

*Sacred  
River*  
a novel

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## Prologue

*Contrary to what she had assumed at the time of innocence, Yeama Iskander realized that the devil's face was red when she finally encountered him.*

*One hour before the devil made his entry, Yeama had been listening to some old Dizzy Gillespie standards and watching the waning sun disappear into the embrace of a September evening. It had been a good day: two fowls had hatched, her stray guard dog had returned home, and she felt at peace with the world, a gentle woman unaware that she had a date with the devil, whose likeness she would experience in the vortex of three men that came to the garden of her house near a river. At first she thought they were bandits out to rob her, considering she lived in a lonely part of Malagueta and was not about to stop them looting her house. One look at them, however, convinced Yeama they had come on a more personal purpose. There was something mean and brutal about them: coarseness so inhuman they had the aspect of gargoyles propelled on the devil's wings. Her faithful dog barked and lunged at them, only to be silenced by a violent kick. When Yeama tried to run to a safe corner of the house, they broke the door down and came in, giving off an odious smell, the result of a prolonged march through the war-torn country. Inspired by the devil, they slapped her hard, dragged her out into the garden, tore off her clothes, and pinned her down the way a sacrificial lamb is held to the ground in that part of the world.*

*"Kill me, kill me," she screamed, convinced that death was preferable to the dreaded idea of being taken by the devil.*

*One of the men removed a cutlass from his belt and flashed its shining blade in the sun. With a grin so menacing that it sent a chill down Yeama's spine, he made a mock chopping movement on his left scapula, the better to suggest that if Yeama preferred death to being violated, it would be a long, torturous one, needlessly brutal, with blood pouring out of her shoulder.*

*Trapped in their clutches, she did not try to fight the men off, but steeled herself for whatever the name of the country of shame was that they were about to take her to. The devil's men wore the red bandannas, assorted T-shirts, and jungle fatigues that were the insignia of the rebels fighting against the government of General Soriba Dan Doggo. One pounded the ground with the dull thud of military boots a size too big for him, while the other two moved unsteadily in tennis shoes, proof enough that they were high on some form of*

*hallucinogen. Before that evening, even with the taste of innocence still on her lips, Yeama had come to think of war as a woman's worst period, a time for even the most outwardly decent of men to move ever so closely to the savagery of cruel creatures. Seeing how red the devil's face was, she did not need reminding that she was in the grip of men who were armed with weapons, magnified by the rising tumescence in their loins.*

*Terrified by the thought of what the men could do, she trembled from the naked horror in her soul and brought a weak utterance of her mother's name to her lips. Even before they had unleashed the devil's spurs, she held her breath and imagined that these men had gone without a woman for a long time. Where was God in all this? she asked. Given his various incarnations—Allah, Brahma, Jehovah, Olodumare, Shang Ti, and so forth—it was obvious that God was a man, which left a woman no choice but to look for deliverance from some other source.*

*The first man commenced the devil's work with a most brutal harshness; he was hungry, almost insatiable, and Yeama bit her tongue against the needles of her pain. She lay stiff as a dead horse and abandoned her body to the other two men, who huffed and puffed themselves into exertions. Horror and pain invaded her soul as the rapids of the devil tore her apart; she felt like screaming, wanted to ask the devil's men whether they had no sisters of their own, but so intent were they on their thrill that she experienced the longest moment of her life, a violent ocean raging in her. After the men were satisfied, they collected their guns, kicked the dog into a final death spasm, spat onto the ground, and then looked at the waning sun, as if for guidance into some distant land, and began to walk away.*

*Besides their hungry grunts, they had not spoken a word to her, for they had ceased to need speech, having severed all connection to humanity, gone as they were into the deepest recess of savagery.*

*Then, as though he had suddenly remembered something more cutting than even the terror that they had just inflicted on Yeama, the most brutal-looking of the men hissed at her, "Stupid woman. You act like civilized Aristo woman, when your mama was a harlot, before dat foolish professor give am respect."*

*Deeply stung by those words, Yeama began to cry, more for her life than for anything her mother might have been. She felt battered, especially by a terrible sensation that her body did not really belong to her; it was some other being that had lain there, a castaway sullied beyond her recognition. Shamed. Feeling very naked in her soul, stripped, like one of the scorched trees in the yard, she felt drained of her spirit. A deep feeling of nausea overcame her; to*

*be so terribly assaulted made her nakedness a wound more painful than the act of being violated itself, and she couldn't stop shaking. She thought she was going to die but was brought back to a spark of life when she saw one of the men signaling to a boy who had been waiting behind a thicket.*

*The boy was not more than nineteen and marked by a solitary aspect as he came slowly to her, hesitating a bit, his strides not as bold as the others. He looked briefly at her—such a long anguish it was for her—and then tried to avert his eyes when she glanced at him. Something about his unease suggested that he knew her, and that perhaps they had even been at the same school, she in a higher form, when the country was beautiful, full of hope, before the spasm of war and destruction had set in. Mercifully, he was quick with her but, unlike the others, spoke humanely. “I had to do this or they would have killed me,” he said, trying his best to make some connection with her demented mind.*

