

COMPRESSED BY THE THICK MIDNIGHT AIR OF TANZANIA, EVERY SLIGHT movement felt like an arduous wade through an inky, viscous swamp. In the black of the round mud hut, Kibwe lay silently and still as the hard floor pressed up into the peaks of his small shoulder blades. Tonight was the night the boy had been waiting for. The time for change had finally arrived.

Kibwe listened for the irregular pattern of his father's staggering breaths indicating he was finally asleep, but as his father suffered from sleep apnea, the depth of his doze was always in a state of flux. He gasped and choked, glistening with sweat on a bed made from a decrepit futon mattress on bottle crates. Kibwe thought it best to wait just a little longer; he couldn't risk waking his father now.

The white-breasted pied crow they kept on the floor in a handmade wooden cage, shuffled lightly upon a bed of desiccated banana plant leaves. Kibwe held his breath as if he had some sort of psychokinetic control over the animal's movements. The bird quickly calmed and resumed its slumber, and then all went quiet again—until an excited scuttle of a thousand armoured legs scampered past Kibwe's earlobe. He jumped up and, desperately hoping not to wake his father, scuffed his bare feet around the area until the robust millipede caught his toe and tumbled away. Kibwe detested any creature with more than two legs let alone more than two hundred, and in the dark, he slowly backed away until a brittle animal bone snapped beneath his heel. He froze and waited a while longer, once again assuring himself that his father was out cold.

Kibwe calmly turned, lowered to his knees, and then gently fumbled an open palm around the straw mat, his fingers brushing over more dried shells, bones, sticks and stones, until he found a small cardboard box. With his thumb, he pushed the little drawer open and slipped out a matchstick. He struck it and quickly contained the light by cupping the flame in his little palms. The mud walls looked like they were crawling as the shadows flickered within the indentations of its countless imperfections, and the shabby straw roof threatened to fall and burn them both alive.

Kibwe quietly fiddled with the rickety oil lantern during his father's

gags and throttled snores, and with what little drip of oil was left, he set the flame to the lowest the wick would allow and surveyed the ground for any other intruding critters. But there was only one, one he knew was there all along: a king baboon tarantula. It was his father's new capture—his new monster. Imprisoned in a large, palm-oil-stained plastic jar, lidded with a scrap of cardboard and a rock, the rusty-brown spider sat scrunched together with burnished black fangs as thick as nails. Mwamba was its name.

Kibwe carefully picked up the broken bone shards and hid them beneath the dried leaves inside the birdcage. He then ever so gently lifted the cage and crept over to the door. He kept the lantern low below his hip and stable to ensure its handle didn't creak, and to prevent the light from dancing on the walls more than the excited flame itself already did. Kibwe knew just how far the door could open before it creaked and held it in just the right position. Where am I going? he thought. What will I do? These weren't new questions. The answers he'd given himself on the nights he dreamt of his escape all seemed to have dissolved when freedom stood right before his eyes.

Ahead of him was a dusty clearing that led onto a meandering dirt road. Tall grass bordered the winding road, quickly obstructing the view of where it led. To the left of the hut, a dark and impenetrable forest hissed, chirruped and chattered as if the reptiles, birds, and creepy-crawlies battled in a great war for territory.

Off in the bushes nearby was a rustle and a crinkle of a small plastic wrapper. It was unmistakable the sound of a sweet confectionary. Kibwe definitely heard it, and in turn, he could now hear his heartbeat louder than ever. Somebody was out there, but it was impossible to see who, and to see where they were, as the forest canopy occluded any light from the bright blue moon above. Now Kibwe gave pause for the thought that this may have been the wrong decision and the possibility that he wouldn't make it very far if he headed out tonight. He squinted in an attempt to see through the opaque shadows of the trees and listened harder for any more sounds.

The crow suddenly cackled gaudily in her cage. Kibwe's head whipped

across to the bed. His father's eyes bolted open and scanned the room in a panic before landing on his son in the moonlit doorway. The rest of his father's body was frozen in a state of paralysis, but his muscles clenched hard as he attempted to break free causing him to vibrate like a shivering statue. Kibwe had seen this many times before, and he was hoping it would happen again tonight. But despite having a head start, something stopped Kibwe from leaving.

'Baba . . . I was just taking *Mama* outside,' Kibwe said. 'She was making too much noise, I could not sleep. I promise.'

His father grunted, trying to communicate through immobilised lips. Kibwe closed the door and returned the birdcage. The look in his father's eyes could have been either fear or fury as they followed Kibwe as he crossed the room. After placing the cage down, Kibwe quickly approached the bed, took his father's stiffly-clawed hand and helped him form a fist. This had proved useful in the past. He then rubbed his open palm on his father's chest and guided him towards the end of his transfixed state.

'It's okay,' said Kibwe. 'Just be calm.'

