



MIDNIGHT FAIRYTALES

A THESIS PROJECT BY IVANA AKOTOWAA OFORI

Foreword

This work of fiction, entitled *Midnight Fairy Tales*, is a creative writing project that explores a selection of African historical legends in a medium as faithful to the original stories as the research and the project's structure will allow. Its form, with the use of a framing story to provide incentive for the telling of the smaller ones, was partially inspired by *Arabian Nights*. The stories themselves were simply ones that I found extremely fascinating when I chanced upon a few lines about them in various required texts from my Africana Studies courses. I would hope the frame story itself helps to justify why I chose to undertake a project of quasi-historical fiction rather than write a traditional historical paper. But, just as important as the motive, is the means which Africana Studies provides, being such an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field of study, to execute a capstone project in this way.

I sought to achieve a number of subversive feats with this project, namely, to challenge traditional notions about legitimate ways of transmitting and preserving history, by minimizing the emphasis on evidence, emphasizing the role of oral traditions, and normalizing the framing of historical events within marginalized worldviews; to provide another platform for African histories that one is unlikely to come across elsewhere; to inspire intellectual curiosity about included, similar, or related African legends; to creatively demonstrate that African mythology, with barely any enhancement or reinterpretation, is interesting and/or has entertainment value; and finally, to challenge global storytelling stereotypes, especially the ideas of Euro-American dominance over fairytale form and that the sole legitimately African form of storytelling is the archetypal folktale/fable form.

Aside the framing story, each of the included tales are derived from accounts of events and personalities that the origin cultures certainly consider real, historical and factual. Many details, though they may seem absurd, bear much more resemblance to the source materials I pulled from, than one might expect.

THE MIDNIGHT FAIRY TALES

The stories started when Mali was seven. Perhaps a little late for a revolution in a child's bedtime story routine, but as far as her mother was concerned, it was better late than never. After all, there came a point in a child's life when Snow White was no longer useful to them. And perhaps, for a Ghanaian child, that point was the moment they were born.

How ironic, that Snow White and Midnight rhymed.

Candace felt that there was something not quite right about her daughter returning from school with a still-bleeding cut on her forehead. It wasn't the cut itself. Although Mali was several times more likely to get into a quarrel where the weapons of choice were imaginary wands, rather than physical fists, her being hurt was not, in fact, unusual. The permanent scar on the underside of her jaw was an ever-present reminder of that. Mali had gotten it a couple of years prior, when she had crash-landed at the bottom of the staircase because her attempt to awaken her fairy powers had gone horribly awry. That had not been the first injury of its kind, and it certainly had not been the last.

This time, though, Mali insisted she was in no way responsible for her wound.

"Midnight did it!" Mali tried to explain.

Candace dismissed the excuse. As to how "midnight" could have done *anything* during the peak hours of the afternoon, only Mali knew.

"It wasn't *me*," Mali insisted as Candace swabbed the cut with disinfectant. "Plus, she did it by accident."

Candace shook her head in exasperation. "Who's 'she,' now?"

"*Midnight*," Mali stressed, with the very same tone of frustration Candace used when she felt Mali wasn't listening properly. "She was trying to throw it at Ronke, but then—"

Her mother didn't have the patience for a long-winded story. Some people, they said, could make a story out of a word. Candace believed her daughter could make a novel out of a punctuation mark. "She's a girl in your class?" she asked.

"Yesss."

"*Manners*, Mali. Why was she trying to throw a book at Ronke?"

“Ronke likes saying things to make her angry.”

“Provoking. What Ronke is doing is called ‘provoking’.”

“Yes, Mummy.” Mali deadpanned. Unlike her mother, she had always been far more interested in stories than the words used to tell them.

Mali’s cut was now clean and bandaged, but Candace had always frowned upon attending to the symptoms without addressing the sickness. “Why does Ronke provoke her?”

“Oh, it’s because she’s Midnight,” Mali answered, as if that incomprehensible statement explained everything.

“Mali, how can a person *be* midnight? Midnight is a time on the clock, not a human being.”

“Midnight like the color,” Mali explained patiently.

But her mother didn’t have much patience of her own remaining. She held in a sigh with great effort and began, “Midnight isn’t a—*Oh!*” The gears only clicked into place because she was Mali’s mother, and thus, intimately familiar with the way her daughter’s brain worked. She could only fervently hope that this matter wouldn’t turn out to be what now suspected. Quietly, she ventured, “Mali, is this girl... umm... very dark?”

Mali nodded vigorously, beaming at her mother who had *finally* gotten something about the conversation right. “The *darkest!*”

Candace wanted to hold her head in her hands and groan. Instead, she held it together, raised her voice again, almost to normal volume, and asked, “What’s her name, Mali? The name her *parents* gave her.”

“Korkor.”

Candace shut her eyes. God indeed loved irony. “And do Ronke’s provocations have anything to do with the color of Korkor’s skin?”

“Yeah. Like, all of them.” Mali was no longer as enthusiastic as she had been only seconds ago. Her mother seemed to have gone cross-eyed and it alarmed her. So much so that when Candace absently ordered her to go and start her homework, she gratefully scampered away.

Candace went through the rest of the evening too dazed to properly think. She cooked, helped Mali with her homework, washed and cleaned, made sure Mali was washed and clean, put her to bed, and read her a bedtime story, as usual.

It was the bedtime story that broke the daze, but not until four hours after she had finished reading it. Mali had chosen the book, entirely unaware of the irony, and oblivious to the static noise in her mother's head, even as she read aloud.

And now, here Candace lay at midnight—the hour, not the “color”—with the words she had recently read haunting her like a curse.

“Mirror, mirror on the wall/ Who’s the fairest of them all?”

Ronke was. Candace had gone back to look at Mali's most recent class photos to verify. Not so fair that you couldn't tell that she was Black, but fair enough that she stood out from the various deeper brown complexions of her classmates. And she found the one Mali called Midnight. Korkor was dark enough that her eyes seemed to gleam from within the glossy photo.

Years prior, when Candace had first started reading these fairytales to Mali, she explained that by “fairest,” the Queen meant “most beautiful.” But was Snow White the most beautiful because of, or in addition to, the snow whiteness of her skin? And did Candace even want to contemplate the answer?

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Laughter. That was what Candace's worries were met with. Neither nervous laughter nor shocked laughter, but the laughter of genuine amusement.

“Oh, come on, it's hilarious, isn't it?” her cousin Abena said through the phone. “‘Midnight like the color,’ahaha!”

It was the morning after the book-throwing incident, and Mali had already been dropped off at school. Candace took this opportunity to call her cousin, Abena, whose daughter attended the same school Mali did. She needed to speak about her troubles with someone who could empathize. Clearly, though, she'd called the wrong person.

“I don't think it's funny at all,” Candace said to Abena.

It only took an instant for Abena's mirth to transform into defensiveness. “Oh, don't pretend like we didn't use to do worse back in our day. ‘Midnight’ is even mild. When we used to say things like ‘Kanzo’ and ‘Coalpot’?”

And worse.

If you ever get lost at night, make sure you keep smiling with your so that somebody can actually find you.

And worse.

“Candace, it’s a *joke*,” Abena stressed. “I’m sure even the Midnight girl herself knows it’s just play.”

“Ah, yes, and that’s exactly why she split my daughter’s forehead open with a projectile.”

“‘*Projectile*’? I don’t even know what that means.”

“It means—”

“No, Candace, I wasn’t *asking*. Must you be a walking dictionary all the time? I’m trying to make a point. If your father hadn’t filled your head with all that Pan-Africanism whatever-whatever, you would have learned how to laugh at these things like the rest of us.”

Candace coldly pointed out that the girl they called “Midnight” wasn’t laughing either. But by then, she was getting late for work and had to cut the conversation short.

At the end of the working day, after turning things over for hours on end, a lock clicked open in her mind. She realized that Abena had unconsciously and unintentionally provided her with a key.

That evening, the minute Mali was seated at the table to do her homework, Candace hurried off to the study she shared with her husband. She lightly dusted the inside of a cabinet whose books hadn’t been touched in years and pulled one thick volume off the shelf.

Its cover bore the name of her father.

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It had been a long time since Candace had felt quite so afraid of failure as she did when she began composing the stories. But it was the horrifying thought of Mali growing into an adult who defended harmful behavior the way Abena did, which gave her enough motivation to at least see the first one through.

She saw, now, that maybe she had judged her own father too harshly for the way he had raised her, lecturing to her and her siblings over meals like they were some of his university students or academic peers. Regardless of how enlightening his teachings had been, Candace felt it would have been

nicer to have had a childhood where every Sunday lunch didn't feel like an examination. Her resolution to give Mali the childhood that she had been denied, full of the same Western fairy tales and children's books that most mothers of a certain class considered essential for girls Mali's age, may have been compounding Mali's problems rather than solving Candace's own.