*She let him take a few steps away from her before she stretched her legs to relax the cramps. She felt her body slowly waking up, and a great agony shrouded and threw her into a spell when, for a brief moment, she imagined she was languishing between life and death. Only then did she realize that the nearby river had been singing all the time, lashing at the bulrushes, perhaps grieving for her, while she was being assaulted. A little blood had coagulated on her bruised lips, but it was not its dry blot that she tasted, rather the aloes of shame as she was still stung by the surprise of fate. Even then, she did not crawl into the embrace of hate or surrender to self-pity, because, even as her pain continued to pierce her heart, she knew that a test had begun with those men, and that she wanted to leave her choices open.*

## The Metamorphosis of King Henri Christophe

ONE EVENING early in his rule, after he had eaten a meal of oxtail soup, rice, goat meat, and spinach, then drunk two shots of brandy to dull his rheumatic joints, Tankor Satani, president of the country of Kissi, whose capital is Malagueta, removed his dentures so that he would not choke on them while sleeping at night. Next morning he spent an hour looking for them, only to discover he had thrown them with some leftovers into the garbage bin.

“Just like my life!” he moaned.

He was unaware of the dramatic changes that were about to happen in his life.

Seventeen years later he would drown in the cockpit of a magic plane, but not before he had wrecked the economy, hanged fifteen men, ordered the killing of a much-respected governor of the Central Bank, and exiled his successor. Even more incredible, in one of the most bizarre and mysterious transformations of human beings, his young, ravishing mistress of seven years would turn out to be a mermaid, and the discovery would stun him that while living with her for so long he had been unaware of the several transformations, admittedly subtle, in her being. The startling color changes of her eyes should have warned him; the moon had always had a noticeable effect on her whimsical nature, and she had a bizarre affection for the ocean, but he had been so taken up with her he failed to read the signs. That he was outsmarted so late in life by someone so young was proof, to the glee of his enemies, that the Houris must have sent her to his bed to avenge the collective suffering of a stifled people. And act she did, with feline cunning, on the night that Tankor Satani was celebrating his greatest achievement: holding a Versailles-like convention in the region, at which he was crowned an emperor.

Nothing in the early days of his presidency had prepared the citizens of Malagueta for Tankor Satani’s profligacy. In fact, before he built the impressive Xanadu on the hill overlooking the city, life was far from sweet for him. His mistresses were conniving, especially when money was short and he

could not satisfy all of their demands. Sometimes he smelled of the verbena of his dogcatching years, and a stale odor, like that of combustible peat, would hang on him for days. Weighed down with the problems of trying to govern some of the most unruly people on earth, he always looked tired and talked, frequently, of dying “before my time,” although he was only sixty-five.

During an obsidian night, soon after misplacing his dentures, he sat in his study as a week-long storm began to rage through Malagueta, threatening to wipe this former ex-slave paradise off the face of the earth and making most Malaguetans feel that such a long fury was nothing less than the vengeance of the dead at the bottom of the ocean for the neglect they had lately suffered.

“What an ungrateful lot we are!” said a very old man.

It had been many years since the government had honored the dead with a public feast at the foot of the large cotton tree where the ex-slaves had held their first thanksgiving, almost two hundred years ago, after they came from the Americas and parts of Africa to start the town. As the storm raged through the town, Tankor Satani thought of rectifying that neglect.

Yet it was while he was contemplating doing something about the neglected dead that Tankor Satani had a dream so extraordinary it canceled out all notions of time and place: Henri Christophe, ex-slave and the legendary first king of a liberated Haiti, had crossed an ocean of two centuries to appear to him.

Tankor Satani recognized the fiercely noble profile of the old king from his image on some mintages in the national museum that the children of the former slaves had built. Although Henri Christophe looked much older now than during his reign, he had a regal bearing befitting a king and wore a tri-corn Napoleonic hat to match an ermine-and-gold gown. He held a staff with a brass lion-head top, and his courtiers, slaves, eunuchs, and voodoo priests and his harem of quadroons, mulattos, and black and white women were kneeling at his feet. With the two centuries separating their lives, Tankor was at first afraid of the ghost of the legendary king, but the ex-slave quickly put him at ease.

“Don’t be afraid,” Henri said. “Why do you think I have changed my image and traveled through the centuries if it is not to come and show you how to run this place?”

“How do you know who I am?” Tankor asked, amazed.

“Nothing is hidden from the dead,” came the imperial voice. “As you know, Haiti was the first republic created by ex-slaves; and Malagueta was

established by the children of former slaves and recaptives, who had been deprived of their kings. So it is up to you to start acting like an emperor.”

“But why me?” Tankor asked.

“Because you are the chosen one: you carry the burden of history. By so doing, you will be completing my work, which was destroyed by my own false sense of grandeur.”

Tankor Satani was still not convinced. “But this is a democracy,” he objected, although not too emphatically.

“Forget about democracy; that can wait for another twenty years!”

A deep rumbling of thunder shook Malagueta as Henri returned with his retinue to La Citadel, his castle on the Haitian mountain, where, according to legend, he had been living since his death two hundred years ago, visible only to the “chosen eye.” When Tankor woke up from his dream, more than the drama occasioned by the fantastic visit, the one thing he was grateful for was that he had been sleeping alone that night in his study, after a tired evening of reading cabinet papers, and thus did not have to explain anything to his wife about his bizarre dream. As far as she was concerned, his esteem had taken quite a drop after he threw his dentures into the trash can. She had begun to worry about the irrational drift of his mind, and would have considered her husband’s dream further confirmation that he had finally entered the period of madness inevitable for someone who had spent too many years as a dogcatcher when he was young.

