

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I'd like to thank the Academy . . . oh, all right, I'll stop now.

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And hekua to all my ancestors for walking the path before me and lighting my way.

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# **BROWN GIRL in the RING**

## **Nalo Hopkinson**



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*Dedicated to my father, Slade Hopkinson. Daddy, thanks for passing on the tools of the trade to me.*

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## CHAPTER SIX

Rudy was pissed off. Tony had blurted out his story to him in the limousine ride back to Rudy's office. Only three more days left to collect the heart for the hospital, and this pissant boy had been wasting time. He'd even found a match, but he was too cowardly to do what had to be done. On top of it all now, Tony had put his three best generals out of commission. Rudy didn't even know if Crapaud was going to live, and Jay and Crack were only lying there like babies, talking foolishness about how Tony's girlfriend

beat them up. He scowled at Tony across the oak dining table. He touched the linen napkin to his lips, put it down. The waiter moved in quickly to clear the table, glancing fearfully at Tony from time to time. Rudy watched him in silence, then, "All right. You could go now."

Tapping the fingers of one hand on the tabletop, Rudy glared at Tony again. *I have a mind to just feed him blood to the calabash one time*, Rudy thought. Lately the thing in the duppy pot had been demanding to be fed more often. And what about that message that Crack had brought him from Eshu? The Eshu in the Black Cape. The one that had shown him the way to control people, to work the dead. Rudy thought about it. Now that he knew where to find a match for Uttley, he could get some of his boys to beat the woman up, then just call the hospital to come and collect, and claim his finder's fee. Less money, but still profitable. Maybe not yet, though. He still had a chance to use Tony to get the full fee. Rudy was sure he could give the man the right incentive. And it would get those blasted women and their nicey-nicey balm-yard spirits out of his way once and for all.

"I figure," Rudy said to Tony, "you must be did see what happen out there by the highway? You see the spirit that appear to Crack?"

Of course, Tony couldn't reply. He was flopped limply in the armchair in Rudy's office, head flopped to one side. Only the panicked look in Tony's eyes betrayed any awareness.

"Some people call that spirit the One in the Black Cape, seen? Him does always dress in funeral colours. Him is the one you call when somebody work a obeah 'pon you and you want revenge. I call him. Twelve years ago. I wasn't nobody then, you understand? Just a poor man who get kick out of he house by he ungrateful wife. Motherass woman take up with a next man behind my back. Them days, I was living in a flophouse, and I had one little problem, same like you. Buff. Used to spend all my money on it, then steal to get more. And just like you, I make a mistake. I steal from the posse."

Tony's eyes were watering.

"But your eyes must be stinging you, eh, Tony? It does burn when you can't blink them, right? Is so the toad poison does take you. Temporary paralysis. Is them kinda things could happen when people cross me. Never mind, though," he said in mock friendliness, "I go get Melba to fix you up, all right? Melba, take your hand and close that man eyes for him. Gentle, now. Don't poke him like you jook the last one."

Melba shuffled out of the corner where she'd been standing. She'd been bathed, but the boys hadn't known what to do with her hair. It hung matted and snarled from her scalp. She had lost a lot of weight. Her clothes sagged on her body, and her skin was grey and flaky. She wouldn't last much longer. She went toward Tony, who started making "uh, uh," noises. She ignored them, slid his eyelids down over his eyes, then stood where she was.

"Now," Rudy said, "what I was saying?"

Tony's noises took on a more desperate tone. Rudy chuckled. "What, Master Tony? Me think say you would prefer if you could see what me a-do, eh? All right, brother. If you could stand the burning, who is me to tell you no? Melba, open up he eyes again." She did.

"Move away now, Melba. Go back to your corner." The woman obeyed.

"So yes, brother, me was telling you: me steal from the posse, and them find out, and the boys come for me. Me did slash all the buff one time. Me was flying high when them bruk down me door. I don't like to tell you how bad them do me that night, me brother. Them nearly kill me." He shook his head, remembering. Cool breeze, though. That was a long time ago. And the two men that had done it had lived to see their error. He went and stood over Tony. "Them break me one leg, here so," he said, laying a hand on Tony's thigh. Tony's eyes were wild with terror. "And me hand, and them crack open me cheekbone, here so." With his index finger, he touched a spot just under Tony's left eye. A tear dripped down. He smiled and flicked it off his finger.

"Oh, I know you can't see no scar or nothing on me face now. Me does keep meself young and good-looking nowadays. No scar, no scratch, that me duppy don't fix it for me. And it take away the craving for buff, too.