To Mali, there was no reason why calling a dark girl "Midnight," in the heart of Accra, two decades into the 21st century, was unacceptable. But there was also little effectiveness, at this age, of teaching Mali to handle the matter the way Candace's own father would have encouraged her to. The sophisticated writings of Césaire, Biko, Baldwin, and even Nkrumah, would hardly mean a thing to a group of 7-year-olds. Besides which, Candace realized with a start, all those thinkers were male. No, she would have to take a more unconventional route; get through to Mali by speaking in her own language. Candace's daughter had a bigger imagination than anyone she'd ever met, and if she wanted to impress *her*, she'd have to think like Mali did.

Over consecutive nights, Candace pored over sections of books written by her father and his contemporaries—scraps of legend, history and folklore—and Malified them. She fit the scraps together and made mosaics out of words, glued fiction to fact, and generously sprinkled upon it all the glitter of her own propaganda.

After several long nights, the first story was printed and stapled together in Candace's surprisingly nervous hands. She clutched the papers tightly as she shooed Mali in through the latter's bedroom door.

"Which one are we reading today, Mummy?" Mali asked as she jumped into her bed, already angling towards her bookshelf.

Cautiously, Candace perched herself at the edge of the bed and said, "Sweetie, I was thinking we could try something different tonight. A new story."

At first, Mali thought Candace had bought her a new book, and asked to see the cover. Candace told her she had found the story online, and it didn't have a cover. Mali wanted to know how Candace could trust a story whose book didn't have a cover. Candace explained that not all stories were in books. Mali asked what kinds of stories *weren't* in books. Candace told her she would find out if she stayed quiet and listened.

And at last, with her heart beating louder than her thoughts, Candace started to read.

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It was the same strategy Candace used when Mali herself turned into the object of ridicule, for daring to challenge Ronke one day. Mercilessly, Ronke had latched onto the unabbreviated form of Mali's name, Malinké, and bastardized it into—wait for it—“Malian Kenkey.”

If you were to ask Mali what her name meant, she would respond, uncertainly “It means I should be proud of my African ancestors?” It had taken this long for Candace to realize that Mali was as far removed from the history of the Malinké as Candace had once been from the history of the Kushite queens for whom *she'd* been named. At least, in Mali's case, that problem was easily remedied with a semi-conventional fairytale.

But soon, it was the strategy Candace used for almost everything. Candace turned African histories into fairytales, and these became as thoroughly integrated into Mali's repertoire as the famous Western ones. It was Mali's acute observation of the details of the stories that led her to group them under the moniker of “Midnight Fairy Tales.”

A handful of Candace's stories went as follows.

THE DARKEST ONES

At the beginning of the world, there was a Hunter. One day, when Hunter was out in the forest of Asiakwa, he came across the Bear.

Bear growled to Hunter, “This coming season, when all the animals are celebrating their traditional feast, the daughter of Osoro’s king will descend to the earth.”

Hunter was extremely pleased to hear this because for a long time, he had suffered from a terrible problem. He was supremely, utterly, tempestuously, *bored*. He thought to himself that if he could convince the king’s daughter not to return to the heavenly kingdom of Osoro, but to stay and live there on earth with him, then he would finally have some company.

Soon, the day of the traditional feast arrived, and all of the animals in Asiakwa were gathered, having eaten so much that they were now too full to move. At that point, the sky turned stormy and with three great claps of thunder accompanied by three strikes of lightning, a long gold chain descended from Osoro to the earth. The tinkling of a heavenly bell sounded as the princess of Osoro, whose name was Ankyewa Nyame, slid down on the gold chain to the ground. Ankyewa’s skin was a radiant golden-brown, which shined like it was kissed by the sun. The storm clouds scattered in the wake of her glowing trail, and the earth now seemed hotter and brighter than it had before.

All the animals bowed in respect to the Immortal. Hunter himself fell on his face in humility and while kneeling, welcomed his sovereign to the earth.

“It would be my greatest honor if you would allow me to help you become acquainted with life on earth,” he said to Ankyewa Nyame.

Seeing no reason to object to this offer, Ankyewa Nyame agreed, and soon thereafter, Hunter took her on a tour of Asiakwa. What Hunter enjoyed most of all was showing Ankyewa Nyame how to hunt, and all the tricks, weapons and strategies that went with the practice. In no time at all, Ankyewa Nyame became as skilled a hunter as Hunter himself! Hunter hoped that the love of hunting would convince her to stay, since there was no hunting in the kingdom of Osoro. But for Ankyewa, there was something else about the earth that captured her interest, and that was the soil itself.

Ankyewa loved to feel the texture of dirt between her palms, watch as grains of sand fell through her fingers. She would often play with mixtures of moisture and dryness until she got the perfect thickness

of mud. She had not encountered dirt before then, for up in the kingdom of Osoro, they had no soil, just clouds and sky. It was the love of the soil that convinced her to stay, and with the powers of an Immortal, she began to do miraculous things with it.

Ankyewa wandered through Asiakwa and wherever she found the soil to her liking, she raised up brand new creatures from the ground; creatures that lived, spoke, breathed, thought and felt. Each had skin a different shade that matched the color of the soil he or she was raised from. These were the world's first humans.

Hunter was nothing short of elated about Ankyewa's creations. "Ohemaa, you have fulfilled my deepest desires," he said to her. In profound gratitude, he pledged himself to serve Ankyewa Nyame for as long as she would ever require.

One day, as Ankyewa was strolling, she came across some particularly loamy soil. It was dark as night, and so rich and malleable that Ankyewa could not help herself from reaching down immediately to start molding it with her bare hands. From the loamy soil of that ground, she raised up the darkest human she had raised thus far. The human, a girl, was called Esum.

Ankyewa grew accustomed to being worshipped by her human creations. In this terrestrial world, the only thing more radiant than her was the sun itself. The humans took her glow as a symbol of her power and divinity. Furthermore, her partnership with Hunter had served to establish hunting as the primary way of life for humans and they often approached Ankyewa and Hunter for assistance... That is, until Esum came along with her trees and herbs.

By virtue of the type of soil Esum was raised from, she too had special abilities. Having inherited the gift of extreme fertility of loam, she was able to raise many kinds of trees and plants from the earth the same way Ankyewa could raise people. Because of Esum, the agriculture prospered, and humans learned how to farm food, pick fruit, and mix spices from whatever grew from the earth. The humans became so impressed with the new ways of life Esum's powers were introducing, that small by small, they began to drift away from the hunting practice and thus, away from complete devotion to Ankyewa and Hunter.

Hunter did not particularly mind, for he, too, enjoyed Esum's company and powers, especially the ability to replenish his energy under the shade of a huge kum tree after a long hunting period. But there was one person who was not impressed with Esum's powers, who was in fact, jealous and furious about the attention Esum received. This person was none other than Ankyewa Nyame. Ankyewa concluded that

if only she could get rid of Esum, things would return to the way she liked them. She decided that she would hunt and kill Esum in the dead of night.

The time came when Ankyewa had planned to carry out her plot. She collected her weapons and set out for the place where Esum slept. Once she was near, Esum herself emerged and greeted Ankyewa. Sleepy-eyed, the human nevertheless knelt before the Immortal in the radius of her glow and said, “Ohemaa, as I lay in my bed, the night looked bright, and so I came outside to see its beauty.”

Caught, Ankyewa played it off with a rehearsed lie. “I was having trouble sleeping and thought I might practice hunting.”

“How honorable that an expert such as yourself still seeks opportunities to improve!” Esum remarked. “But if I may offer, I know of a leaf whose brew might help you sleep better.”

Ankyewa declined, saying that she had remedies of her own, and took her leave, planning to return on another night to complete her mission.

The night she had prepared for arrived. Again, she packed up her hunting weapons and set out for the place where Esum slept. This time, she was almost at her destination when another human came outside to meet her.

Bowing down to her, he said, “Ohemaa, as I lay in my bed, the night looked bright, and so I came outside to look for the moon. Is there any way I can be of service to you?”

Foiled again, Ankyewa had to reply that she was simply having trouble sleeping and hand wanted to practice hunting.

“I know of a leaf your servant Esum grows, whose brew might help you sleep better,” said the human.

Ankyewa was secretly furious that someone else had the nerve to recommend Esum’s sorcery to *her*. Once more, Ankyewa declined and took her leave. Believing that the light constantly interrupting her was the light of the moon, Ankyewa planned her next attempt for the darkest night of the month—a night when there would be no moon. One more time, she set out with her hunting knives, but this time, she was not even halfway to her destination when yet another human came out to meet her.

Kneeling down before Ankyewa, the human said, “As I lay in my bed, I saw a brilliant light, and thinking how unusual it was on a night as dark as this, I came outside to find out what it might be.”

At last, Ankyewa discovered the root of her problem. Thrice now, she had been foiled by her own glow, which gave her divine presence away even in the dead of night. Realizing that she could not be the one to carry out her plan, she brought Hunter into her chambers and employed him for the task.