Inspired by the belief that he was about to become an emperor, Tankor Satani began to conjure fantasies about that future. Given all of its trappings, not ruling out self-coronation, he thought about how that would change his life. The first thing he would do would be to build a castle, like Henri’s, on the slopes of the densely forested mountain overlooking Malagueta. With an almost demonic fervor, he began to prepare for his perceived grandeur by ordering all the available books about Haiti brought to his office. For the next two weeks, sometimes past midnight, he spent long periods reading in his study, his most startling discovery being that before the time of the Duvaliers, the mountains of Haiti had been as lovely as those in Malagueta—lush, green, full of secret grottos, from which the zombies came out to walk the night’s secret avenues. Animals that talked like humans roamed the forests shimmering with quartz and other brilliant colors. Some hardworking peasants who had given up fishing had moved there and had built hutches, then farmed and raised families, protected by the sorcerers among them: men and women who could ward off all kinds

of evil and dispense various cures in their sacred argot. It was just the right place for a great king.

One afternoon shortly after his dream, Malagueta now calm after the storm, the dark mist hanging over the forest finally began to lift. Accompanied by a handful of guards, Tankor Satani drove up to the verdant slopes of Mount Agadi thinking of the Xanadu he was going to build on it. With a falcon's concentration, he began to map out the area where it would loom, large like La Citadel, on at least fifty acres, his eyes misting over with the thought of how many diamonds he would have to sell to accomplish his dream. Each stone for the porticoes of his castle would be shaped like a round gem. He thought of how the gates would be embossed with his own coat of arms, and he imagined a driveway lined with aromatic eucalyptus trees imported from Australia, and nowhere else, leading to the castle.

Evening was falling, and the light on the forested mountain was pale violet. Lost to everything but his obsession with immortality, he heard the night-prowling animals coming out and the hooting of a hungry owl. Nonetheless, he stood dreaming about the Xanadu, imagining the trembling surveyors reading the maps' tangled skeins to transform the virgin area. Punctilious engineers who knew how to hold back mountain avalanches appeared in his dream, fighting off the unruly behavior that nature might put in the path of his glory. He let his fantasies assume a most extraordinary zenith as he pictured the columns of laborers hurrying against the coming rain, sweating in the granite quarries to fashion the stones for the porticoes. July's rain had always made the forest impenetrable, but buoyed by his fantasies, he thought he could already hear the saws of the master carpenters slicing away at the heart of the nation's finest mahogany to shape the dowels for the varnished wood to build his library.

A deep sense of filial gratitude rose into his head, and tears welled up in his eyes, for although his mother had been dead a long time, Tankor Satani imagined her standing in front of him, as though telling him how proud she was he had turned out to be a success after she had abandoned him as a disaster soon after he was born. Resplendent in sequins, she thanked him for his recent spate of generosity when he had paid visits to her grave, bringing with him a lavish spread of food for the dead. "Thank you, Son," he heard his mother's voice say.

A bolt of lightning brought him back to earth, and he felt the first signs of anxiety thinking about how some of his enemies might react to his extravaganza: those recalcitrant judges, for instance, who had opposed him.

But he dismissed them from his thoughts and returned to the world of fantasies, convinced that their mouths would tremble with reluctant praise after they had seen his marvelous castle.

“They will see what a former dogcatcher can do,” he said with infinite determination.

Building the Xanadu was going to take some time, though, so Tankor Satani set about preparing the elementary steps to carrying out Henri Christophe’s unfinished work. Once again, it was the former slave who illuminated for Tankor how to proceed. “Act boldly, consult the masters of the occult, and never make the mistake of believing only what your naked eyes can see in the stars. That is for white people.”

Considering that it was not so long ago that he had been mulling over the idea of death, Tankor Satani felt grateful to the spirit of Henri Christophe for giving him the chance to look beyond the present.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Group Portrait of a Woman

TO BE fair to her, when she was much older but still alluring, Habiba Mouskuda was the severest critic of some of the affairs she had carried on as a young woman with more men than she cared to remember. When she was only eighteen, her father had died suddenly, after which she not only had to fend for herself, but as the oldest of four children was expected to help look after her siblings. Her mother was a hardworking clerk at the government treasury, but given how poorly Tankor Satani paid civil servants at that time, the only recourse open to a young woman like Habiba was to sell her body to the highest bidders, even though she hated doing so in the beginning. Strangely, while Tankor Satani was being carried away into the imaginary world of his immortality thinking about his Xanadu, Habiba Mouskuda was reassessing her years spent in the byways of intemperate loves.

She had grown up in a country that was an African Wild West of diamond smugglers and corrupt officials, to which prospectors, crooks, and schemers flocked, sometimes in the guise of researchers, investors, tourists, and even priests. After she decided to become a kept woman in that climate, she did not have any problem advancing her gifts. In fact, the only problem she had was keeping men away. However, when she met the philosophy

professor Theodore Iskander, for whom she would have Yeama, she decided to come clean about her past. “I had to tell you so that no one will have to lie about me!” she said.

