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While the tang of laser-singed titanium still ribboned the air and the swarm of discoid war-drones glided erratically above the field of battling soldiers, it happened. The ashen skies came alive with thousands of man-size gyrospheres that hung momentarily against the pallid dome of the sky before accelerating in a blast of blue-white flares, out of sight. Suddenly, the war-drones decelerated and, in perfect accord, plummeted to the earth, exploding in magnificent mushrooms of fire and smoke on impact.

As the soldiers looked on, wide-eyed, with their smoking laser cannons hanging at their sides, their frown-crinkled faces smoothed out into embattled plains of comprehension as it dawned on their multitude what had just transpired.

The Geo-Engineers were gone. That meant one thing: they failed to save the old world.

And with this, the soldiers, after decades of war, returned to what was still left of the old world, their home. Many never made it back home.

But some did.

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Whenever she dreamed, it was always the same dream. But this time, it was different.

It was always the day before he left for the war. They were together on the white shores of Neo-Dar before the floods came. They were standing at their favorite spot, his arms wrapped around her waist, her back against the wall of his torso, facing the waters of Oce that glistened with frolicking shards of sunlight. The conversation was always the same. She would ask why he had to go; he would say he had to for the sake of the cause; she would plead with him not to go and fight though she knew it was pointless. He was a stubborn man. Then he would whisper into her ear, an assuring soothing whisper, and say:

"I dey come back t'you. Promise you dey wait fa me?"

She would promise. His embrace would tighten before breaking his grip, releasing his hands to journey down the grooves and crevices of her body. She, with a quiver that rose from between her legs, surrendered herself to him.

"Come back t'me, I beg" she would say as she pulled his head down to her neck, yearning for the wetness of his tongue. He reciprocated in full measure. Her knees buckled, satisfied.

Then his hands stopped and the dream changed.

Then she heard them, the *whispers* of the floods, rising behind her, coming from him. She turned and saw his eyes had hollowed out into dark holes that were oozing an endless flow of black gunk down his cheeks, leaving black war-paint-like trails on his deadpan face. The whispers were coming from the dark holes, echoing from *inside* him. The whispers got louder. The holes grew larger. And then.

She woke up, screaming, gasping for air as if from drowning.

It was night and she was alone in her cabana. She sat up from the floor and placed her hands on her flat belly, stroking it in circular rubs through her tattered robe, taking in deep breaths as she did. As the dream dissolved from memory, as dreams often do, all that remained was him, the soothing reassuring *him*, at their favorite spot. She wrapped her arms around her belly.

“When he bi home, he dey take us away from this place. You dey see *babi*.” She said, before humming a lullaby whose words she didn’t remember.

*

He was different the day he came home from the war.

It was hard to say how long it had been. Nuke-clocks did not have the same determining stronghold on the human estate as they once did. All she had were the sun, the seasons, the westerly desert of Sah and the easterly waters of Oce to help her remember. It had been six winters and seven summers, just before the first of many floods to blanket the lower plains in oil-slick blackness. He left the enterprise of ocean-farming to fight in the war for the Geo-Engineers. A war that raged on for far too long and took more than it had given.

It had been six winters of bitter chill and empty slumber. Seven summers of drought and unquenched hankering. Each season clung on for much longer than the one gone before. It made waiting that much harder. Lonelier.

She had given up hope on any chance of his return.

And yet there he was; standing in the frame of the makeshift doorway, held together by dried hyacinth, scrap titanium and rotting wood, in his soil-caked combat fatigues. The embroidery of the Geo-Engineers emblem – a lower case *g* with a plus in superscript – was still visible through the cracked-dry muck on the slouched shoulders of his fatigues.

“You dey bi here? Nay some mind witchery, I beg?” she said, only then realizing she had been holding her breath, causing a mild dizziness.

The air in the room, like her mind, felt lighter as if gravity was falling apart at the seams. Her heart was hammering in her flat chest and echoing in the chamber of her ears as it once did when she witnessed the broken cohorts of wounded soldiers coming back to the barren lowland plains they called home. She would wait in the small of her cabana of black mud and rock, looking at the silhouettes of passing soldiers through the tattered drapes over her singular window, hoping it was him. It never was.

And yet there he was. Not a contorted shadow or passing silhouette. But here. Now. With her.

“Aye! I bi here!” he mumbled through a foliage of red-tinged facial hair, each word delivered with an Olympian effort.

She took a step forward. Then another. Each step, ruffling her threadbare robe, taken with cautious consideration as if walking through a mine field – her eyes, glazing over into runs of tears, fixated on him, until she was close enough to feel the warmth of his stale breath on her dampened black cheeks.