Though unwilling to kill Esum, whom he liked, Hunter was reminded that he had sworn allegiance to Ankyewa for the time she remained on earth, and he could not go back on his word. Ankyewa warned him to wait for one of the darkest nights and for a time when everyone was likely to be asleep. Thus, on a dark night, he set out for the place where Esum slept and was not interrupted even once. But when he got to the place where she slept, he could not find her, and returned to tell Ankyewa that Esum had been nowhere to be found.

Ankyewa implored him to try again. But once more, Hunter reached her sleeping place and could not find her there. He even searched around, amongst the trees and bushes, but there was no trace of Esum. Again, he reported his failure to his mistress, who was greatly displeased.

Ankyewa rained insults upon her servant and dismissed him from her sight. The dejected hunter begged Ankyewa for one more chance and set out on a dark night to try again. Hunter peered around Esum's place with his knife in his hands ready to strike, but he did not see her, although she lay in the same place she had lain every night before this. But Hunter could not see her. She herself was as dark as night, and when the sun was down and the moon was hidden, she was all but invisible.

When Hunter reported yet another failure to Ankyewa, she decided once more to take matters into her own hands.

The next morning, Esum was walking about in Asiakwa when she happened upon the Bear.

Bear growled to Esum, "On the brightest day of the month, when all the animals and people are gathered together for a festival, Ankyewa Nyame plans to cast a spell that will return you to the soil using the heat of the sun."

When Esum heard this, she was greatly dismayed. She couldn't believe that Ankyewa would do a thing so terrible, but she also knew that Bear never lied. Not knowing who else to turn to for help, Esum decided to raise a new tree from the ground that very day. She made the tree grow and grow until it was tall enough to reach Osoro, then she climbed all the way up to the heavenly kingdom. There, she brought her predicament before a tribunal of Immortals.

The Immortals decided to cover the human Esum with a protective blessing: if Ankyewa indeed tried to utter any words against Esum, she would be struck dumb. If she was struck dumb, the only thing that could cure her affliction would be a pot of soup filled with the meat of a recently slaughtered hen. Esum thanked the Immortals of Osoro and returned to Asiakwa.

The day of the big festival came, and Ankyewa Nyame called everyone together at high noon, saying that she had a very important announcement to make. But when she started trying to speak, all that came out of her mouth were the sounds of a beating drum. Ankyewa shut her mouth, frowned, and tried again. Still, all that came from her lips were the sounds of a beating drum.

The humans and animals quickly grew restless and confused. Esum, sad and disappointed, came forth with a large copper dish of light soup with chicken, and bent down to offer it to Ankyewa in the presence of everyone. While doing so, she whispered to Ankyewa, “I heard from Bear that you were planning to cast a spell that would kill me, so I went to Osoro for help. They told me you would be struck dumb if you tried to curse me and you would not regain your voice until you drank of this soup.”

Ankyewa was furious and ashamed, but she accepted the soup and drank it. At last, she could speak again and she said to Esum, “Curse you? Why would I do such a terrible thing?” Then she turned back to the crowd to supposedly finish her announcement.

“The reason I called you all here is that I want to tell you something very important,” she declared. “I only mistakenly came here, to Asiakwa. When I descended from my palace in Osoro, here was not the place I meant to come.”

After making this astonishing and unanticipated announcement, she disappeared from Asiakwa.

She reappeared in another district called Asantemanso and there, tried to recreate a community of humans that would follow her ways only. She soon found, however, that the people were dissatisfied with their diet and craved more variety in their lifestyle. Ankyewa tried in vain to make vegetation sprout the way she had seen Esum do several times, but every time she succeeded in at least raising a seedling, it would become bleached or scorched long before it could reach maturity.

Frustrated and repentant, Ankyewa returned to Asiakwa to enlist Esum’s help. Esum received her graciously, as though the other woman had not once tried to kill her. Esum tried to impart her knowledge to Ankyewa, since she had successfully taught a few residents of Asiakwa. But the two realized something curious: although anyone could learn how to take care of plants, the magic that Esum had could only be

performed by the darkest ones. Once Ankyewa acknowledged this, she returned to Asansemanso and selected the darkest humans she could find, and sent them to be taught by Esum. When they returned, equipped with the skills they hadn't previously known, they made Asansemanso an extremely fertile bedrock where not only hunters thrived, but the soil itself also yielded extraordinary results.

THE LADY OF THE WATERS

Before the earth began there was a lord whose name was Mangala.

Far away in outer space, Mangala reigned. His unhatched children all lay in huge round eggs, each the size of an individual planet. Back then, there was nothing yet on earth. Mangala had plans to eventually send his children off to the earth, where they would rule all together and make the planet a place full of life. But one of Mangala's children, whose name was Pemba, was extremely ambitious. He wanted to gain an advantage over the rest of his siblings, so that he would rule over them on earth. So, prematurely, Pemba cracked himself off from his egg, took half the yolk with him, and fell through space onto the earth, where his yolk covered the whole planet.

But Pemba, in his eagerness, had created a problem for himself. The yolk of his egg could not produce life. Once it covered the earth, it made the whole planet barren, dusty and dry. Mangala would never make him a lord over anything if he saw what Pemba had done! Foiled and ashamed, Pemba thought to himself that if he returned quietly to his shell up in space, he could act like nothing had ever happened. But upon reaching his former home, he found that his egg was no more. Mangala had used the remaining half of its yolk to form the bright yellow sun which shone down upon the earth.

Pemba became even more afraid and now resorted to a new strategy. He considered that maybe if he was clever enough, he could fix the problem he had created on earth and thus revive his chances of being made a lord on earth. Pemba snuck into Mangala's chambers and stole some of his father's Seeds of Life. He swooped back down to the earth, where he hoped they would bring life to the barren ground once planted. But Pemba failed yet again, because when he planted the seeds, almost all of them died straight away from lack of water.

Twice now, Pemba had upset Mangala's plans to make earth a fruitful place and Mangala was furious. Now that the earth was cursed with barrenness due to Pemba's rebellion and thievery, the only way to restore it was through an immense, powerful sacrifice. Mangala then searched among his children, and the only one he could find that was righteous and powerful enough to break the curse was Pemba's sister, Faro.

Mangala killed Faro and cut her up into sixty different pieces. He sprinkled the pieces all over the earth, where they fell as the first rain. From that moment, vegetation finally began to grow, and the earth showed the first signs of life.

As it rained, Pemba tried to hide, but Mangala located him and said, “Since you are so bent on becoming a lord, a lord you shall be. Henceforth, you, Pemba, are Lord of the Barren. The dust and sand will be your inheritance.”

Of course, Pemba was upset, but in his conceited little mind, he reasoned that even for all his disobedience, at least *he* was still alive.

But that was before Mangala resurrected Faro.

He brought Faro back to life and gave her a brand-new body—one that was part human and part fish. He also gave her a new title: The Lady of the Waters. Down on earth, Faro made her home in the river Niger.

The Lady of the Waters was given much power. She was responsible for taking care of the first plants, animals and humans that blossomed in the area, making sure they survived and multiplied, in spite of Pemba’s restless scheming. Faro made the region around the Niger so prosperous that it became the cradle of one of the most impressive civilizations to ever walk the earth. These became the Malinké people of West Africa. The Malinké eventually formed a huge empire led by some of the most powerful rulers the African continent ever saw.

For a long time, Faro, the Lady of the Waters, lived down on earth in the Niger river, where she herself had many mermaid children. One of them, a strong and powerful swimmer with toned brown arms, was called Inari Konté.

Inari Konté grew up in the Niger river, which ran through the land of the most powerful civilization in modern West Africa: the Malinké leaders of the Mali empire. From the river, she had a chance to observe the Malinké people and occasionally even converse with a few when they were close enough to the river. Inari Konté had a fondness for the Malinké, and the one she loved to converse with the most was a rich and powerful man called Musa. She soon fell deeply in love with him.

Musa himself, who was a member of the royal family, was so skilled at leadership, bravery and political strategy that when he became Mansa, he made himself and his empire so rich that their

wealth was incalculable. And even though Mansa Musa was the richest Mansa who had ever lived, he was also the most generous with his wealth. He gave and gave until the people to whom he gave began to complain that they had far too much.

Although this is a little-known fact about him, Mansa Musa loved the Niger river. When he was not too busy taking care of the Mali empire, he came often to the banks of the Niger, to water his horse, to swim, or simply to converse with his great friend, Inari Konté.

But whenever they talked together, Inari Konté made sure to keep her true form hidden. As a child of Faro, Inari had the power of manipulating water. She made river waves swirl strongly around her waist so that Musa never saw her catfish tail. She feared that if Mansa Musa found out she was a mermaid, he wouldn't want anything to do with her. This was because the Malinké lived in fear of the consequences of offending Faro, getting somehow involved in the permanent feud between her and Pemba, or even accidentally angering Mangala himself.