Fifteen years her senior, Theodore Iskander was part of what used to be called the intelligentsia in Malagueta and had gone out mostly with women from that circle. When he started seeing Habiba Mouskuda, no one gave the relationship any chance of surviving. For one thing she was a *Coral*: a half-African and half-Arab woman, whose Lebanese father was a member of the much-hated business class that had bled Malagueta dry in cahoots with successive African governments. She was stunningly beautiful, almost six feet tall, with hazel eyes and cinnamon skin that was the result of the most dazzling mixture of bloods, but was nonetheless a woman with a quick temper and a loose tongue, so it seemed all the more improbable that the highly cultured, classical music-loving professor would come to love her, when his friends felt he could have had any woman he wanted: “someone with class.” His mother, the redoubtable Irene, had a simple answer for the enigmatic coupling. “It is witchcraft,” she decided.

Irene went to church regularly to pray to God to break the couple up. Inspired by her belief in the supernatural, she spent sleepless nights thinking of other ways to achieve her aim, but her efforts proved fruitless because Habiba was a most determined and wily malatta in love, as tenacious as her father’s ancestors had been in their conquest of Malagueta’s commercial business.

Soon after the freed slaves had built the town, the Arabs mysteriously began to appear from the ships sailing from Syria and Lebanon, dazzling the black pioneers with their colorful clothes and their ability to quote arcane verses by Moroccan dervishes. The Arabs always exhaled exotic perfumes, a good splash of which was needed to dull the smell of garlic and other condiments on their breath. Given their hard-won freedom, the black citizens were initially suspicious of the newcomers, viewing the arrival of these people speaking a barbarous argot as a diabolical plot by the then-ruling English to check the power of a thriving black business class that would brook no nonsense from half-baked colonial officers.

At first the Arabs did their best to avoid offending the Malaguetans, limiting their activities to peddling coral and other beads. Braving the torrential downpours and ferocious dogs, and sometimes almost robbed or beaten up, they went from door to door peddling their wares, all the time quoting the words of the Sufi mystic Rifai on “sublime ignorance,” to help convince the Malaguetans that wearing the beads as amulets could drive out the devil,

whose existence the Arabs insisted was commonplace in the town. The blacks, who fancied themselves tough pioneers, were not convinced that the devil posed any threats to their livelihood, or that even if it did, coral beads or any other magical amulets could chase it away, so they mostly ignored the Arabs. But it was from those early days that they began to refer to them as “Corals,” which in their good humor the blacks pronounced as “Cor-raals”!

By the time Habiba Mouskuda was born, the Corals had come a long way, due in part to their ruthless ability to start a new life anywhere and their pugnacious competition after the discovery of diamonds. The discovery would turn out to be a disaster for most Malaguetans but a godsend for the Corals and a few of their black lackeys, the lure of the diamonds bringing all kinds of speculators to the shallow alluvial rivers where they were mined: good men, scoundrels, and yahoos.

After the Corals had taken control of smuggling the gems to Beirut, Rotterdam, and, later, Tel Aviv, they became a different class of men: bold, arrogant, crudely manipulative, and, worse, insouciant about the country’s welfare, as long as they could bribe the British and African officials in charge. Not for them, any longer, the smallest courtesies to people. Rather, they were rude to many of the blacks, who had hitherto laughed at their “Cor-raal” penury. They kept mostly to themselves in their new, rented villas in the Arab quarters that faced the ocean or in the inland ones that they had built with the profits from their smuggling. Most evenings they were seen playing dominoes and smoking hookahs in the splendor of their verandahs. On those enchanting Sundays when the Malaguetans usually went to church and the entire city was shut down, the Arabs would be heard singing the rhapsodically beautiful songs of their origins.

But they soon grew tired of the tempestuous rains lasting for almost six months; and not having women to make them forget about their misery, the Arabs missed the enchanting desert evenings of their youth, back in Lebanon or Syria.

“If we are to survive in this hellhole, we must have women,” an old man with a walrus mustache said one night, contemplating their predicament. With their new wealth, he saw the possibility of the Corals easing the lonely hours of the night and of having children.

Their first overtures were to the peasant girls who went from door to door selling peanuts and fruits in the Babel of tongues that characterized life in Malaguetta in those days, given its exotic mix of peoples. Eventually won over by the Corals because of the generous swathes of cotton, silk,

and taffeta that they offered as bait, some of the women began to frequent their shops, especially on those days when the sun was a boiling furnace. Thrilled, the Arabs would offer the women water from earthen jugs to cool their throats, buying up their entire trays of fruits, always feigning concern for their plight. But it was soon clear to the women that the Corals were desperately trying to entice them to their beds. Such dedication yielded results, and after some seamstress had turned the fabrics into elaborate gowns, the women came, shyly at first, to see the Corals in the evening, quite a daring thing to do in those days. The Corals would suffer a case of the stutters just looking at them.

Soon they were having malatta children, but the Corals, to whom many of the women had surrendered their virginity, had no intention of marrying them. They were merely exotic tropical fruits that the men had enjoyed devouring: sweet molasses on their desert tongues, especially the very dark ones: tall, willowy, mysterious, but still playthings for the Arabs. The girls had been tricked into satisfying their needs until the men could send to Lebanon and Syria for veiled wives, chosen by their mothers, who came hurriedly to live off the profits of Malagueta's diamonds.

It wasn't long before the Corals came to own the best commercial businesses in the town, although in the esteem of most highbrow Malaguetans they did not really amount to much, especially as in spite of their newfound wealth, many of the Corals could neither read nor write.