"So yes, posse do for me that night. And them wasn't the first one to do me bad, no, sir. From I born, people been taking advantage. Poor all me born days. Come up to Canada, no work. Me wife and all

kick me out of me own house. Blasted cow. If it wasn't for me, she woulda still be cleaning rich people toilets back home, and is so she treat me. Just because me give she little slap two-three time when she make she mouth run away 'pon me." Anger at the injustice of it all burned again in Rudy. But it wasn't like that now. Nobody took advantage of him now.

"So lying there in me broken bones that night, me decide nobody nah go get nothing from me no more. Time to get my due back from them, you understand?"

A line of spittle ran from Tony's mouth to drip down his chin onto his shoulder, mixing with the tears that were now running freely from his tortured eyes.

"Me face did swell up, the two ends of break bone in me leg rubbing every time me try to move. And me call the Eshu. The One in the Black Cape, just like me wife did show me. Me soul did already flying free from all the buff what me slash, and me reach out from them heights there, and me call, drumming the rhythm on the ground with me one good hand that leave. Me ain't know how long me call, but me swear me see the sun come up and go back down again. And me ain't stop. Mouth dry, leg a-pain me, and me ain't stop for nothing. Finally him come, and me tell him me want him to kill everybody that do me bad. And imagine this: blasted Eshu tell me no! Him tell me say revenge is one thing, but him nah go help me to kill, for nobody I vex with ain't kill nobody of mine. *But killing is that me want*, me say to him. *And if you don't give it to me, I go keep drumming you back here until you do it.* And me do it, seen? So him go 'way, so me drum him back. Three times. The buff wasn't keeping away the pain no more. Plenty times me nearly faint from it, but me bite me lip to keep me awake, and me keep on drumming. The third time him come back, him did vex, you see? Him say all right, if is death I want to deal in, he go tell me what it take for a man to deal in the dead. Stupid spirit. Him think say I woulda frighten at what I have to do, and I would back off with me tail between me legs. But I listen, and I learn. Him tell me must find a dead in the cemetery, somebody who just cross over. Him tell me must call the dead man duppy, and make him serve me. Him tell me how to keep the duppy by me, and what to feed it. He tell me if I do all that, neither him nor the rest of the ancestors go want nothing more to do with me. Well, me didn't business with that; what the ancestors ever do for me before?" Rudy chuckled, half to himself. "Is long time I had to wait till me leg heal good enough to follow he instructions. But you know what? I is a patient man." He fell silent for a minute, remembering the smell of carrion and grave dirt on the night he'd gone to the cemetery. "Sometimes I wonder is what Eshu think when he watch me doing everything he say, and he see the duppy rise. It heal me, Mas' Tony; heal me good good like you see me now. Then each day after that, one of my enemies dead. On the third day, was Dunston turn. Blasted man who steal my woman. When them find him, him had no skin left on him body, and his heart did rip out. Dogs, them say. Me know better. Then me tell the duppy me want more than that. Me want to run things in the posse. And so I ask, is so it go. Inside of a year, I was posse boss. Funny thing that, eh?"

Tony made no sound.

"What you think Eshu want now, eh, Tony? Why you think he warn me away from your woman?"

Ti-Jeanne, Mi-Jeanne, Gros-Jeanne; them fucking women been giving me trouble from since when!"

Rudy turned Tony's chair to face him. He reached out a big, powerful hand and closed the man's eyes with a deliberate tenderness. "See now? Don't that feel better?" Tony made a mewling sound. Rudy looked down at Tony's body and chuckled. Funny how many of them this happened to. "But see how you pay me back for my kindness," he told Tony. "You gone and piss up my good good chair. Is a good thing the seat make out of leather. Melba, get a damp cloth and clean up this chair."

Easily as he would a doll, Rudy lifted Tony out of the chair and lowered him to the floor. He removed Tony's shoes and socks, undid his belt buckle, and began taking off the sodden pants. Tony's moaning started up again, like a weak sobbing.

"But what a way this man could fret, ee?" Rudy inquired gently. "Don't you want to have fresh, clean clothes? I go get Melba to bring some for you."

Once the pants were off, Rudy sat back on his heels and looked at the helpless, half-naked man. Maybe he should have robbed Tony of his volition when he'd had the time to, the way he had done with Melba. Then the man would have done anything he told him to. But the mindless slaves could only follow simple instructions. He needed Tony to be aware so that he could use his medical training to transfer the live

heart into its container.