But the young mermaid could not bear the thought of no longer being able to spend time with Musa and so she ensured that he remained unaware of her true nature. She didn't dare consider that Musa could reciprocate her feelings, until the inconceivable happened: he asked her to marry him.

Stunned and utterly unprepared, she exclaimed, "There is nothing on this earth I would like more than to be your wife!" And then, remembering that her lover had no idea that she had fins where he supposed she had toes, she added, "But alas, I fear that my mother may not approve of our union. Allow me to consult with her, and if she gives her blessing, I will come away with you and be your wife."

This was what Inari said out loud, but in her heart, she grew depressed. As soon as the Mansa left, her eyes brimmed with freshwater tears. There was no way she and her lover could ever be together, since she could not survive outside the water and he could not survive within it. Heartbroken, she resolved that she would simply cease to see or interact with Musa, in order to avoid outright rejection for either of them.

Several times, Musa returned to the river, hoping to meet Inari there, but each time, she deliberately avoided him. Meanwhile, she herself grew more and more depressed about this impossible situation.

Not too long after the proposal, Mansa Musa was away on a mission to resolve a critical dispute on the periphery of the Mali empire. Inari Konté wallowed in her sorrow all by herself, while perched on a rock that jutted out of the river. But she was not quite as alone as she had previously thought.

The Lord of the Barren swooped down next to the brooding Inari Konté on a terribly dry wind and rested beside her on the rock. He took the form of a scaly desert lizard, but Inari recognized him at once as her evil uncle, for her mother had given her and her siblings many warnings regarding Pemba. The children of Faro were not to strike bargains with Pemba, for all Pemba's schemes inevitably resulted in curses which could never be broken except by immense, costly sacrifice. But Inari was so miserable that she had lost her presence of mind in that moment and thus, forgot to leave her uncle's presence straight away.

"I notice you've been avoiding your lover lately," Pemba said in his reptilian rasp. "I see he is also *quite* dejected about your absence."

Inari Konté did not respond, for he was simply rubbing salt into her wounds. But then, Pemba continued, "What if I told you I knew of a way that the two of you could be together?"

For the first time, Inari turned to look at him. Still, she said nothing, but he smiled, knowing that he had now fully caught her attention.

"A pair of human legs is all you need to live as a Malian queen. With the help of my powers, acquiring those would be an easy feat."

Inari Konté's desperation got the better of her. For weeks, she had lived without hope and now that a morsel of it had been presented to her, she was powerless to resist it.

"All I require," breathed Pemba in a gust of desert sand, "Is your word."

In those days, the spoken word was a sacred type of magic with the power to seal a bargain. Once she gave her word, Pemba told her, she would be sworn to secrecy. She would neither be able to speak a word about being a mermaid nor about the bargain itself. Furthermore, she would be barred from interacting with her mother or any of her aquatic relatives. Pemba offered Inari no means by which to be freed from the bargain's terms, and even so, forgetting her mother's good counsel and the curses that accompanied Pemba's every plan, Inari gave her word.

With a horrid smile, Pemba thanked her for her time and returned whence he came in another dry wind.

Inari Konté fell into a deep sleep and when she awoke, she was on the ground—the real, dry ground— several steps away from the riverbanks. It was a moment before she realized that though she was completely out of the water, she was having no trouble breathing. Gasping the clean, Malian air lungfuls at a time, she scrambled clumsily onto her two new knees, the skin around them so creasy and a darker brown than the rest of her thick, unsteady legs. “*Legs!*” she thought to herself.

“Inari Konté?” a male voice called.

Inari whirled around in her new bipedal form and promptly fell. But in no time at all, her lover was by her side, lifting her for the first time and supporting her against his own sturdy weight. She looked into the Mansa’s eyes and at once felt that there was no other decision she could possibly have made. She agreed to his marriage proposal and immediately, an overjoyed Mansa Musa placed her atop his own horse and rode behind her, straight to the palace, where he had ordered that wedding preparations should begin without delay.

Many of the Malinké people were ready and willing to integrate this new stranger into their royal clan. But there was one member of the royal family who was far from enthusiastic about the marriage. This was Nana Kankan, the mother of Mansa Musa. The moment Nana Kankan set eyes on Inari, she declared to her son that this young lady he had chosen was dangerous because she had a curse upon her. Nana Kankan was explicit and unrelenting about her disapproval of Inari. But if there was anybody more hard-headed than Nana Kankan, it was the emperor. Against his mother’s wishes, he proceeded with the marriage. Though it broke his heart to disobey her, he could not conceive of a life without Inari.

Inari, for her part, was quickly discovering limitations to her bargain which Pemba had conveniently “forgotten” to tell her about. For instance, she had lost her ability to manipulate water in the river and in the sky. She also realized that if she stayed away too long from water, her skin started to turn dry and scaly like those of a reptile—even up to her arms and her face. But just as they did before marriage, she and Mansa Musa often spent time together at the Niger river.

The tension between mother and Mansa did not dissipate after the wedding, but only grew stronger and worse, so that soon, the Malinké people in the empire’s capital were split into two factions:

those who stood with Mansa Musa in favor of the marriage, and those who stood with the queen mother against Inari Konté. Nana Kankan was bitter about what she believed was her son's betrayal. There were many petty fights between the two royals, to the point where it began to disrupt official governance. Mansa Musa felt that for the sake of his people, he had no choice but to separate himself from his mother. He ordered that Nana Kankan be relocated to a different province of the empire, far from the capital, so that he could rule in peace.

But as the royal entourage transported Nana Kankan to her partial exile, a fierce sandstorm hit out of the blue. Desert sand swirled and swirled like a tornado, entering people's eyes and choking their airways. Nana Kankan, who was already old and fragile by the time of the journey, did not survive the disaster.

When Musa found out about Nana Kankan's death, he was inconsolable. No matter what anybody else said, he was convinced that it was *his* actions that had led to her demise.

Meanwhile, when Inari heard about how the tragedy had occurred, she knew that her mother-in-law's final breath had been stolen by the Lord of the Barren. But those Malians who had taken Nana Kankan's side now blamed Inari Konté for what had happened, saying that she had worked dark magic to get rid of Nana Kankan. Bound to silence about Pemba, Inari was unable to substantially defend herself against these accusations.

So she wallowed mutely in her regret as guilt, though undeserved, ate her husband up from the inside. From then, Mansa Musa became even more extravagantly generous than he had ever been before, hoping that his good deeds would make up for his one terrible action. As if in response to the monarch's mood, it rained less and less in the Malian capital, until the climate bordered on drought. Mansa Musa was so absorbed by his feelings that he hardly noticed, but Inari felt the consequences, and knew that this, too, was one of Pemba's curses.

In the midst of his grieving, Mansa Musa was approached by a sheikh with skin the color of desert sand, who claimed to have hailed from Arabia. The man, whose breath was as dry as the northeast wind, advised the Mansa to make a long pilgrimage through the desert to Arabia, where he would supposedly find forgiveness for his actions and relief from his guilt.

Thus, the Mansa made preparations and, when the time was right, he set out on this pilgrimage, with 8,000 of his men. Inari Konté was obligated to accompany him, and she did so with 500 of her own

Malinké court women. The desert was the last thing Inari needed, given her need to be close to water at all times. But her tongue was tied, and her choice was already made for her. She couldn't stay behind without the presence of her husband to protect her from those who now hated her.

When Mansa Musa's party had been crossing the desert for a long time, Inari Konté realized that her skin had once more begun to get itchy and scaly from severe dehydration. She cracked and bled so painfully in the barren desert that she feared that if she did not reach a waterbody soon, she would surely die. But they were two weeks' march from any river. By the time they got to one, Inari would likely be nothing but desert dust herself.

Pemba's curses continued to manifest in the hunger and thirst which the entourage suffered during the journey, the frequent sandstorms, and the numerous bandit attacks. Without the use of her powers, Inari had no means by which to make the journey more bearable for anyone. Thus, for the second time in her life, Inari Konté fell into a deep depression. She refused to leave her tent, and when Musa was there with her, she recoiled so that he could not touch her. She found it difficult to eat and impossible to sleep. The only thing she ever asked of her servants or her husband was for more and more water to drink.

After a while, Musa himself became despondent about his wife's depression, but time and time again, when he asked what the matter was, Inari could give him no answer. She knew, however, that her silence was causing her husband great stress, and she could bear torturing him no longer. Thus, one evening, when he asked once more what the matter was, she said, "Nothing... Except that my body is so filthy from all the dirt of the desert and I feel unworthy to be touched or looked upon."

Inari hoped that presenting Musa with a problem he could not possibly solve would force him to let the matter go. Instead, Musa was thrown into a terrible agitation. He rose from the bed and sat cross-legged on the floor, where he lost himself for hours in meditative thought. When he roused himself once more, he went off in search of Farba, the overseer of his servants.