Habiba Mouskuda was one of the lucky malattas who in her youth had polished herself for a few years in a secondary school, though she was still regarded as a "lowlife" woman by some condescending black women. When she was thirty, and already a *femme fatale*, some very desperate men were still chasing her all over the town. In spite of her age, she was fantastic competition for any woman ten years younger, and had turned out to be so skillful at driving some of her lovers off the roller-coaster of death that not even the law was able to lay anything on her. She felt driven by a compulsion to dominate some of those men and seemed destined to write the tragic scripts of their demise. But even when she was suspected of having a hand in those deaths—the hanging of Colonel Fillibo Mango and the fishbone-choking death of General Augustus Kotay, for instance—other men kept coming, drawn to her fatal allure. So it was all the more surprising that she would confess to Theodore Iskander, when they started going out, how easy it had been for her to dispatch to hell or heaven three of the men who had really loved her.

"It was as if I had been cursed to bring harm to men," she cried.

The first time it happened she was only twenty, sweet like an overripe pomegranate, as people say in Malagueta. Her curvature was proof of what a great artist God could be on his good days, and with her bewitching smile, cinnamon skin, and long legs she numbered among her earliest victims the scalps of some rich boys who merely wanted to be introduced to life. When she was done with them, she honed her skills, bought some new dresses, and, after adding some cheap jewelry to her allure, was ready when Ismael Touré feasted his eyes on her.

He was the government surveyor, and in addition to large acres of land, his job brought him ample profits of office—not a surprise to anyone, given the way he had been moving beacons and land boundaries, even though some of those landmarks had been pegged long before he was born. Family titles to land disappeared from his office, and he saw to it that ownership disputes were tied up for years in Byzantine litigation in the compromised courts, swelling the pockets of lawyers and judges always willing to share his ill-gotten gains with him: blood money with which he sought to win Habiba Mouskuda.

“I am not a cheap woman,” she said, trying to ward him off, when he started courting her, “someone you can have for a night or two, just because you are a surveyor.”

“For you, I am prepared to stop going to confession,” he replied.

Helplessly drawn to her, he wooed her with the remarkable patience of his much older years. At every chance he would watch her go by, standing at a distant corner with his trained eyes, as though he were mapping out a clearing in the forest. One day, unable to bear his torment any longer, he went over to her place in broad daylight to beg her to become his woman. Just thinking about her made it impossible for him to sleep, which finally aroused the suspicions of his wife, who had taken to complaining to her friends that her husband had stopped eating well and that he would drop off to sleep as soon as he came home, tired and worn out every day.

“It must be the humid forest vapors that are making him tired,” one of the women said.

Determined to conquer her, Ismael Touré sent Habiba Mouskuda jewelry: onyx, malachite, pearls, and beads made of barracuda bones. On her birthday, he gave her French perfumes that he had bought in the duty-free shops in Abidjan, gift-wrapped with the sweet talk of sending her abroad to study in England, if only she would have him. It was an auspicious beginning for a twenty-year-old, except that after she had slept with him

three times, Habiba Mouskuda decided she was not prepared to wait for the attack that she hoped would rupture his weak heart so that she could move on to someone who had more money and was less ponderous as a lover: an uncomfortable mess for a woman, especially if she did not really like the man.

Impatient like a tropical storm, she took fate by the hand and said goodbye to the fat surveyor by the simple formula of overworking him in bed one Sunday afternoon.

When the death was announced, it was with great envy that less adventurous men learned about how the surveyor had met his end. The rumor was that he had done so the way some of them had dreamed of going, beyond the ambit of heavenly pleasure, on top of a mistress, the dead man dying with the satisfaction that the angels had rung their death bells only after they had allowed him the intemperance of making love in the roasted fowl position for an hour, after he had received the Holy Sacraments in church before going to Habiba for some dessert in her bed.

Angels had seldom been as generous to a dying man as they were to Ismael Touré that afternoon. Taking their time, allowing him to indulge in his dessert, they saturated the room with a mesmerizing fragrance before they tapped his chest very gently. Being good angels who did not want to appear capricious right away, they had removed the skullcaps that they usually wore when they were about to execute an immediate death sentence. It was such a cunning fraud that the exhausted man made the mistake of confusing the diastole and systole of his weak heart with the excessive exertion of sexual activity.

Habiba Mouskuda knew very little about the versatility of angels when they chose to appear to lesser mortals, but nevertheless recognized their presence by the celestial air in her room. Alarmed, she tried to steady her nerves when it dawned on her that the angels had come on a death mission, the tremors of Ismael Touré's hands and mouth being so rhythmic that it was obvious the poor man was dying. With practiced skill, she rolled him off of her, calm as if she were removing a quilt whose warmth she no longer needed. When the final tremors of the angels flattened his heart, Ismael Touré was lucky not to suffer too much.

It was in awe at how magical they could be that Habiba Mouskuda experienced the hallucination of seeing the angels leave. When she had fully recovered her wits, she grabbed a dress, hurried into it, and touched the face of the dead man to confirm that he was really gone. Hurriedly, she walked over to the next house, where her friend Victoria lived.

“What are you doing here,” Victoria asked with a wink, “when you should be busy serving the Son of Man?”

“You have to come with me to see what fate has done to me!” Habiba replied, breathing heavily.