The paralysis must have begun to wear off a little. Tony had managed to open his eyes and was blinking slowly through his tears. His eyes seemed to beg. It was Rudy's power alone to answer that plea. Or not. Rudy felt the familiar tightening in his crotch that that sense of power always brought him.

"Well, boy, look at you. The time come to pay the piper. You been bringing me one set of trouble. You had a match for the heart all along, but you been wasting time? Boy, what wrong with you? Me a-go show you what me do with people who make me vex, then me a-go give you a choice: either you bring me the blasted heart by tomorrow, or you turn duppy food."

••••

*Barkodey, me buddy,*

*Barkodey*

*Them send me to shave you,*

*Barkodey*

*With me ten pound razor,*

*Barkodey*

*And if you laugh me go cut you.*

*Barkodey*

—Call-and-response chant

Sensation was returning to Tony's feet in the form of an almost unbearable prickling. He'd been able to move his upper body for a few minutes now, to turn his head away from the ritual that Rudy was performing in front of him, but with his arms shackled to the chair he was sitting in, he hadn't been able to shield his ears from the sounds of a knife ripping through skin or his nose from the smells of blood and human waste. Melba had been allowed to scream only once. After that, Rudy had told her to keep silent, and impossibly, she had. The drug that he had been feeding her had that much power to place her will under his control, though her muscles trembled and twitched with reaction from the pain he was inflicting on her. Most horribly, since Rudy had ordered her to lie perfectly still on the dining table, she had made no attempt to escape over the last minutes as Rudy methodically flayed her alive.

Tony whimpered as he stared transfixed at the living anatomy lesson that Melba had become. Insanely, he remembered a lecturer at college informing them, "The average human has about twenty square feet of skin weighing about six pounds." Tony's medically trained mind persisted in identifying the structures that Rudy had exposed with his knife: anterior tibialis of the lower leg; the long bulge of the rectus femoris muscle of the thigh; external obliques covering the stomach region; flap of the platysma myoides muscle layered over chin and clavicle; sterno-cleido mastoid just visible behind the ear. The fat pads and gland tissue that had been her breasts had come off with the skin covering her torso. Lips, eyelids, and hair had come away, too. Her exposed eyeballs goggled, and lipless, her exposed teeth and gums gave her a ghastly grin. The drug that incapacitated her must also do something to delay shock. Deprived of their skin, the largest organ of the human body, any other human being would have died by now. Tony clenched his eyes shut and prayed that the ordeals both he and Melba were suffering would soon come to an end.

Rudy said, "Look at me, my brother." Tony didn't dare disobey. He opened his eyes, feeling the tears start unbidden as he looked at Melba's body again. Arms gory to the elbow, Rudy smiled happily at Tony from the other side of the table. "This is what I go do to your Ti-Jeanne if you nah get that heart for me."

"No!" Tony had control of his vocal cords again.

"No? All right, Master Tony, tell you what. Me just decide a next thing, yes? You know say me can't make word get out that a man try to cheat me and I make he get off scot free, right? I wouldn't be able to keep no discipline if I carry on like that."

Tony stared at him, chest heaving.

"So. You have to get punish. You go kill your Ti-Jeanne for me, boy. Is the price for your own life. Kill she clean, or I go do it like this."

Tears started down Tony's cheeks again.

“Like you nah like the sound of that, neither. Look like I go have to set my watchdog ’pon you to make sure you nah try to cheat me again. Me soon come back, Tony.” He disappeared through a door that led to the back of his office, returned wheeling a small, black-painted metal gurney, just wide enough for the bowl that was balanced on its top. The bowl appeared to be unvarnished wood, about the size of a watermelon. It had designs incised on its surface. Its bottom was round. It was sitting inside a ring of cloth that held it steady. “Look my watchdog here,” Rudy told him cheerfully. “My duppy. It need lifeblood for it to have the vitality to do what I go ask it, and you go get to watch me feed it.”

He wheeled the gurney to the head of the dinner table, positioned it beside Melba’s left ear. “Melba, sweetness,” he cooed, “your punishment nearly finish now, darling. You is a strong woman, Melba. Almost two years you last. See what does happen when people defy me? But when you dead, darling, you go be free. Soon now. Just stretch out your left side neck for me there.”

Wet, red muscles glistening with fluids, Melba presented her neck to the knife. Tony thought he was going to be sick. Rudy tilted her chin toward the bowl. Melba’s eyes were now staring straight at Tony. He couldn’t read the expression on the weaving of muscles that were her face.