She let off a self-conscious chuckle, whispering his own words to herself. *Aye! I bi here!*

Her extremities tinkled; she imagined those extinct butterflies, the ones from the stories, were fluttering

underneath her skin, craving to burst out, taking her memories with them to serenade the coming night. Letting off a quiet chuckle peppered with snuffles, she leapt to him and wrapped her arms around his sunbaked neck, pressing her smallish body to his. Startled, the man took in a sharp breath and flinched slightly. His arms, which were still hanging to his sides, flexed faintly unsure of how to reciprocate, as if this were some unfamiliar custom of an alien civilization. As his appendages recalled the appropriate customary response, he reciprocated, though in gradual measure.

She held on to him tightly, her hands fondling the back of his head, as if to reassure herself that this was no *mind-witchery* of the man who had gone to fight for the side that promised to save the old world from this place and failed.

As she hung onto him, her feet airborne, a dark shadow came over her and the butterflies started fluttering again. This time, she wished that they could carry away her secret as well. For as they stood, quiet in each other's arms, probably not wanting to break this silent magic with the clumsiness of words, she had a singular thought on her mind.

Howse do I tell 'im 'bout you, babi?

Her heart continued hammering – harder than before.

*

When she woke up, she reached for his side of the floor bed and found that it was cold – hadn't been slept in. She scoped the sparse room. Everything was exactly where it was supposed to be: power cylinder, food containers, water purifier and a small stack of clothes neatly folded to one side. She looked to the door beyond the foot of the bed. It was open. She panicked.

Had he left again?

Post-haste, she shoved the sheets away, got up, put on her old mandarin gown and bolted for the door. She sighed, relieved.

He was still there.

With his back to her, he stood naked and dangerously close to a billowing bonfire that was reaching for the dark of night, rising over him. The bonfire was an oasis in a limitless maw of darkness. Beyond, further up the plain, were little flickering lights, homes of fellow plains-folk, scattered off to the west. At a glance, it was as though the earth and the night had been seamlessly stitched together making the flickering lights just celestial members of an age-old constellation. He was alone and seemingly unafraid. His frame was blackened into shadow making him a child's stick figure against the flames.

Walking slowly on her tip-toes, she started toward him, until she was within earshot. That was when she noticed there was some kind of clothing clasped in his hand. The heat had singed his body hairs to black freckles on his hardened skin.

But he didn't groan. Instead, he spoke.

"Go 'n' bed," he said calmly, his head tilted to the dark night sky as if talking to the few stars that pushed through the overcast smog-vapor. "I need t'bi on my ownsome."

Startled, she stopped motionless, her elbows cupped in her hands, not sure of what to do.

“Go ‘n’ bed, sabi?” he snapped, twisting sharply in her direction, revealing crusted dark-red trails that lined his caved-in torso. Though the fire reflected in his eyes like a shapeshifting tattoo, all she could see was a *deadness* around the edges. His brittle look cut through her like some fated betrayal.

He *didn’t* want her there.

She complied, albeit reluctantly. As she turned back to the cabana, she heard crackling behind her; she stole a glance before closing the door. He had thrown the piece of clothing into the bonfire and it ignited into brilliant greens and purples against the relentless reds and oranges. Before the cloth was consumed by the flame, she could make out what it was. His old combat fatigues.

As she tried to rest herself to sleep, she could hear weeping in the calm of the night.

Later, as he snuck onto the floor bed next to her, she shuffled closer, spooning him as she caressed the roughness of his dry skin. Her hand slowly sloped up and down the valley of his pelvic region – the way he liked it.

“Nay now,” he said, shrinking away from her and breaking her tether. “Gi mi time.”

And she, with a sigh, rested her head on her interlaced forearms as they both pretended to sleep.

A few days later, she bartered off some clothes at the Weekly Barter in exchange for a large woolen shawl.

*

*Stop kickin’! You ticklin’ me! Babi! What!? You bi
try’n to cheer me up? Why?*

*Methink you no much-much. These bi grown things. I no no. Its
jus’ he bi diff’r’nt.*

Aye, Tru’ to god. He need time. Me only wish he talk’d to me ‘bout di war, m’be it dey help ‘im sleep.

*I told ‘im ‘bout howst been since he left. Neo-Dar under di water. Me r’build’n three times bicos o’ di
waters. He worri’d that m’be di waters will rise ‘gain. I nay worri’d. It bi so long since di last flood.*

He bi out on the Oce scavv’n fa food ‘n’ supplies. He nay like the weekly barter wit’ di other plains-folk.

“We fend fa us-self” he say.

