness of his lips.

"No affected behavior," we heard one of the nearby Big Eye bark and immediately we pulled away from each other. I couldn't help the smile on my face. I had read and watched many stories where people kissed, this was nothing like what I imagined. And I'd never thought it would happen to me. Saeed took my hand under the table and my smile grew bigger. I heard him snicker beside me. And I snickered, too.

Everyone in the dining hall stared at us. I remember specially the idiok baboons pointing at Saeed and me, and then signing energetically to each other. "They're just jealous," Saeed whispered, squeezing my hand. I grinned, my stomach full of unusual flutters, and my lips felt hot. Even if it were from within, it was the first time that I had ever laughed at the Big Eye.

Now, I couldn't stop thinking about what had happened. *He took my apple and he ate it. He took my apple and he ate it. He took my apple and he ate it.* The Big Eye explained that then his stomach and intestines hemorrhaged and Saeed was dead before morning. I couldn't stop stressing about the fact that I never got to tell him what was happening to me. I was sure that it would have given him hope; it would have reminded him that things would change. I wiped a tear. I loved Saeed.

• • •

As grief overwhelmed me for the first time in my life, I pressed a hand against the thick glass of my window and longingly looked down at the green roof of the much shorter building right beside Tower 7; one of the trees growing there was in full bloom with red flowers. I'd never been outside. I wanted to go outside. Saeed had escaped by dying. I wanted to escape, too. If he wasn't happy here, then neither was I.

I wiped hot sweat from my brow. My room's scanner began to beep as my body's temperature soared. The doctors would be here soon.

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When it first started to happen two weeks ago, only I noticed it. My hair started to fall out. I am an African by genetics, I had the facial features, my skin was very dark and my hair was very coily. They kept my hair shaved low because neither they nor I knew what to do with it when it grew out. I could never find anything in my books to help. They didn't care for style in Tower 7, anyway, although the lion lady down the hall had very long, silky, white hair and Big Eye lab assistants came by every two days to help her brush and braid it. And they did this despite the fact that the woman had the teeth and claws of a lion.

I was sitting on my bed, looking out the window, when I suddenly grew very hot. For the last few days, my skin had been dry and chapped no matter how much super-hydrated water they gave me to drink. Doctor Bumi brought me a large jar of shea butter, and applying it soothed my skin to no end. However, this day, hot and feverish, my skin seemed to dry as if I were in a desert.

I felt beads of sweat on my head and when I rubbed my short short hair, it wiped right off, hair and sweat alike. I ran to my bathroom, quickly showered, washing my head thoroughly, towed off and stood before the large mirror. I'd lost my eyebrows, too. But this wasn't the worst of it. I rubbed the shea butter into my skin to give myself something to do. If I stopped moving, I'd start crying with panic.

I don't know why they gave me such a large mirror in my bathroom. High and round, it stretched from wall to wall. Therefore, I saw myself in full glory. As I slathered the thick, yellow, nutty smelling cream onto my drying skin, it was as if I was harboring a sun deep within my body and that sun wanted to come out. Under the dark brown of my flesh, I was glowing. I was light.

I pulsed, feeling a wave of heat and slight vibration within me. "What is this?" I whispered, scurrying back to my bed where my e-reader lay. I wanted to look up the phenomena. In all my reading, I had never read a thing about a human being, accelerated or normal, heating up and glowing like a firefly's behind. The moment I picked up the e-reader, it made a soft pinging sound. Then the screen went black and began to smoke. I threw it on the floor and the screen cracked, as it gently burned. My room's smoke alarm went off.

Psss! The hissing sound was soft and accompanied by a pain in my left thumbnail. It felt as if someone had just stuck a pin into it. "Ah!" I cried, instinctively pressing on my thumb. As I held my hand up to my eyes, I felt myself pulse again.

There was a splotch of black in the center of my thumbnail like old blood, but blacker. Burned flesh. Every speciMen, creature, creation in the building had a diagnostics chip implanted beneath his, her, or its fingernail, claw, talon, or horn. I'd just gone off the grid. I gasped.

Not twenty seconds passed before they came bursting into my room with guns and syringes, all aimed at me as if I were a rabid beast destroying all that they had built. Bumi looked insane with stress, but only she knew to not get too close.

"Get down! DOWN!" she shouted, her voice quivering. She held a portable in her hand and her other hand was in the pocket of her lab coat.

When I just stood there confused, one of the male Big Eye guards grabbed my arm, probably with the intent of throwing me on the bed so he could cuff me. He screamed, staring at his burned, still-smoking hand. The room suddenly smelled like cooked meat. "You're not going anywhere," Bumi muttered, pulling a gun from her pocket. Without hesitation, she shot me right in the leg. It felt as if someone kicked me with a metal foot and I grunted. I sunk to the floor, pain washing over me like a second layer of more intense heat. I would have been done for if someone else had not shouted for the others to hold their fire.

Thankfully, I healed fast and the bullet had gone straight through my leg. Bumi said she'd shot me there knowing the bullet would do that; I believed her. If the bullet hadn't gone straight through and remained in my flesh, I don't know what would have happened with my extreme body temperature. Bumi knew this more than anyone.

One minute I was staring with shock at the blood oozing from my leg. Then the next, I blacked out. I woke in a bed, my body cool, my leg bandaged. When they returned me to my room, the scanner was in place to monitor me, since I could not hold an implant. They replaced my bed sheets with heavy heat-resistant ones similar in material to my new clothes. The carpet was gone, too. For the first time, I saw that the floor beneath the carpet was solid whitish marble.