The angels had been gone for some time, but their pungent perfume was still on the dead man’s clothes. He lay in the same undignified position he had been in since Habiba had hurled him off of her chest, and his mouth was wide open, as though he had been surprised by the nature of his death. Habiba, who up till then had really tried to be composed, started trembling, ready to cry.

“Be quiet,” Victoria cautioned. “We have to move him out of your room!”

Hurriedly they closed the mouth of the dead man, bundled him into his blue Sunday suit, and straightened his breast pocket handkerchief. The visit of the angels had left him first with a smile, then with a woebegone countenance that bothered the women, but with almost clinical skill they relaxed the tight knots of his brow so that he looked as though he was enjoying his siesta. Except for a few girls hanging their midday laundry out, the neighbors were inside; a relief to the women, whose hearts were throbbing as they hurried with the dead man to his car, holding him as though he was drunk, and a priest would have admired their skill as they slid the dead man into a comfortable position in the front passenger seat. Victoria, who had not lost her nerves, offered to drive.

Less than two hours before coming to the house of his mistress, Ismael Touré had been listening to a hearty rendition of Bach’s *St. Mathew Passion* in church, but his date with the angels of death in Habiba’s bed meant that he was not to hear the Lord’s Prayer that she had started singing for him. In the past, when distressed, she had not sought the comfort of song or even of prayer; but, now, in an enchanting voice, careful not to arouse the suspicion of the handful of late homegoers strolling on Talabi Road, still flushed with the blood of Christ they had received in church, she sought solace in that prayer. She stroked the head of the dead man and thought of how fortunate he had been to die on a Sunday, a sign that he was going straight to heaven. Breathing like wild horses, the two women turned into Bambara Street, where some of the first houses built by the descendants of the pioneers in the late nineteenth century had retained the charmed but decaying elegance of that period, their lush gardens still blooming, the wild bougainvillea and hibiscus luxuriantly cascading over the high cement walls.

The women missed killing a bad-luck cat before they came to their destination in front of the mortuary, which the surveyor had driven past less

than an hour ago on his way to his mistress, and it was a beautiful cameo the way they shifted the dead man into the driver's seat, shocked that even for a fat man he was so heavy in death. Aware that they were working against time, they called up all their reserves of strength to create the right subterfuge, making sure he was slumped forward, being very careful that his head should be resting on his folded arms on the steering wheel. So convincing was the effect that Ismael Touré really looked as though he had been assailed by a heart attack or by the excesses of a Sunday afternoon's drinking at his local bar, which was precisely the ruse that Habiba wanted to achieve, just in case someone who knew the surveyor should pass by and see the poor man in his car.

Then it was that the women heard the elegiac notes of piano music coming from one of the houses, where a gifted artist was playing "Un Sonnet d'Amour," the third movement of the *Petite Suite de Concert* by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. Otherwise, everything was quiet on Bambara Street. In spite of his lofty English name, the composer was a black man whose father was a doctor, born in Malagueta. Clearly in a celestial sphere that afternoon, his long fingers burnishing the black and white keys, the pianist was unaware of what was happening on the street. Besides the few hungry dogs and cats that had witnessed the dead man being taken to his car, Habiba Mouskuda felt no one had seen them when they were moving him. Smiling at the animals, she said a few hurried liturgical lines that she had suddenly remembered from when she was polishing herself at the Catholic girls' school, thinking that such contrition would help ease the passage of the dead man into heaven. Moved by the certainty that this was the last time she was seeing him, she took a quick searching look at him, patted his cheeks, and squeezed them.

The sun had come out and the jowls of the dead man had lost some of their firmness. He had the pallor that Habiba recognized as the first signs of death in a man who had not been taking good care of his health. For the first time since the angel had stopped the heart of her lover, she felt, in the deep resources of her heart, a tinge of sadness for the fat surveyor who had sometimes watered her garden.

Then, as though it was the most natural thing she had ever done, Habiba used a public phone booth to call the dead man's wife, who had been waiting for him to come home to their Sunday lunch, with the news of the disaster that she had always been afraid might happen, given Ismael Touré's cardiovascular condition.

“You don’t know me, Madam, but I think something terrible has happened to your husband,” Habiba said in the calmest voice she could use under the circumstance.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Tankor Satani Has Another Unexpected Visitor

NOT TOO long after he returned from surveying the mountain for the spot on which to build his Xanadu, Tankor Satani dispatched a secret emissary with an urgent message to the president of the neighboring French-speaking republic of Bakazo, as though something about the trip to the mountain had convinced him of the need for caution. To the consternation of his ministers and friends, he soon installed two eunuchs from that Islamic nation in the guest rooms of his private residence.

His wife, Sallay, was aghast. “Why have you brought those men wearing talismanic cords on their arms and looking like the devil’s disciples to my house?” she demanded.

Tankor’s reply was laced with a concern in his voice she had not heard before in more than thirty years of marriage.

“I am a president, and I cannot afford to take chances with my life with so many enemies around. Besides, who would keep an eye on my prime minister, who wants this job so badly before I die that he is acting like a sycophant?”

“But you will die soon, all the same, given whatever is eating you up!” she screamed at him.