With a quick slash, Rudy slit the woman’s jugular vein. Bright blood gouted into the bowl. An appalling sound came from it, like someone guzzling great amounts of liquid as fast as they could. Melba’s body relaxed into death.

“Yes, me duppy, yes,” Rudy crooned at the bowl. “Drink it all. Then me have a special job for you. Me want you to follow this man here, this Tony. Make sure him reap a heart out of a living body for me. Then make sure him kill the one named Ti-Jeanne.”

Rudy looked up at him briefly. The man’s eyes were inert lumps of coal, empty of emotion. He looked back down into the duppy bowl. “And if he ain’t do it, duppy? Well, first you feed on Ti-Jeanne, then you feed on him.”

The slurping noises from the bowl stopped. In its ring of cloth it rocked around and around, fast, then was still. A red mist seeped out of it and hovered in the air. Shapes coalesced from the mist, then melted back again: grasping, clutching hands; a rictus of a mouth, lips pulled back into a snarl; deranged eyes that appraised Tony like so much meat on a hook. Petrified, Tony was the monkey transfixed in the tiger’s frozen stare. Nothing in his world had prepared him for this creature from another reality. He was looking at a thing that must have died and never stopped dying, a thing that Rudy would not allow its natural rest, that he kept barely appeased with the blood of the living. Tony’s heart hammered in his chest. He could not endure another moment of that gaze.

The thing looked away, focused on Rudy with such malevolence that Tony didn’t understand how Rudy was still standing. Rudy sighed. For the first time that evening, he looked tired, older than he seemed. But he gave no sign of fear or fatigue, just stared calmly at the red, hovering mist. Then, butcher knife still in his hands, he strode casually over to where Tony was tied. Tony scabbled his heels desperately against the floor, trying to shove the chair he was shackled in out of Rudy’s reach. The chair almost went over backward. Rudy reached out his free hand to right it. “Steady, brother, steady.” He knelt in front of Tony. “Good thing this material so dark, eh? The stain won’t show.” And he wiped both sides of the bloody knife clean on one leg of the pants he had given Tony to wear. “So tell me now, nuh? You go do this little job for me, or you go join Melba?”

Tony felt his throat closing. He couldn’t, he couldn’t. He made an inarticulate noise.

“What, Tony? You have to speak up loud so me and the duppy could hear you.”

“I, I’ll do it.”

“Good. I feel say we finally understand each other, me brother.” He freed Tony from the chair.

Tony stood carefully, on wobbly legs. His eyes kept being drawn to the body on the table. Two days ago he’d been a whole man. Now he felt as though his protective skin had been removed along with Melba’s. He would never feel so sure of himself again.

“Barry go give you back the hospital equipment,” Rudy said.

“Yes.” A sun in torment, the duppy whirled before his gaze.

“Go ’long, boy. Just know it go be following you.”

Tony nearly ran from the room.



Rudy wiped a gory hand on the leg of his pants. He'd need a new suit. He said to the duppy, "Never mind what I tell you before. Once he give the heart to the hospital, I want you to kill all of them: Ti-Jeanne, Tony, everybody."

It didn't make a noise, exactly. More something like the remembered sound of a wail of agony. Then it sharpened into an arc and poured itself at speed right through the wall to the street outside.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Give the Devil a child for dinner!*

*One!*

—Derek Walcott, *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*

The soup bubbled fragrantly on the stove. Mami knew that Ti-Jeanne hadn't eaten since the night before. She would make some bitter melon, fried up and served on the side; that would strengthen her blood. Ti-Jeanne loved bitter melon. Mami pulled a few leaves of sage and rosemary from the bunches drying at the kitchen window and added them to the soup. She missed the tropical herbs she could no longer get in Toronto, both for healing and for cooking, but no help for that. Romni Jenny and Frank Greyeyes were teaching her about northern herbs. In time, she'd have a more complete arsenal.

She looked sidelong at Ti-Jeanne. She was sitting at the kitchen table, clutching Baby resentfully, like a boulderstone that someone had given her to hold, and drumming with her free fingers on the table.

Ti-Jeanne was pretending obedience, pretending she was dutifully learning all that Mami had to pass on to her, but Mami knew that look. It masked resentment. Mami kissed her teeth in frustration, too late realising that Ti-Jeanne would just hear more scolding implied in the noise. Why was the girl child so sensitive?

"Stupidness," Mami muttered. Ti-Jeanne scowled at her. Mami didn't know what to say. Silently she pursed her lips and busied herself making Ti-Jeanne's favourite cornmeal dumplings, cooking in the love she couldn't express.