He rath’r go far-far out on di Oce than beg. He keeps com’n backs wit’ li’l or nuttin’.

*Hey-hey! Look at di shawl I gat fa you. Gat it from the weekly barter where I gat you. Should keep you
cover’d ‘til I tell ‘im.*

Nay, he no no ‘bout you yet.

*Aye, I no told ‘im. Bicos it might bi much-much fa ‘im, but I will tell ‘im. Aye! Aye! I promise. I
will tell ‘im ‘bout you!*

I no no when, but soon. For now, you bi my li'l secret. He jus' need time, babi.

*

The sky was anemic, losing its pallet of color and taking on milky grey pallor, as if one were seeing through cataract-coated eyes, as the heavens welcomed the stardust of the coming night that promised to be cold.

Squatting outside the cabana in her shawl, she blew down into a discus of pulsing red heat that was hovering several inches above the ground. When the glow's intensity was just right, she placed her hands, palms up, underneath the discus and rose with the restraint of an aerialist. The discus rose in unison with her.

As she started for the cabana, the creaking and groaning from a field of timeworn windmill turbines on the Oce could be heard far out in the easterly distance, beyond where Neo-Dar used to be. Many were still standing, perforating the greyish smog- vapor that blurred the twilight. A thick jungle of fabricated monoliths.

Clank!

The sound of debris, from Neo-Dar drowned beneath, clanking against the rusted hull of the massive turbines formed the ambience of the day and night. The smell was putrid, reeking of the black gold that had seeped into the ground, poisoning the ground water and rendering a livelihood impossible on land or Oce.

Clank!

But she never noticed any of these, only because she chose not to. A part of her believed things would get better. She had to – *needed* to – believe that. What was the alternative? Give in to the *cabin fever* that was always at her doorstep, waiting to be invited in? To her, noticing the smells, the sounds, made her a conspirator of her own despair, like the many plains-folk that had gone before; many by their own hand in the quiet of their shacks. Some gave in to the Sah, further west beyond the far-off hills. Others walked toward the Oce and never stopped walking.

She felt an unwanted kinship with those who gave up and gave in, because she understood. It was this place. Being trapped in this place – this *terminus* between the Oce and the Sah – got the better of them.

It bi eith'r by water or by fire, she often thought. A cruel choice – the only one that remained.

*Water 'n' fire. Oce
'n' Sah. Death 'n'
death.*

If only it could all stop fa a li'l, she often thought. The whispers.
The desert.

The life within her.

Him.

Come back t'me, I beg!

Stop 'um vain mullin', she snapped, as she entered the cabana and partook of the glowing warmth of the discus; the nightly routine numbing her from the *vain mullin'* that came with this place, before she slept.

She didn't wait for him to come home.

Like most days, he arrived, late and empty-handed, and threw himself onto the floor bed next to her, not touching her. And like most days, he didn't say a word.

*

It was the funk that woke her first. Then his rummaging.

The room hung heavily with the unmistakable stench of the Oce. Dead and unholy. As she lifted herself off the floor bed, the film of sleep melting from her eyes, she saw him, clad in his *kanzu*, frantically clawing for the supplies and throwing them onto a large lightly woven cotton cloth spread out on the floor.

"Hey-hey. What bi this?" she said, with the back of her hand to her mouth, fighting off a comfortable yawn.

"There bi no time!" he exclaimed, not looking at her as he rolled the power cylinder onto the cloth.

Then she heard it. It had been several moons since the last time she heard it outside of her dreams, but it was unmistakable. Her eyes widened with horror.

Di whisp'rs.

He wrapped the corners of the cloth over the supplies and heaved it on his back, as she bolted from the floor, dashed outside and looked to the dawn-tinged easterly horizon, looking for it.

It was coming.

A deluge of water – one endless escarpment of liquid death rising to a boil of white froth – thundered steadily up the plain, swallowing the poisoned ground beneath it.

ClacClacClank!

The sound of debris hitting against the windmill turbines came in rapid succession. The massive stem-tower of the rusted hull was twisting in the waters – each twist going further than the last – as the mammoth metallic blades creaked loudly, without rotating. With each slow grotesque twist, the hull groaned a metallic groan of age and tire; squeaks and cracks could be heard echoing from within its guts.

So it bi by water.

A sudden force dug into her shoulder, pulling her away. "What you doing? RUN!" he roared, yanking her by the gown with his free hand, while carrying the cotton-cloth satchel with his other.

"Run for di hills!" he yelled, pulling her behind him.

"Wait!" she screamed. She grabbed his hand, broke his grip and tore back to the cabana, disappearing into the black of the interior.