Farba could immediately tell that Musa was in a highly agitated state and he bowed down in supplication, promising to do his best to provide relief if it was in his power.

"Farba," said Mansa Musa, "From the day I first met this woman until today, not once has she asked me for anything it wasn't in my power to provide or find somewhere within the reach of the Mali empire. But for the first time ever, I am unable to fulfill her desires, for I do not have the power to create a flowing river out of nothing, right here in the middle of the desert!"

The sadness and desperation in Mansa Musa's voice moved Farba to tears. "My liege, if we believe, there is a way it can be done," Farba said. "But it will involve great sacrifice from all your people and we will probably perish as a result."

"If my people perish, I will perish with them," swore the emperor. "So tell me, Farba, how is it that it can be done?"

It was the result of this discussion that, right at midnight, while Inari was slowly crumbling away in her tent, Musa and Farba gathered all 8,000 men who had accompanied Musa on this trip, and each was given a hoe to dig. Mansa Musa walked a thousand steps and told his men to till the barren land from the point where he had started to the point where his steps had ended. As they began digging, Farba stood in the middle of the pit and told them to dig deep enough that the hole became three times his height. Once this was done, Musa told them to smoothen the bed of this new ditch with sand and then rocks, after which Farba instructed them to place stumps of wood above the rocks, and then coat it all with balls of melted shea butter until the surface of the ditch was as smooth as the varnish on a well-made pot.

By this time, the men had been working for several hours. Midnight was long past, and the sun was mere minutes away from beginning its ascent. At last, Musa and Farba asked them to make the ultimate sacrifice: to bring together all the water from their water-skins and reserves which were meant for drinking and cooking. In the middle of the desert, there was no way to recover the water once it was lost. But the Malinké men did as they were told, trusting in their leader and his unflinching love for his wife.

When the pool in the middle of the desert was finished, Inari Konté was summoned, along with her 500 Malinké court women. At that moment, night ended and the sun began its ascent into the sky. Inari Konté shed the cloth she had covered herself with for weeks and immersed herself in the pool, with her hundreds of women around her.

In the water, Inari's skin was restored to its lustrous, brown state. But something even more curious happened in the water: her tail reappeared! Yet each time she tried to lift it out of the water to take a look, there were her feet once more, with all ten toes!

Suddenly, a sandstorm started building up in the area around the pool. The storm represented the fury of Pemba, which could only mean one thing: the bargain had been nullified. The extreme sacrifice of the Malinké people, in the middle of the desert, had freed Inari Konté the same way the sacrifice of Faro had freed the earth of Pemba's curse so long ago.

With hardly any effort, Inari Konté drove away the sandstorm with an even greater rainstorm. Free at last to tell her story, she then called Mansa Musa and all his men to the poolside so she could reveal the truth to them all. As she spoke, floating on a spout of water several feet above the surface of the pool, freshwater tears of gratitude flowed down her face. When she raised her hands and called out to her mother, the Lady of the Waters, it began to rain freshwater, and the men all brought their containers to be filled.

“Because of your great sacrifice, honorable Malinké people, a curse has been broken,” Inari concluded her speech.

The rain poured and poured, in the middle of the desert, until each container overflowed.

THE PANTHER QUEEN

Sarraounia, the queen of Azna, was dying, and the magician Dawa hadn't been able to do a thing about it. He had tried every healing herb at his disposal, every salve, every spell. But the queen was too far gone to be saved. She was drained from having fought a war alongside her husband while heavily pregnant. Now, she barely had the strength to even push her baby out, to at least save the child's life if she couldn't save her own. And thus, the baby girl, Mangou, was born, in the midst of a tornado as her mother transitioned into the spirit world with Mangou still cradled in her arms.

In the wildly swaying tent, kneeling beside the queen, Dawa wept, consumed by his own failure. What was the point, then, of all his decades of learning the secrets of the bush, all the tricks of sorcery, if he couldn't even rescue his queen, the wife of his long-time best friend?

The king entered the tent when the tornado subsided, to find his best friend holding his newborn daughter. Dawa raised his tear-streaked face towards the king.

"Is she...?" the king asked, unable to complete the question.

Dawa hung his head and offered an apology. The king took a deep breath, nodded once, and turned to leave.

"Your majesty, wait!" Dawa exclaimed, leaping up with the swaddle in his arms. "Your daughter."

He held Mangou out and asked the king to take a look at his daughter's eyes. The king gasped. The baby's eyes were bright yellow, almost glowing in the gloomy aftermath of the tornado.

"The mark of the Panther," Dawa and the king said in unison.

There was no greater honor among the Azna people than to be born with the mark of the Panther. The Panther was the kingdom's totemic animal, the symbol of their magical and military strength, the reason Azna had never been colonized. For several decades, even until that very moment, the tiny Azna kingdom had won every battle against the larger kingdoms from the north or the east, which had tried to absorb Azna into their empires. But, by the strength of the Panther, Azna maintained its precious independence.

To be born with the mark of the Panther, though, meant to be gifted with the most powerful sorcery a person could possess: the ability to shape-shift into a monstrous Beast, a huge yellow-eyed, pitch-black cat.

“Your majesty, let me atone for my failure,” Dawa pleaded. “I couldn’t save her mother, but I can protect the child. Let me oversee her upbringing. I’ll teach her everything I know and ensure that she reaches her full potential.”

The king himself was so weighed down by grief that he surely wouldn’t have been able to raise the girl on his own. Dawa was his closest friend, confidant and advisor, his friend from infancy and the most competent man he knew. The king trusted Dawa more than anyone. And Dawa had delivered the girl. Why shouldn’t he be given the right to raise her as well?

The king placed his hand on Dawa’s shoulder and told him, “Henceforth, Mangou is as much your daughter as she is mine. Bring her up as you see fit. And remember: now that her mother has passed on, *she* is Sarraounia now.”

Dawa tried his best to acquire everything the baby Sarraounia Mangou required to survive. One of those things, now that the queen was dead, was milk from a mother’s breast. Dawa searched the whole capital city of Lougou for a lactating mother and found none. He searched in all the surrounding villages, but still could not find a single woman who had recently had a child. Fearing that Sarraounia would otherwise perish for lack of nourishment, Dawa settled on his last resort. He owned a horse that had given birth recently and was still lactating. Perhaps the brown mare could be Sarraounia’s wet nurse?

Sarraounia had the most extraordinary childhood ever experienced in the history of the Azna kingdom. Not only was her nurse a *horse*, but the princess herself was also raised by the most curious, unfathomable man in the kingdom. Dawa lived alone on the outskirts of civilization, preferring the company of the bush and its animals to human beings.

Or, at least, he *used* to live alone, before he became Sarraounia’s surrogate father. At that point, Dawa and Sarraounia became inseparable. Together, they trekked through desert dunes, climbed many hills, and waded through several rivers and backwaters, building physical strength and stamina. They made their own living by fishing, hunting, and gathering things to eat from scratch. Dawa taught Sarraounia the properties of all the plants they came across in the wilderness; which brought healing, and which brought death, which were safe to eat, and which brought discomfort.

In particular, Dawa educated her on the attributes of “hyena’s ear,” the most potent war-time poison known in Azna. Hyena’s ear was made by boiling together the yellow sap of a certain weed and the brown gum of the acacia tree. Any human or animal struck by an arrow dipped in this poison would die

within hours. There was only one cure, and even that wouldn't leave the victim without at least *some* lingering consequences of this magic potion.

Dawa taught Sarraounia the arts of war and continuously developed her supernatural abilities. But there was one trick he could not teach her, because it was a power he himself had never possessed.

"The Panther resides within you," he repeatedly told the little princess. "You just have to let her out."

But no matter how many hours Sarraounia stood still in concentration, meditating upon the panther, her body stubbornly retained its human form.

As a child, Sarraounia dressed like a boy, always wearing the type of loincloth reserved for males and sporting a masculine, close-cropped haircut. With Dawa having constituted her whole world for a little over a decade, Sarraounia had little exposure, much less interest, in boys.

That is, until she met Baka.

When Sarraounia was on the brink of adolescence, the Azna king ordered Dawa to relocate from the outskirts to the capital city. After all, she was going to rule someday, and she ought to become as intimate with the palace as she was with the bushes.

Sarraounia trained with the most advanced boys' cohort of young warriors in Lougou. It was there that she met Baka, a boy about her own age, and the only one whose archery skills rivalled her own. As a warrior, the boy was pure talent. Having matched her bullseye for bullseye with every arrow for days, Baka approached her at the end of her first week in the cohort. Showing none of the deference Sarraounia had been met with since she'd moved into the capital, Baka asked, "Is it true that you were raised on the milk of a mare?"