Silence sat thickly between them.

There was a loud knocking at the door. It was beginning, the thing Mami had been dreading. She didn't know what was going to happen, but it would change her and her grandchild's lives forever.

"Go and see who that is, Ti-Jeanne. Here, give me the baby."

Mami dusted the cornmeal from her hands so she could take Baby. She rocked him a little in her arms as Ti-Jeanne went to get the door. Things were moving fast now, too fast for her to control them. She feared for Ti-Jeanne. She hadn't given her granddaughter all the knowledge she would need to be able to do as the spirits had commanded them.

Ti-Jeanne was back, looking nervous and frightened. "Mami? Is Crazy Betty out there. I think she asking for you. She just standing out there, saying, 'Mami, Mami, Mami,' over and over."

All these years Ti-Jeanne had been telling her about Crazy Betty, Mami Gros-Jeanne had never encountered the street woman. She began to have a horrible suspicion. Oh, spirits. It couldn't be, say it couldn't be. Wordlessly Mami took her granddaughter's hand. They both went to the front door.

Gros-Jeanne opened it and looked full into the face of the shrunken woman standing there, muttering softly to herself.

It was Mi-Jeanne. Oh God, it was her daughter. Gros-Jeanne cried Mi-Jeanne's name, started forward, but the baby in her arms prevented her from hugging Mi-Jeanne. "Here, Ti-Jeanne, take he. Don't you see is your mother?"

"My . . . ?" Gaping at Crazy Betty, Ti-Jeanne took Baby.

Mami Gros-Jeanne felt her tears spring hot as she gathered her daughter into her arms after so many years. "Mi-Jeanne, you come home at last?"

Mi-Jeanne started at her touch, then stood still. She was whispering to herself: "It have hearth in this home? Or it heartless? Worthless. Worthless girl child. No sense nor manners! Stupidness!"

Gros-Jeanne held her tightly as she dared. She didn't want to let go. She could feel Mi-Jeanne's bones through the thin rags she wore, smell the sour sweat of her. Mi-Jeanne pulled her arms out of her mother's embrace, batted awkwardly at her own face, as though trying to banish voices whispering in her ears.

Mami took Mi-Jeanne's hands in her own. "No, doux-doux, no. Don't hurt yourself. You ain't worthless." Then she said the words she'd welled up inside herself all these years. "I do wrong to ever tell you so. You hear me? I do wrong."

Ti-Jeanne asked quietly, "Mami? Is she in truth? Is Mummy?"

"Yes, doux-doux." Gros-Jeanne led Mi-Jeanne into the parlour, sat her in a chair at the warm fireplace. Mi-Jeanne kept muttering, batting at her ear with her free hand.

"But, Mami," Ti-Jeanne continued, "why she never come home before? All this time? Why she been living in the street like that? And what happen to she eyes?"

Whathad happened to her out there? Mi-Jeanne looked older than her years, about the same age as Gros-Jeanne herself, but nowhere near as healthy. Her body was stooped and frail, her hair dull, matted into clumps. The sockets where her eyes had been were sunken holes. Her pretty Mi-Jeanne, a mad, blind street woman, living off filth.

"She wanted to go and live with she daddy," Gros-Jeanne admitted. "He was living in some little break-down room in town, stoned out of he mind all the time. She tell me he wouldn't have leave if I had been taking care of he."

"Take care of he," muttered Mi-Jeanne. "Watch out for he."

"I did have a new man by then. Dunston. She ain't like he. She tell me I horning she father. She call me all kinda names. She own mother, imagine! I tell she to go then, if she love she worthless daddy so bad. Go, but don't come back."

"Go," said Mi-Jeanne distractedly. "Go, and don't come back."

Someone else was pounding at the door. Ti-Jeanne just stood there, looking stunned.

"You best had go see who it is, doux-doux," Gros-Jeanne told her.

At this, Mi-Jeanne blindly grabbed at her mother's arm, held on tight. "No! Sly mongoose! He stealing the chicken, you don't see? He name full of shame!"

Gently Gros-Jeanne took Mi-Jeanne's face in her hands. "Is all right, my darling. Is probably just someone who need some medicine." She mouthed the words "Get the door" at Ti-Jeanne and took the baby from her.