The man kept screaming for her, as he watched the water approaching, relentless; staring into the frame of darkness waiting for her to erupt forth.

She darted for the floor bed as if by magnetism, scooped up her shawl from the ground, leapt for the doorway and out of the cabana, joining him as they charged for the westerly hills.

She couldn't feel her legs as they carried her neither could she feel the wet crimson- rich ribbons that ran down the inside of her thighs as she ran. But she could feel the fear in his voice as he cried, "No look back!"

And she didn't.

The last thing they heard was the hollow crack of the windmill turbine hull as it slowly toppled to the waters.

A splash of water kissed the heels of her airborne feet.

*

They made it to the scarp face at the base of the hills. Safe and breathless. She sat on a rock to catch her breath as he walked away, transfixed by the devastation.

They watched as wave after wave of water swept through the lowlands – most of the plains now under with Neo-Dar. Their home, if it ever was such, gone.

Now one with the old world.

"What we do now-now?" she asked, putting on her shawl, still catching her breath. The man's shoulders slouched as he sighed. He turned and walked to her until he stood over her.

He placed his free hand on her cheek and stroked it with his thumb. Softly. Gently. It was the first time she *felt* him like this since his return. She closed her eyes, as her head leaned into his hand.

"What we do now-now," he repeated. In one sudden swift motion, his hand recoiled from her cheek and re-connected in an open-handed slap across the same cheek. She almost stumbled off the rock from its intensity as a plume of pain exploded across her face.

"Nay ev'r do that t'me 'gain," he said in a whisper, with the veins of his neck protruding grotesquely as if about to burst. His face, a contorted mask of contempt. He immediately headed for the slopes and started climbing, the satchel hanging from his back.

"Where we bi go'n'?" she said mildly, clutching her cheek, her eyes teary. Though she asked, she knew the answer. She knew where he was going, because there was nothing left for them here.

This bi it, she thought. It bi by fire.

She, faithfully, followed him into the desert.

*

The air was always still and the sun, unforgiving.

The desert was an enveloping sprawl of nothingness below a searing oblivion sky. The sand dunes rose and fell as if nature were making love to itself, as the man and the woman, like magi following the North Star, journeyed through the dry emptiness.

The grit, which stung their eyes, graduated from grating to familiar to tolerable.

*

Babi? Talk to me, I beg (cough)

I hate this place Babi. Howse can I prepare you fa this world the way it bi?

We found a dy'n woman (cough) t'day layin' on 'er ownsome in a brokun nuke-silo. Me says to 'im "we should take 'er wit' us"

And he say "Nay! She slow us down." He scavv'd 'er supplies 'n' left 'er there fa deat' "She bi dead already" he says, 'n' walk'd away.

What could I dey do? We left 'er there. Does dey make me a bad person babi? (cough)

Does dey it?

(Cough)

*

At first, they travelled by night and slept where they could shelter by day. But with each passing day, the woman got inexplicably weaker. It started with mild coughs which he dismissed as passing. But they were getting stronger and more violent that they only travelled when she had the strength for it – which was seldom.

During a biting cold night when they should have made distance, she slept, covered by her shawl, next to the glowing discus, which was running on their last megajoule of power. Sitting across from her, the man stared; the light from the discus was an orange-yellow iridescence on his pupil, like a wolf's eyeshine in the moonlight. He was staring intently at her.

"What you bi think'n 'bout?" she rasped.

"I?" he paused, the yellow flicker still dancing in his reddened eyes. "Survival."

That night, as she dithered on the twilight of dreamless sleep, she felt a strange engulfing presence pressing into the elfin swell of her belly.

When she woke up the next day all she found were a few supplies and bottle of water. Inscribed in the

sand, next to the supplies, was a message, though partially windswept, she made out the words:

You dey promis'd to wait fa me.

She combed around, searching, and found a trail of footprints in the sand. Straight and determined.

He was gone. Again.

*

I saw dry bones t'day 'n' wonder'd what their stories bi. Did they love as I? Did they dream as I? (Cough)

He bi gone babi . This place has tak'n 'im the way it has tak'n di stories fr'm 'um old bones. It dey bi this place that has empt'd 'im out. (Cough) But I nay let this place hav' the better o' me. I dey nay bi one wit' this place.

I dey rath'r bi wit' you when di moons ripen. Babi ?

Talk to me, I beg?

(Cough)

*

She lifted her frail body up, carried her supplies and continued walking into the godless desert.

A mutant moth fluttered passed her ear and away into the scorched sky. As the moth climbed higher, becoming a speck in the heavens, she gazed with a smallish smirk and swore she had seen a butterfly.

Fly, babi, fly!