Sarraounia was so stunned that of all things, *these* were the first words Baka had ever said to her, that for a long moment, all she did was stare at him, without answering. But Baka was not deterred in the least. His next demand was already at the tip of his tongue: "Turn into a panther right now and let me see."

This only baffled Sarraounia more. Her yellow eyes widened as she tried to fathom this young boy's audacity. Even when Dawa or her father asked her to transform into the Beast, they never used *that* tone.

"*Ohhh,*" Baka sneered in realization. "You can't do it at all, can you?"

Sarraounia frowned. She was not used to being teased. She didn't like it at all. Baka laughed heartily at her, and rage coursed through Sarraounia's blood. Suddenly, Baka stopped laughing and looked down. Sarraounia followed his gaze to her right palm, bared on the ground, and was as shocked as he was to see that her nails had transformed into panther claws. But then he smiled, and his grin was friendly and not malicious. "Nice one!" he cheered.

Sarraounia decided she liked him.

A sixteen-year-old Sarraounia worked, not in the palace, but in the backyard of Dawa's hut, the one he lived in when he was required to be based *inside* Lougou, and not in the bush. Between both palms, she held a white chicken which flapped and struggled at first, but after a few moments of Sarraounia whispering soothing incantations, it grew limp and the life faded from its eyes. When she was sure it was dead, she placed it on a wooden board in front of her and chopped its head off with a cutlass.

She sensed a presence behind her, and reflexively, her claws sprang out, bloody from the spattered chicken blood. She turned her head as much as she could while remaining seated on the ground, but it was only Baka, striding towards her, drenched in sweat. He had a quiver sling across his back, which was, at this point, almost a fifth limb.

The boy was gorgeous, easily the most beautiful among the Azna males. The trouble was that he knew it. He had deliberately tousled his wild, kinky hair into a spiky crown, and his arms, legs and abdominal muscles gleamed as he walked, bare-chested. Though young, he was turning out to be one of Azna's best warriors, and none of the unmarried girls ever forgot it. Unfortunately for them, Baka didn't give any of them the time of day. He only had eyes for Sarraounia.

"Stand down, Mangou," said Baka. "It's only me."

Sarraounia grinned and retracted her claws.

"So," he said casually. "Tuareg attack in three days."

"I know. You think I'm just sacrificing holy roosters for fun?"

"It's not beyond you." Baka rearranged his quiver and sat beside Sarraounia on the ground. "Why are you always doing magic when you could be training the warriors with me?"

Sarraounia grabbed another chicken from a nearby pen. "Brute force isn't the only way to win a battle. Magic gives you an advantage."

“Who cares about advantage? Combat builds your courage!”

“What good is courage when your enemy’s army is three times the size of your own?” Baka only huffed. Sarraounia sighed. “I’ll train with you tomorrow. Tell our unit to be ready for drills at the crack of daylight. We are going to work until it gets too hot to breathe.”

Baka grinned, and his face lit up into the expression which made lovestruck girls swoon. “That’s the spirit!” Baka placed a kiss on Sarraounia’s cheek and rose. “See you at dawn, Mangou. And, as always, tell the Panther I’d like to see her.”

Sarraounia smiled as he left, but Baka’s casual jibe had struck a tender spot. Because the truth was, *she’d* have liked to see the Panther, too. For years, she had tried and tried, but not once had she ever managed to fully morph into the beast. The best she could say of her “mark of the Panther” blessing was that the claws now came naturally. She could also grow panther ears when she needed enhanced hearing, and transform her nose when she needed a Beast’s sense of smell. As for the eyes, well, those at least, she’d been born with. The Panther herself, though, continued to elude Sarraounia, to the point of discouragement. She was sixteen already. A grown woman. If she wasn’t Sarraounia, she’d have been married off by now. Maybe *this* was the extent of her power. Maybe she’d never be able to turn into a Beast...

“That boy does not show respect.”

Sarraounia yelped and dropped the chicken she was holding. She looked up to find Dawa leaning against the wall of his hut. He was the only person in the world who could sneak up on her, the tricky magician.

“He is too familiar,” Dawa continued. He always had the same complaint about Sarraounia’s companion.

“That’s just how Baka is,” Sarraounia defended. “He knows his place.” Besides, Baka’s rebelliousness was part of the reason why she liked him.

“All I’m saying,” Dawa said, “is that your father is the *king*, you know. And still, he always referred to your mother as ‘Sarraounia,’ until the day she died.”

Regardless of Dawa’s misgivings about their exchange, Sarraounia and Baka led Azna to victory against the formidable Tuaregs, and not just for the first time.

Battle after battle, Azna emerged triumphant, despite their small army and meager land. The king himself was becoming too old and weary to participate in the thick of the fighting, but his daughter Sarraounia and her closest companion Baka became legendary on the battlefield. They were like two hurricanes, cutting through the enemy's lines like it was as easy as slicing oranges. Stories of them spread far and wide, until it was common knowledge that the Azna kingdom was not one to be messed with.

Or, *almost* common knowledge. Evidently, the Sokoto Caliphate didn't think so.

They attacked for the last time when Sarraounia was twenty.

After several days of fighting and strategizing against the marabouts of Sokoto, everyone in Azna was becoming understandably irritable, not least of whom were Sarraounia and Baka, both, as usual, on the frontlines of the action.

One evening, Sarraounia paced through a hidden communal kitchen, supervising Azna women who were too old and frail to assist war efforts in other ways. But that wasn't food boiling in all those gigantic pots they stirred.

Presently, Dawa arrived on horseback—the same mare that had been Sarraounia's wet nurse. He disembarked and pulled down a large pack the horse had been carrying alongside him. He hauled the pack to Sarraounia, who then began distributing the dozens of arrows it contained to the women, so they could dip each one carefully in the potions they brewed.

"I was worried that I would meet no one when I came," Dawa confessed.

"What are you talking about?" Sarraounia asked her guardian. "Why wouldn't we have been here?"

"There were rumors that you had changed battle strategy and decided to march *into* the Sokoto war camp tomorrow. I heard the troops were being mobilized to do so."

Sarraounia let out a genuinely furious growl, and her claws sprang out. "*Baka!*"

Moments later, she stood fuming before the warrior. "What do you think you are doing?" Sarraounia snarled.

Baka was not perturbed in the least by his partner's anger. He played with his scimitar as she raged. "What does it look like I'm doing? Preparing for *actual* war while you sit around conjuring smoke and steaming leaves in the back of the village."

“I gave you explicit orders—”

“You left *me* in charge of the army!” Baka snapped. “And the army is *restless*, because they’re trained and trained for months, only to be told in the thick of battle to sit back and do nothing while their Sarraounia chants incomprehensible incantations for hours!”

“I’m trying to protect my people from unnecessary deaths!”

Baka folded his arms and glared. “Are you really trying to protect your people, Mangou? Or are you just trying to protect yourself?”

“How can you even say that, when I’ve fought in *every* battle—”

“As a *human*, on two feet, as vulnerable as the rest of us, despite your so-called ‘mark of the Panther’. Without a weapon in your hand, on the battlefield, you’re dead. I’d respect your battle strategies more if they came from the Beast. But maybe you don’t have the courage it takes to be a warrior-queen. Maybe *that’s* why the Panther continues to elude you.”

Sarraounia was seething now, and it took all of her self-control not to rip open Baka’s beautiful face with her sharp claws. “You will *not* lead the army into the fray, and that is a *royal order*. Now, get out of my sight before I do something we will *both* regret.”

If only Baka had followed her orders, the next few years might have turned out much happier for Sarraounia Mangou. But, as it happened, when she gave the orders for a flock of birds to rain down poisoned arrows on the Sokoto war camp, a small unit of Azna warriors was caught in the fray. Birds could not tell the difference between friend and foe, and several Azna warriors who were not as quick as Baka were struck down as well.

Sarraounia, however, didn’t know a thing about it until, hours later, after the battle had ended—in Azna’s favor, of course—Baka hauled over a heavy body and dumped it at her feet. Baka’s eyes were pits of darkness, as outraged as she’d ever seen them. He himself was cut all over and covered with dried blood, most of which was probably not his own. But Sarraounia was more horrified about the corpse at her feet. The dead man was Baka’s cousin, whom he loved like a brother.

“What,” Baka spat, with a voice full of venom, “Did you put in those arrows?”

“Hyena’s ear. It’s a fatal potion that—”

“*Magic!* It’s always magic, with you! We had everything under control in the camp until you came with your cursed magic arrows—”

“I *ordered* you not to go into the fray!”

“I tried for *hours* to heal him, and nothing worked!”

“Hyena’s ear has only one antidote. You’d have known this if you paid attention to me and Dawa when we’re speaking of sorcery.”

“I don’t *care* about sorcery, Mangou! You’re the reason my cousin is *dead!*”

Sarraounia said nothing. There was no way to reason with Baka when he entered these moods.