Mami Gros-Jeanne sat down beside her daughter. "Mi-Jeanne, you know you have a grandchild? A boy, Mi-Jeanne!" She took Mi-Jeanne's hand and led it to Baby's face, holding on tightly in case her mad daughter tried to hurt the child. Instead Mi-Jeanne's face went soft and gentle as she felt the baby's face. That was almost a smile on her lips. Baby blinked at her touch but didn't seem to object.

"Dort, dort, petit popo," Mi-Jeanne sang in a cracking voice, running a hand over his fat cheek. *Sleep, little baby, or the tiger go come and eat you up.*

Ti-Jeanne came back into the kitchen, Tony behind her, looming above her with his greater height.

Ti-Jeanne's face was trembling between smiles and tears. "Look, Tony come back," she said. "He come back for me!" Trustingly she reached her hand behind her, groping for Tony's.

Tony looked scared to death. He took Ti-Jeanne's hand just long enough for her to pull him into the room. Mami noticed that he let go almost immediately. "Crazy Betty?" he said. "How'd she get here?"

"She is my mother, Tony. She just tell me. She is Mi-Jeanne."

"What? What nonsense you talking?"

"Never mind that," Mami Gros-Jeanne snapped at him. This masquerade was making her vex now. "Is what you come back for? I thought you reach Scarborough by now."

"I, ah, Rudy said I could stay. They got the donor they need. Some woman head-shot in a fight last night."

Ti-Jeanne's face could have lit the sky like the sun. "But Tony, that good! Everything all right now, ain't?" He looked at her, glanced at Mami, then lowered his eyes to the ground. "Yeah, everything's great."

Mami could see his hands shaking. Lying brute. He was up to something.

She asked, "What happen to the three men what Rudy send for you?"

Tony flicked guilty eyes at her, then at Ti-Jeanne. "Ti-Jeanne, you told her about that?"

"Of course I tell she, how you mean?"

"Well," he said with a nervous laugh, "I don't know what you did to them, but Rudy had to have an

Angel of Mercy ambulance pick them up. They don't know if Crapaud's going to live."

"He go live," Ti-Jeanne replied. "Is booze go kill that one."

"What? How d'you know that?" The fear on Tony's face was obvious.

"Is one of the things I see, Tony. I does see things sometimes." Tony seemed to accept the explanation, distractedly. Gros-Jeanne could hear the fatigue in Ti-Jeanne's voice. So much her granddaughter had had to face in these past few hours.

Suddenly Mi-Jeanne flew at Tony, mad hands scrabbling like claws for his face. "Sly mongoose! Slyng, lying mongoose!"

"Hey!" He grabbed the crazy woman's wrists, immobilized them effortlessly. "Ti-Jeanne, call she off, nuh?"

Mami just watched, noticing how easily her daughter had found her way over to Tony. Blind she might be, but obviously she hadn't lost all of her Sight.

Hesitantly Ti-Jeanne touched her mother's shoulder. "Mummy? You go come with me and sit down?"

Something in Ti-Jeanne's voice seemed to reach Mi-Jeanne. Her scrabbling hands relaxed. She turned to the sound of Ti-Jeanne's voice. "Ti-Jeanne? My baby?"

"Yes, Mummy."

"Brown skin gal stay home and mind baby?"

"Yes, Mummy. Come and sit with me and I go let you hold the baby."

Ti-Jeanne led Mi-Jeanne back to the chair where she'd been sitting. She took the chair next to her mother, signalled for Mami to give Baby back to her. She murmured to her mother, let her pat Baby's small body for a while. Crazy Mi-Jeanne's twitching became less as she felt the baby under her hands. "Dort, dort, petit popo," she sang again in her fading voice. Mami noticed that Ti-Jeanne was biting her lips. She always did that when she was nervous. Ti-Jeanne put Baby into her mother's arms but didn't let him go. Mi-Jeanne's cracked, trembling hands moved automatically to support Baby's head and his back. She had been, after all, a mother. Mami watched the two women cradling the baby and managed a small smile. Her granddaughter was learning, learning how to reach out a healing hand to others, despite her own cares. She would make a good seer woman.

"You think it's a good idea to let her get so close to the baby?" Tony's voice reminded Mami that this drama hadn't played out all the way yet. Rudy never let people off so easily. Probably he'd sent Tony back here to spy on them. Mami stared at him in disgust. He couldn't hold her eyes. "Why're looking at me like that?" he asked.

"I think I looking at a tool, not a man," she replied. "And I think I know is who hand on the handle."

"I don't know what you're talking about." His hand moved nervously to the pocket of his jacket, patted at it.