Back in Bakazo the eunuchs had been renowned for their abracadabra, which was precisely why Tankor had sent for them. Obviously enjoying the consternation that their arrival had caused, he saw to it that the eunuchs stayed in the cloister of their rooms most of the time, going about their work quietly, and were only heard when their soaring Berber-Arabic poetry would waft through the windows into the courtyard, sending the peacocks running helter-skelter from those alien tunes. Turbaned, with parts of their faces veiled with indigo cloth, they exuded a mysterious air that the guards found fascinating, as the eunuchs did their best to stay out of the way of the president’s wife, who did not trust anyone who was not a born-again Christian like herself. Moreover, as far as she was concerned, the vagaries of fate were best left in the hands of men who knew *something* about women!

But contrary to her disdain for the eunuchs, her husband had a lot of trust in the efficacy of their clairvoyance, which was greatly enhanced after they warned him about the diabolism of the book that his amanuensis, Colonel Fillibo Mango, was writing.

“That book will ridicule your mother and put pepper in your eyes, Excellency.”

“In that case, I shall have it banned and arrest the colonel!” Tankor Satani said, alarmed by the prospect of the book becoming a best seller.

On the morning the colonel was executed, Tankor Satani lit a cigar with a burning copy of the book and then telephoned his prime minister, Enos Tanu.

“I leave it to you to see that the offending printing establishment is smashed up as punishment for daring to bring out the book,” he informed the underling.

“That is why I am your prime minister,” Enos Tanu replied effusively.

Tankor Satani’s confidence about a rosy future was now greatly increased; he went to sleep every night convinced that his eunuchs would anticipate any threats against him. He felt so confident that he decided to lift the ban on the offering of public sacrifices or *sara*, which were rites sometimes used to bewitch people. Whether by instinct or because of something hard to define about the man, the eunuch that Tankor Satani really trusted was Pallo, who had come to him separately, many years later, and was not installed in the guests’ quarters, but had been given a room in the Xanadu after it was built.

Silent as a crab, astonishingly prescient with his sorcery, Pallo began to advise Tankor on whom to include in his cabinet, the choice of ambassadors, and when he should go to the presidential office downtown. Faced with the country’s volatile politics and afraid he might be poisoned by some harmless-looking lackey, Tankor appointed the eunuch his sole food taster and asked him to keep an eye on the goings-on in the military barracks.

“I shall know when they are cooking up rebellions, Master, so don’t worry. I shall alert you before the gun finds your heart.”

The eunuch was to save him from the autumnal follies of old age, such as his passion for malattas. “They might be good in bed, Excellency, but bad for business, because they have too many men.”

He did all he could to keep the old man away from those Coral and other “brown-skin gals,” who would have wrecked Tankor’s presidency in the first three years. In return, all that the eunuch asked for was that he and the other

eunuchs meet under the giant cotton tree in the center of town three times a year and dance.

“Anytime you feel like it, Pallo, just let me know,” the president was quick to assure his sorcerer.

Tankor Satani was over sixty when he became president. Given Malaguetta’s glorious beginnings, the sons and daughters of the founders always wore their pedigree with an unmistakable contempt for others, especially the Corals. Cocksure people that they were, the founders did little to control their petulance with servants and were just as injudicious about their dislike of the president. They ridiculed his presumptions and speech making, and called him “too common,” for which reason he was sometimes heard to refer to his first three years in office as being in a “snake pit.” With the congress packed with lawyers and doctors of the old school, he fought epic battles there, and his honeymoon with the military was brief, a mere two years, during which time, with troops rushed in from Bakazo, he had to put down three mutinies. Afterward, he carried out his first batch of executions of the insurrectionists, exiled their wives and mistresses, and confiscated their properties. Then, to guard against further rebellions, he sealed the national armory so that on ceremonial occasions his soldiers were reduced to performing their military exercises with wooden guns.

“Look at Tankor’s soldiers,” the kids would laugh; “they are Boy Scouts!”

Before becoming president, Tankor Satani had worked in the mines and had been a dogcatcher, broke most of the time, lonely, but philosophical about the destinies of men, never giving up—a determined young man. Surprisingly, as president he came up against a system more annoying than those dogs, more intractable than death, a civil service bent on destroying him, courts tying up his first bills or sending them back to him with the insult that they were not properly written in the Queen’s English. His most implacable critics were the judges, roasting in their ermine and wigs in the tropical courts, who took delight in delaying his injunctions, flooring him with legalisms, making him look like a weakling in the foreign press, whose appetite for scandal was growing every day. Under the pretext that he had not been crowned with the laurel of a law degree, the university council barred him when he tried to name himself the chancellor.

“He did not even go to a proper college!” scoffed one of the professors.

Nor would the Freemasons allow him into the secret rites of their order, where black Englishmen played Scottish fantasies. Some diamond

smugglers, illiterate Corals, and thieving lawyers were members of the Order, but the bigwigs insisted on keeping him out.

He felt trapped in the labyrinth of a constitution he had inherited from the British and began to think of ways to establish his order, if need be, by abolishing the courts, but so powerful was the opposition against him he knew he had to take it easy. That was until he received help, once again, from Henri Christophe. As had happened prior to the first visit, the ghost of the old emperor appeared in a ring circle of storm, rain, and lightning, but without his outlandish entourage. Somewhat older than when he had last appeared to Tankor, he said that even for someone capable of crossing oceans at will, it was becoming too difficult for his large entourage to travel, but he had brought his harem with him.