“You know what?” Baka said finally, quietly. “I’m done here. Dissolve the whole army if you like. Replace it with a coven of old sorcerers. Or a flock of hawks. I don’t care.”

Baka took his bow and snapped it in two. Sarraounia gasped as he flung it to the ground. As he threw down his blade and all his arrows as well, he added spitefully, “I’d give you a final message for the Panther, but I don’t think the Beast ever planned on showing up through *you*.”

Sarraounia furiously wiped her tears as Baka disappeared into the darkness. She knew he was not coming back.

Mere months after Baka left Azna, Sarraounia’s father died. Losing her father and her lover in the same year, even if in entirely different ways, was too much for her. She barely paid attention at her coronation, when Dawa, the royal magician of Azna, who also doubled as her godfather, placed the panther-claw necklace around her neck in the presence of the entire kingdom. The necklace had been worn by Sarraounia Mangou’s mother, and several generations of Sarraounia before her. Mangou took her place looking ferocious, powerful, and devoid of all happiness, on the royal throne, whose arms ended in carved paws. At either side of the throne, a polished carving of a life-sized panther lay at the foot. Spiritual guardians, watching over their goddess.

Years after her father’s death, the queen Sarraounia crouched, with pricked panther ears, listening to the words of the wind. They had been saying the same things for many moons now: that the most savage group of white men ever to walk on black soil was tearing a bloody path through the Lands of the Blacks, moving steadily eastward. Everywhere they passed, they left a thick trail of death and destruction. Aside the fact that they moved always east, they seemed to have no discernible purpose other than to ravage as many villages as they could. The words of the wind told her that some kingdoms thought these white men were cruel gods sent to punish them for something, or more likely demons escaped from the spirit world, masquerading as men. But other words of the wind told her that these men were

recruiting black mercenaries, picking out the most brutal and deranged among them from every city. Men who did not mind killing for killing's sake. Criminals and slaves and prisoners of war; those whose societies believed the best way they could be useful to their communities was by remaining in chains. *These* were the ones the white men paid to do their dirty work. So far, not a single civilization had emerged victorious in a battle against this cursed army, and they were only a handful of territories away from Azna.

"Sarraounia." The Panther Queen turned to see Gogu , her royal griot and current closest companion, approaching with a solemn expression. Gogu  was talented, and astonishingly intelligent, as all griots were required to be. He was even handsome. But he was no warrior, and he was *certainly* no Baka. Almost no-one and nothing had succeeded in making her smile since Baka had left, not even Gogu  could come close. *This is no time to dwell on heartbreak*, Sarraounia chided herself. *Focus on the impending war*.

She fixed her yellow eyes on Gogu  and he continued, "We have a visitor. A refugee. She says she is one of the women who cooked and carried loads for the men in Voulet's army."

"*Voulet*." The white man from across the sea who commanded the deadly army.

"Indeed. She said she escaped from their camp in the middle of the night, a few nights ago, during a storm. She has horrible stories of how she was mistreated by Voulet's men and the scars to show for it. But she also has valuable intel on the army's movements and their plans to decimate Azna."

Sarraounia's nostrils flared. "Where is she now?"

"Being bathed, clothed and fed in the refugee quarters, my queen."

"Let her rest a while," Sarraounia commanded. "And then bring her to me."

Not a day passed that thoughts of Sarraounia didn't, at least once, cross Baka's mind. As much as he had tried to forget about her and his time in Azna, his reputation did not afford him such luxury. After swearing off the bow and arrow, Baka had turned to trading. For the past few years, he had travelled from village to village, hawking his wares. Now, he was in the business of selling kola nuts. It was laughable, really. The best (or second-best, depending on who you asked) warrior of Azna, now reduced to hawking kola nuts to West Africa's market women. The sorcerer Dawa had always warned Baka that his pride

would be his ruin. Well. This was his life now. He ought to stop thinking about Dawa or Sarraounia at all and simply accept it.

Now, if only these women would approach him for his nuts alone, instead of trying to get him to commit to marrying them at every turn. Famous warriors were always popular among the women, but famous warriors who also happened to be strikingly, unbelievably handsome? He was doomed before he entered any village. The experience might have been delightful for another man. But for Baka, it was dreary, since he had never been interested in anyone but Sarraounia Mangou. And there he went, thinking about her again. Why couldn't he get himself to understand that there were many other women in the world?

Here came one now. A slight, graceful woman, far too gentle-looking to stand a chance in this huge market of aggressive, competitive women.

The lady greeted him and palmed through a sack of nuts. "How much for this bag?" she asked. Bored, Baka named a price and the lady pretended to be shocked. "My God!" she exclaimed. "These kola nuts are worth more than my dowry!"

"Madam, if you are shopping for men, I think you are in the wrong place. I sell kola nuts, not husbands."

Their exchange was interrupted by a commotion from behind. All at once, it seemed as if everyone was screaming and rushing about, exchanging news, and pleading to their protector spirits for mercy. Baka rose and elbowed his way into the center of the commotion.

"All right, what's going on here?" he asked, like a man with authority.

The women around him hushed and made way so that the individual they had all been gathered around became plainly visible to Baka. He could not hold back his gasp.

The being before him barely still looked like a human being. It took another moment for Baka to register that she had once looked like a woman. Now, half her skin was raw and singed off, her head completely shorn, she was possibly blind in one eye, and with several fingers missing.

"The white man's army approaches," the specter croaked in her fire-damaged voice. "And its leader, Voulet, is a merciless madman. They did this to me—to my entire village, to those who resisted. He spares neither woman, man nor child. If given a chance, he would kill everyone. I came to warn you to

take cover. He's headed towards Azna now, and if he passed through my village, he will almost certainly pass through yours."

"Azna?!" a market woman shrieked. "Well, he *must* be a madman if he's going *there*! Doesn't he know that Sarraounia is an invincible witch?"

"Believe me," said the burnt woman, "Sarraounia has never seen anything like Voulet. Besides, the white man doesn't fear black magic. He has something even worse: his gunpowder."

Baka was shaken to his core. Like everyone else, he'd heard the stories of this demon army making its way east, more cruel than anything ever seen before. But Baka had dismissed these as mere exaggerated fairytales; no army could possibly be *that* bad. He should know, for he had fought many.

But here was concrete evidence of the evil and torture they could inflict. And if this was not even a fraction of what they were capable of, then this woman was right. Sarraounia had never encountered anything close to Voulet's army.

Eyes flashing, Baka made his way to the woman who had just called Voulet crazy for daring to challenge Sarraounia. He bared his hands on her stall table. "How would you like to become a seller of some kola nuts?"

That very night, after selling off all his wares to other traders, he bought himself a few new weapons and a horse, and was at once on his way back to Azna. Back to the woman he loved.

Perhaps it was true that Sarraounia had never seen anything like Voulet, but it was equally true that Voulet had never seen anything like Sarraounia. For the first time *ever*, his band of outlaws was showing fear! And, worst of all, the Black ones were infecting the white ones with all their paranoia and superstition about 'the panther queen' this and 'the warrior witch' that. Every day, another soldier approached him with uncharacteristically humble advice that they should go around, and not through, Azna territory. Voulet executed each one without exception.

Nevertheless, there was nothing Voulet could do to assuage the panic. Black soldiers *and* women were deserting in droves every night, too frequently to control, especially when *they* knew the territory and his French men did not. The army that remained was more and more disorganized each day. Whoever this so-called Sarraounia was, she'd really done a number on these Africans. They feared her like his countrymen were taught to fear God.

But Voulet would not be deterred, not him. Everyone, even his second-in-command, Lieutenant Chanoine, believed that he could not beat the Azna witch. Voulet had even received more than one letter from fellow Frenchmen stationed in other parts of France's hopeful colonies and in France itself, telling him that whatever he was doing was unsanctioned and unnecessary. But all this only fueled his determination. It may not have been necessary, but it *would be* satisfying. He would defeat Sarraounia no matter what. As a matter of fact, they would start their march into the heart of Azna *that very night*.

All of Voulet's commands came straight to Sarraounia's panther ears, riding on the words of the wind. Unfortunately for Voulet's army, they would not be marching anywhere tonight. Not if they wanted to see a single thing while they were at it. Already, the mysterious fog clouds had begun to gather, and with a flick of her strong wrist, Sarraounia directed them towards Voulet's war camp. The best that army could hope for was to mobilize in the morning. *But*, Sarraounia thought, her panther eyes picking up the bats awaiting nightfall, arrows tucked between their wings, *Who knew how many of Voulet's 'soldiers' would still be able to walk by then?*

Days later, Voulet, exhausted but relentless, and at the very least, still alive, finally walked with his remaining men right into Lougou. Night after night, his army had been obstructed by a fog so thick, he couldn't see his fingers if he laid his palm right on top of his nose. And those arrows that rained down from *nowhere* at midnight, every night, like clockwork, devastated his army to extents that were never plain until daylight. Their numbers were now too depleted for him to keep taking chances. Doing away with any more attempts at surprise; they marched in the daytime.