His father's breathing gradually steadied, and the tension in his muscles slowly dissolved. He could now flex in and out of a fist, and he could partially raise his arm. As soon as his father felt his joints unlock, he hammered a clenched knuckle down onto Kibwe's skull, knocking him backwards.

'Stupid . . . boy!' he shouted, standing from the futon. '*Mpumbavu!* I do not need your help! And what!? You were taking her outside?'

'Yes, Baba—'

'Outside for *chui* to eat? Are you mad?'

Immediately regretting his lie, Kibwe said, through blubbering lips, 'No, Baba! Please! It was too hot—'

The crow reacted to the commotion, cawing and attacking the cage. Kibwe jumped to his feet, as if he were about to bolt out, and backed away from his towering father. Every step he took, he punished himself for looking back, for hesitating, for returning, for helping; and on his final step, his heel knocked over the spider's jar. The cardboard lid fell flat and

the rock tumbled away.

A heavy palm rammed Kibwe aside and his father quickly swooped up the jar before its captive escaped. Not to be confused with protecting his child from a venomous hunter, his father found more value in the power he believed he derived from the eight-eyed, all-seeing beast. The tarantula jostled around back onto its eight leathery claw pads and huddled its limbs together again.

‘Come here!’ his father shouted, as he grabbed Kibwe by the scruff of his tattered shirt. He hoisted Kibwe up like a dumbbell curl until he was standing on the tip of his toes. ‘Do you remember his name?’ He released Kibwe’s shirt, and then locked his thick fingers onto the back of his neck instead, pushing his face towards the opening of the jar. ‘Look at him!’

With Kibwe’s face forced into the jar, the smell of dust and iron permeated his nostrils, but he held back his gags and kept his eyes shut.

‘Tendaji?’ called a distressed voice outside in the distance. Neither Kibwe nor his father could hear the call over the crow’s incessant squawks and the boy’s hysterical cries, and so the threat persisted.

Kibwe wrestled to get away. His scrawny arms flailed at his father’s abdomen, and his feet slipped on the silty floor, but his father’s grip on Kibwe’s nape was as strong as a gorilla’s. Since Kibwe’s eyes were jammed shut, the fear of not seeing what could jump up at him scared him more—so, regrettably, he opened his eyes and saw the beast already reared on its hind legs, primed for combat; its front legs and palps splayed, like a ghoul’s claws grasping for fresh meat, showcasing its devastating fangs.

‘Strong! Powerful! Undefeatable!’ his father shouted. ‘*Mwamba!* Remember the name—’

The tarantula flinched as Kibwe’s teardrops pitter-pattered on the fine hairs of its back.

‘Brother Tendaji!’

The voice outside was now at the door, and a heavy knuckle rapped upon it. Tendaji flung Kibwe against the wall where he slumped and remained sobbing.

With his eyes still locked on Kibwe, Tendaji responded to the visitor,

‘Come.’

The door swung open, and in stormed a giant of a man with wide eyes, a panting mouth, and a gleaming sweaty brow. Kibwe looked up at him, noticing he carried a dusty backpack over one shoulder as he turned to quickly close the door again.

The crow’s screaming was relentless and near-deafening, but the visitor persisted. ‘I am very sorry to disturb you so late, but I ran straight from the village with news.’ Kibwe watched the two men loom high above him, and their shadows tyrannised even higher above them, dominating the room. ‘My wife . . . she gave birth . . . but the baby is not normal.’

The crow’s fluttering wings beat at the bars. Tendaji shot a fiery glare at Kibwe and the crow. ‘Silence her!’ he shouted. Kibwe trembled where he sat and picked up an old, crinkled piece of foil and began reflecting candlelight at the crow. It didn’t seem to do much to help.

Tendaji turned back to his visitor. ‘Not normal?’

‘She has been promiscuous, sir. That I am certain!’

‘How?’

The visitor almost laughed as he wiped his drenched face. Kibwe noticed the break in the conversation and looked up at them. The visitor slipped his backpack off of his shoulder and unzipped it. He reached in and pulled out a limp newborn baby with the fairest skin complexion Kibwe had ever seen.

‘A ghost,’ the man said, as he dangled the infant by her ankle.

Kibwe was unable to take his eyes off her.

Tendaji regarded the baby and then said to Kibwe, ‘Go outside. And take Mama with you.’

Kibwe immediately picked up the wooden cage and edged around the adults and the baby. Tendaji returned the spider jar to the mat, placed the cardboard and rock on top, and then quickly dressed in a large, elaborate headdress comprising multifarious animal furs and feathers, along with necklaces and bracelets made up of teeth and bones.

‘Sir, the maid took this devil child out of my wife’s stomach,’ said the visitor, ‘and I want you to put wasps back in there.’

Tendaji nodded solemnly. ‘I will call on our ancestors to judge.’

Thanks for reading.

*The entire short story is available upon request or online at leading eBook
stores...*

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