Then Mami felt something change in the air around them. She thought she could just barely detect the difference, a misty redness that seemed to centre around Mi-Jeanne. Used to seeing into the spirit world, Mami briefly glimpsed something that might have been eyes burning with longing and loss, clutching hands. The mistiness faded, seeming to melt into Mi-Jeanne's flesh. Was it real, Mami wondered, or had she imagined it?

Mi-Jeanne released Baby back into Ti-Jeanne's arms. She clasped her hands to her head, groaned as though she were in pain. Ti-Jeanne touched her shoulder. "Mummy? You all right?"

Mi-Jeanne collapsed from the chair onto the floor. Ti-Jeanne jumped to her feet with a little scream. "Oh God, Mami, what wrong with she? Mummy!"

What now, Osain? Quickly Mami moved to kneel at her daughter's side. Mi-Jeanne's pulse was fast, faint, and irregular. Her breathing was shallow. *What it is I see?* Mami wondered. "Tony, quick. Carry she into the examining room for me."

"No!" Ti-Jeanne said. "Put she in my bed."

"Doux-doux, she might have something catching. . . ." Silently Mami cursed herself for not having thought of it sooner.

"She's my mother. Put she in my bed, I say."

Too late to worry about spreading disease now. Mami nodded at Tony. He bent and picked up the sick

woman. Mami and Ti-Jeanne followed him up the stairs to the little bedroom. *Osain, pray you*, Mami thought to herself, *don't make she have passed anything on to the baby.*

Tony laid Mi-Jeanne down on the bed. She lay like the dead, barely breathing.

"Tony," said Mami, "go back downstairs and bring me some smelling salts. They in a bottle in the big cupboard in the examining room." Maybe that would revive her.

Ti-Jeanne put Baby in his cot, then came and knelt at her mother's side. She put a hand to Mi-Jeanne's neck. "She ain't have no fever, Mami. So what wrong with she?"

"I ain't know, child." Mi-Jeanne's skin looked bluish. Her hands were cold. She was muttering something under her breath. What was keeping Tony? "I soon come, Ti-Jeanne." As Mami went down the stairs, she heard Baby start wailing, wailing. Poor little soul. She hoped he wasn't becoming colicky again.

She found Tony in the examining room, pacing back and forth, patting and patting at his jacket pocket. He still looked frightened. Mami pursed her lips in irritation. Why had he gone into the healing profession? He obviously didn't have the stomach for it. From the open door Mami said, "Like you can't find the smelling salts?"

Tony started at the sound of her voice. "Um, no, Mistress Hunter. I don't see the bottle." His eyes were big in his head, like a spooked sheep.

"Boy, is what do you? Like duppy riding you, or what? The smelling salts in the cupboard just by you left hand there."

Tony leaned into the cupboard, rummaged around. Irritated, Gros-Jeanne kissed her teeth. She knew the bottle was right in front. "Here, let me get it." She bustled into the room. Tony stood back to let her into the cupboard. There was the bottle, just where she'd told him. "Stupidness," she sneered. She reached for the bottle. She never saw Tony pull the hammer out of his pocket and slam it into the top of her head.

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*Give the Devil a child for dinner!*

*One, two little children!*

—Derek Walcott, *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*

Baby screamed, then started sobbing as though his heart were broken. Ti-Jeanne rushed to pick him up, but all her rocking and shushing didn't help. His clenched fists punched at the air. The sorrow on his pudgy face made him look older than his years.

The noise had no effect on Crazy Betty. With Baby cradled in one arm, Ti-Jeanne sat on the edge of her bed and stroked Crazy Betty's forehead. The woman moaned a little. Was this really her mother?

Ti-Jeanne stared at the ruined face, trying to see some resemblance to the beautiful, vibrant woman who had left her twelve years before. Funny how eyes defined a face. With them gone, the rest of her features seemed to have lost their definition, too. The nose looked a little like she remembered her mother's.

Maybe. The mouth, too, but it was hard to tell. Some of Crazy Betty's . . . Mi-Jeanne's teeth were missing, and her lips caved in around the spaces, shrinking her face.

Mi-Jeanne's hands jerked, then her feet. Alarmed, Ti-Jeanne stood up, ready to go to the top of the stairs and yell for her grandmother. An ambulance howled by, very close. Then the noise stopped.

Seconds later there was a pounding at the door. Had someone called an ambulance for Mi-Jeanne? But who would pay for it? Couldn't Mami help her? Ti-Jeanne put a still-weeping Baby back in the crib and ran downstairs, but Tony had already answered the door. He was pointing the visitors toward Mami's examination room. He looked ill. Six men brushed by him and went into the room. They were Vultures.