Bumi took me to one of the labs soon after that. This would be my first but not last encounter with the cubed room with walls that looked like glass. Maybe they were thick clear plastic. Maybe they were made of crystal. Or maybe they were made of some alien substance that they were keeping top secret. I knew nothing. I didn't even know what the machine was called. They simply put me in it, and it heated up like a furnace. I felt as if I were on fire and when I started screaming, Bumi's voice filtered in, smooth like okra soup, sweet like mango juice, but distant like the outside world.

"Phoenix, hold still," she said. "We are just getting information about you."

I believed her. Even through the pain. I always believed everything they told me. The space was just large enough for me to sit with my long legs stretched before me, my back straight, my palms flat to the surface. The smooth transparent walls warmed to red and orange and yellow, so it was like being inside the evening sun I watched set every day.

"Does it have to hurt?" I cried. "I'm burning! My skin is burning!" It did not get so hot that my flesh caught fire, but the parts of me that touched the walls—especially my legs—received first-degree burns.

"Nothing great comes without pain," she said. "Just relax."

I closed my eyes and tried to retreat into myself. But the memory of the sound of Bumi's gun firing was still ricocheting in my head. I hadn't been fighting, I wasn't as dangerous as some of the other speciMen became when in some kind of distress. I wasn't doing anything but standing there in confusion thinking about the fact that I was off the grid. Yet, she'd shot me.

I couldn't help my legs flexing and twitching whenever the pain hit. My legs ran, like a separate part of my body.

"Relax," Bumi said.

Relax. How could I relax? I frowned. I couldn't stop thinking about it. It was as if my thoughts had become tangible and were bouncing off the walls, getting faster and faster, like a heated atom. Maybe thoughts were just atoms made of a different type of material for which even the Big Eye lacked tools to study.

"I am trying," I said.

"Do you want to hear a story?"

For the first time, I was able to pull back from the sound of the gun firing and the kernel of whatever I was feeling deep in my chest. "Yes," I said, looking up. All I saw was the machine's artificial burning sun.

"Ok," Bumi said. She paused. I listened. "You read so much, so I know that you know my country, Nigeria."

“Official name is the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Capital is Abuja. Most known city is Lagos, the second largest city in the world. West Africa. One of the world’s top producers of streaming films, crude oil, and fine literature,” I whispered.

I heard her chuckle. “You know my country better than I do.” She paused. “But to really know it, you must go there. I was born and raised in the metropolis of Lagos. My parents lived on Victoria Island in one of the high-security gated communities. Big big houses with columns, porches, marble and huge winding staircases. Manicured palm trees and colorful sweet smelling flowers. Even the houseboys and house girls dressed like movie stars. Paved roads. Security cameras. Well-dressed Africans with perfect wigs, suits, jewelry and flashy cars. Can you see it?”

I nodded.

“Good. So, I was born in that house. I was the first of five children. My mother was alone when she went into labor. My father was on a brief business trip in Ghana. The two house girls had gone to the village to visit their families before coming to stay in the house until I was born. She only had a virtual doctor to guide her through it all. She’d never had to use one before then. They could afford to have an actual doctor come to check on her and they’d hired a midwife. But she went into labor with me ten days early and the midwife got stuck in go-slow, Lagos traffic. My mother said it was like being instructed by a ghost.”

“I was born healthy and plump in my mother’s bedroom. She’d shut the windows and turned on the air purifier, so my first breath was not Lagos air. It was air delivered from the Himalayas.” She laughed. “My mother took me outside for the first time three weeks later. I took one breath of the Lagos air and vomited from coughing so hard. Then I was ok.”

I had my eyes closed. Though I could smell my skin slowly baking as the heat increased in the tiny room, I was strolling down the black paved road of Lagos beside Bumi’s mother who was dark-skinned, pretty and short, like Bumi. She was pushing a light-weight stroller with baby Bumi in it, coughing and cooing.

“When I think of my youth in Nigeria, I know that I can never be fully American, even when I am a citizen.”

“So you are not American?” I asked. “But you live here. You work here. You—”

“I’m legal, but not a citizen. Not yet. I will be. My work with you will earn me the pull I need.” She paused. “Do you want to know about how you were when you were a baby?”

I frowned. I remembered life from when I was about a month old; I was like a three year old.

“Do you know when I was a baby?” I asked.

“I was there when they brought you,” she said. “You were so small. Like a preemie. But strong, very very strong. You never needed an incubator or antibiotics or special formula. You took easily to life.”

The lights in the machine went off and something beeped. I breathed a sigh of relief. “Time’s up. Let’s get you to your room,” Bumi said. She didn’t say any more about first meeting me, as we walked back to my room, following the red lines. I was curious, but Bumi always had a set look on her face when she had switched back to her Big Eye self. I knew not to ask for more of my own story.

When we arrived at my room, it was evening.

“May the day break,” Bumi said. This was how she liked to say goodnight to me every night. She said she’d once heard it in a Nigerian movie she’d watched. She only said it to me and usually when she said it, I

laughed and smiled.

Tonight, I was in too much pain to smile, but I responded as always, "May it break."

My body ached from the burns, but by the time I entered my room, removed my clothes and inspected myself, there wasn't a mark left on my body. But I remembered the pain. You never forget the smell or the pain. I took a long cool shower.

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