“I always travel with my women, as I cannot live without the pleasure they give me,” the emperor said.

“I know what you mean!” Tankor hastened to agree.

“Someone is coming to see you,” Henri said. “But don’t fret over things you cannot change. Epochs change men, not the other way around. And watch out for a *mermaid*. She is one woman no man has been able to fathom.”

Just as he had promised, he sent Tankor Satani help from a most unexpected source: one of the very lawyers who had made a career of opposing him.

Victor Adolphy was the unacknowledged Coral son of an Arab father and a black woman. Like his father he was short, stocky, built like a baobab, but he had the angelic voice of his mother. Widely rumored to have the Corals’ habit of avoiding doing straight business and paying taxes, he preferred the dark, smoky rooms where they could bribe politicians. Life had kissed his brow with money, but he wanted *respect!*

His most feared attribute, however, was his rumored secret taping of the rituals of court deals, the conversations of his colleagues, and, most damaging, the contempt that the chief justice had for the president. God, he hated the judges, and saw his chance of getting back at them after they had blocked some of Tankor Satani’s bills.

One evening while Tankor Satani was enjoying a gourmet meal of cassava leaves stew, the lawyer was suddenly announced. It was not a good time for visitors, especially lawyers and journalists, whom Tankor did not trust, and his suspicions were aroused, but the lawyer convinced him he was not there to talk about a business deal.

“I have come about your welfare, Excellency.”

“Tell me what it is and I shall reward you for your confidence in me,” Tankor Satani said to the Coral, gripping the younger man’s hands.

Victor Adolphy finished the goblet of French brandy that the old man had offered him and cleared his throat, aware that he was about to cross a great river. “I have found a way out of your predicament, Excellency.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“I’ll bring you tapes of what the chief justice has been saying about you.”

“For that you will deserve an ambassadorship of your choice,” the old man said, almost leaping out of his chair.

Victor Adolphy thought about the ambassadorship for a while but realized he was making more money as a lawyer and liked the climate better at home than in some cold, lonely European outpost. An ambassadorship was not for him.

“No, thank you, Excellency,” he said. “I am happy knowing that I have helped you overcome the problem of how to ensure that you will rule forever.”

He drained the last measure of his brandy, thought of how he was going to enjoy his visit to the Freemasons’ club that evening, and extended his fat hand to the president.

Tankor Satani thanked the Coral profusely. “Go with God,” he said, barely concealing his glee.

The lawyer left the house as surreptitiously as he had arrived.

Before the ghost of Henri Christophe and the brazen lawyer came to visit him, old age had offered Tankor Satani limited opportunities for happiness. Challenged on all fronts, his presidency had swung between a few bold acts and retractions. Moreover, the currents of his own old inadequacies would sometimes jar his brain as he tried to come to grips with his predicaments, so he viewed the visit by the lawyer as a rare chance to square things up with his enemies. Meanwhile, he would raise the profiles of the Corals in all the commercial business, and decided he might even amend the constitution so they could stand for election to the parliament, which was something that those diabolical courts had fought against.

As soon as the Coral was gone, Tankor Satani poured himself a glass of Georgian brandy and paced up and down in his study, savoring the taste. After a while he began to dance, throwing his arms wide in the air like a nubile girl at a Fulani wedding, drunk with the prospect of revenge on the chief justice. He drew up a long list of actions against the other judges. First he would destroy those expensive monuments to the imperial governors, built with unpaid black people’s labor; the judges felt attached to them. Those

statues erected to the glory of the missionaries were just as insulting, and so pleased was he that some of them had died of malaria that he had established the Order of the Mosquito in praise of the pests. He stopped dancing to look out the window at the mountain, dark now and covered by thick clouds of mist, but still majestic, where he was going to build the Xanadu. What secrets, he wondered, lay in its bowels?

The years that he had spent working as a dogcatcher—broke most of the time, laughed at because of his suits, growled at and almost bitten by the dogs, his blood running high just thinking of his fate—had given Tankor Satani a good deal of time to hone his skill at trapping the strays with a swing of his club; at being patient. Now, surprisingly, it was about those miserable days that he was thinking as he began to make preparations to show his enemies he was still capable of stealth. He still kept as mementoes a pair of the old shoes that he used to wear. Issued by the miserly colonial administration, they were tough as camel leather and made to last forever. In those days he had gone without the luxury of a radio or even the comforts of a house. Most of the time he slept in a small room, having to put up with the impertinence of the insufferable English, their black lackeys, and the illiterate mulattoes running the place.

Armed with the Coral's tape, he was going to change everything in this god-forsaken place. Life had never been so good to him. Yet he had a little regret.

His children had not turned out well, especially his daughters. Alas, they had taken after their mother when it came to the bulge on their bottoms and had married useless men to boot, whose indolence had increased, thanks to his generosity, which was keeping them in style. When he thought of his children, it was with deep pain, and in spite of the promise of a great autumn of his life a swamp of bitterness rose in his heart. It was the despair of a man whose children had made a mockery of their parentage.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

## A Fishbone-Choking Death

SOON AFTER the death of the surveyor, Habiba Mouskuda forgot about him and took up with a new lover, a colonel in the army. He was a man of high birth, principled, and a chess player with an existential bent, who would have preferred a career in the diplomatic service but had been made to follow a family tradition into the military. At twenty-five he had married

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