And now they were here, in Lougou. But it was a ghost town. There was not a single sign of life, not even a bleating sheep. They had come prepared for a war, and there was no-one for them to fight. For the first time, Voulet did feel the sparks of fear as his men looked to him for explanations he could not provide. He eyed one of the panther statues lying at the foot of a wooden throne. He could have sworn the statue was staring back at him.

Voulet had not yet given up, and Sarraounia was stunned by such resilience.

After days of endless sorcery, she felt drained to her bones. But she paced and paced, constantly wondering if what she'd done was the right thing. Dawa seemed to think so. She had protected her people,

after all. But it was *how* she had protected them that stole so many hours of her sleep. Her methods made her a good queen, and even an excellent sorceress... But what kind of *warrior* could she claim to be?

Are you really trying to protect your people, Mangou? Or are you just trying to protect yourself? Baka's taunts from several years ago rang in her ears, as clearly as though he was standing right beside her. This was the fiercest enemy Azna had ever faced—and not once had she even gone into battle.

Baka stalked through the bushes, into the wilderness camp where Sarraounia had hidden all the Azna people and animals. Of course she'd chosen the bush. Who knew better than Sarraounia how to survive in it—except Dawa, of course? Baka had panicked at first, when he'd reentered Lougou and found nothing, not even a crawling spider. It had taken him this long to reach home, only because of that supernatural fog that prevented him from travelling ceaselessly from sunrise to sunrise. But there were no signs of death, war, or explosion, which meant Azna was somehow, somewhere, still alive. That was when he had made his way to the bush.

The tip of a spear was at his chest the moment he breached the hallucinatory barrier of a grove. Another spear tip dug into his side, and three more appeared just inches from his face. Baka raised his hands in surrender and growled, "Stand down! Friend, not foe."

The sentries who had been about to attack dropped their spears in shock, recognizing the voice of their former commander at once. Baka grinned, pleased at their reaction. But his smile faded the very next second and he asked, "Where is Sarraounia?"

Most of them shrugged. "Gogué would know," one of them volunteered. Baka ordered to be taken to Gogué immediately.

It turned out, however, that Gogué *didn't* know where the Azna queen was. "B-b-but... But I saw..." Gogué stammered, cowering before the ferocity of the returned warrior.

Baka snarled, profoundly disappointed in the weak character of this griot. He may have been smart, but he surely didn't have heart. "*What did you see?*" Baka demanded.

"A big black cat with yellow eyes. It went—I think it went—that way." Gogué pointed.

Baka was surprised, but his shock quickly transformed into anger. "You saw a big black panther heading *towards* Voulet's war camp, and you didn't try to stop it?"

"I..."

But Baka didn't wait to listen. He was tearing towards the place Gogu  said the cat had gone, calling for any Azna warrior who had the guts, to follow him.

Meanwhile, a massive panther roared and wrecked whichever tents and structures still remained of Voulet's war camp. All inhabitants who had any type of sense fled in her wake—westward, *away* from Azna, where they would hopefully be safe from the famous sorcerer queen. Those select brave ones who dared face her, she broke their weapons and guns and snapped at the men themselves when they tried to maim her. She was Sarraounia, the Panther Queen. And she was indomitable.

Still, it was one cat against an army. In no way had coming here alone been a wise decision. She was surrounded not by rational men, but by deranged ones. And when a madman saw a beast—no matter what type of beast it was—his first instinct was not to run, but to try and kill it.

Sarraounia's fur was riddled with bullet grazes, sword strikes, and arrow piercings. She had never been a full panther before this, and certainly never for this long. She was severely weakened. So, when a group of Voulet's rebel archers approached, she had barely enough strength remaining to fight back. Before she could finish bringing down even one of them, an arrow pierced the tender flesh of her underbelly, and the Beast roared in indescribable pain.

But then one of the archers cried out. And another. And another. Someone was bringing them down. Sarraounia couldn't see through the pain. But she heard the unmistakable voice of Baka yelling instructions to Azna warriors. This was all she had time to register before the large Beast blacked out.

She awoke in her human body, bleary-eyed and hurting, apparently, *everywhere*. She was stretched out on a straw mattress. The room, she recognized. She was in Dawa's Lougou hut. What had happened to her?

The last person she expected to see walked through the doorway, holding several batches of dried herbs. Baka grinned at seeing her awake. The sight of his beautiful face almost melted her heart in that moment. "Congratulations!" he beamed. "You're not dead."

The memories suddenly came rushing back, and Sarraounia sat up too fast. "Voulet—"

"Dead," Baka informed her grimly. "One of his own mercenaries ended up killing him in a blind skirmish."

Sarraounia exhaled, but she was not at peace. “But *I* should be dead. That arrow they struck me with, it was one of ours. Dipped in—”

“Hyena’s ear,” Baka finished, sitting down next to her. “A fatal poison that kills within hours, except for one antidote.” He pointed to a chunk of raw meat in the corner of the room. “The fat of an iguana rubbed immediately on the still-bleeding wound.”

Sarraounia’s yellow eyes widened. She lifted her blouse to see the arrow wound against the human flesh of her stomach, already healing. She raised her eyes back to Baka’s in surprise. “You’ve learned magic!” she exclaimed.

“Just a little. The most courageous woman I’ve ever known inspired me. Honestly, maybe a little *too* courageous.”

Sarraounia stood up and flexed her aching muscles, testing out everything from head to toe. “I can’t move my left shoulder,” she said.

Baka sighed. “Hyena’s ear. Even with the antidote, there are still irreversible consequences, such as—”

“Paralysis in some minor body parts,” Sarraounia finished for him. They remained in a pregnant silence for a while and then Sarraounia said, “The Panther wants you to know that she’s happy to see you. And thank you, for saving her.”

“Sarraounia...” Baka began, and then he cut himself off, lowering his gaze to the floor. Sarraounia cocked an eyebrow. Since when had *Baka* learned how to be shy? And furthermore, to refer to her by her title instead of her given name? But then he did something even more astonishing: he got on his knees and bowed before her.

“I want to apologize for the way I’ve behaved in the past. I never intend to leave you again. I offer my full service to Azna, for as long as I live—that is, if you’ll have me, Sarraounia.”

“Baka, get up.”

Baka rose, but his gaze remained lowered in deference.

“Do you still know how to use a bow?” she asked.

“About as well as I know how to use my right hand.”

“Good. Because henceforth, you are royal commander of the Azna army.”

French colonization efforts neither began nor ended with Captain Voulet. But when the next wave of tyranny came to West Africa, the Azna army stood ready, with its fearless leaders, Sarraounia and Baka, at the front of their troops' lines. When the trumpets of the French army sounded, Baka raised a hand and the Azna warriors gave a resounding war cry that drowned out the enemy's horns. Beside Baka, the yellow-eyed Panther Queen shrank and then grew again into a glorious Beast with jet-black fur. She was Sarraounia, and she was *indomitable*.

EPILOGUE

Candace considered her experiment a remarkable success. Parts of her stories had infiltrated Mali's vocabulary. When Candace gave her a cup of Milo before bed, Mali called it "Esum tea," and eventually came to require it before story time. And now that Harmattan approached, when Mali woke with dry lips, she informed her mother that Pemba was obviously scheming again. Mali often asked Candace to repeat her favorite stories until Candace could practically recite them off-head, word for word. Her daughter confessed to her that she preferred the ones in which the princesses had magical powers.

Despite Mali's obvious enthusiasm about the African fairy tales, it still came as a surprise to Candace when, one weekend, she found Mali sprawled out on the floor of her playroom, surrounded by stacks of printer paper, scissors, glue, and a spilled 64-pack of crayons.

"What are you doing?" Candace exclaimed. Her first thought was, of course, that printer paper was far too expensive to be wasting like this. Mali, however, refused to break her concentration.

"I'm making a storybook," she replied.

"But sweetie, you already have so many!"

"This one is special," Mali insisted. "Plus, it's not for me. I'm making it for my friend Korkor's birthday. It's a present."

That answer, so unexpected, made Candace extremely curious. She came forward and glanced at the scattered papers that already had drawings on them. As to the quality, well, they certainly looked like a 7-year-old had drawn them, but the large, fuzzy black cat with bright yellow eyes was unmistakable to Candace. As was the tree whose branches stretched into the clouds, the brown-skinned girl with a fish tail where legs ought to be, and the stick figure girl colored with the darkest brown Mali could find, and surrounded by etches so deep and dark and close to the girl that it was hard to tell where the crayon night ended and the girl began.

The page Mali was working on currently, her brows furrowed in concentration, was dominated by letters. In big, bubbly handwriting, Mali had written: "Mid Night Fairy Tales."

Candace retreated quietly from the playroom, so Mali could continue her work in peace.

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