All were wearing hooded, floor-length bulletproofs in Angel of Mercy black. Two of the men had Glocks. One more was carrying a telescoping stretcher.

"Why you going in there?" Ti-Jeanne asked them. "She upstairs."

The Vultures hesitated, looked to Tony for confirmation.

Mutely he shook his head. The glance he gave Ti-Jeanne held all the sadness of the world. She could almost weep just looking at his face. He went outside.

"Leave the door open, sir," one of the Vultures called. The small speaker grid in the beak of his bulletproof magnified and distorted his voice.

Ti-Jeanne didn't understand. She followed the men into the room. For a second, her mind rejected what her eyes saw. The body on the floor was recognizable only by its small frame in its patched black housedress. Mami's necklace of beads had broken. The brown and red beads were scattered over the floor and her body. Tony's funny square knapsack lay beside her, open. A machine of some sort hummed inside it, fat red tubes extended like claws into Mami's neck, arms, chest, thigh.

Her head was the wrong shape. Someone had smashed the back of her head in. In the room above her head, Baby's screaming reached a crescendo.

Two of the Vultures knelt at Mami's side, began checking the machine's connections.

"Looks good," one of them said, checking the readout in his hand from the wand he was running over Mami's chest. "BP falling a bit. Kurt, step up the dopamine some, will you? And Jamie buzz the hospital. Tell 'em to meet us at the airlift out front. We'll fly the heart straight to Ottawa General."

Dimly Ti-Jeanne's mind registered two shocks of pain as her knees hit the floor. She choked on the word "Mami," then she screamed it. "Mami! Oh God, Mami!" She crawled over to her grandmother's body, reaching to touch. Hands pulled her away, dragged her to her feet. She resisted. "Let me go! Mami!"

"Please stay out of our way, miss. That woman is a biomaterial donor." Ti-Jeanne kicked back with her heel, connected with someone's kneecap. She ignored their howl of pain. She was free. She fell at Mami Gros-Jeanne's side again. Sobbing, she touched her grandmother's face, still warm.

The pulse at Mami's neck was still beating. Incredulous with joy, Ti-Jeanne looked at the Vultures down on the ground with her. "She ain't dead! She heart still beating! Quick, make we take she to the hospital; maybe we could save she!"

One of the Vultures raised the beak off its face. It was a woman. "I'm sorry, miss. She's dead all right. That's not a pulse. It's just the CP bypass machine keeping the blood circulating. I'm very sorry."

"Dead? Mami really dead?" Ti-Jeanne felt as though her own heart were being turned inside out. The words came out without thought: "How she get like this?"

Another of the Vultures with the weapons raised her to her feet again, gently this time. "We don't know, miss. Maybe she fell or something."

"No!" Ti-Jeanne looked at one, then the other, searching for the faces behind the Shattertite beaks.

"Allyou ain't understand. She did fine when I leave she. Somebody must be . . . Oh God, where Tony?"

Ti-Jeanne rushed out, flung herself through the open front door. There was no sign of Tony. "Is he do it?"

The words fell from her lips. "Jesus Jesus Lord, is Tony kill she?" She ran back into the examination room. The Vultures had activated the stretcher. It was telescoping to its full size, Mami's body on it.

"Miss, we're going now." The words came faster, like a litany: "Angel of Mercy Hospital offers its condolences for your loss and thanks you and your family for making this life-giving donation of your loved one's biomaterial. Your address has been entered into the hospital's data banks and you will be compensated for your donation. Good day."

Ti-Jeanne grabbed for the side of the stretcher, took her grandmother's hand. She willed the fingers to close around hers, but there was no response.

"Miss, I'll have to ask you to step aside." They were pushing the stretcher quickly, almost running.

Ti-Jeanne ignored the words. She kept pace with them, holding Mami's hand all the way to the ambulance. They had to pull her away, prevent her forcibly from entering the ambulance with Mami's body. They all climbed in the rear. The doors slammed shut, hollowly. The ambulance started off down the gravel pathway that led to the road.

"Mami!" Ti-Jeanne wailed. "Oh God, Mami; I sorry!" She ran after the ambulance, screaming, begging, crying. The ambulance sped away, kicking pebbles into Ti-Jeanne's face. She barely felt them. She stood in the road, howling, wailing, until her breath was gone and her desolate eyes were swollen nearly shut.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

*duppies of dust and ululations in light  
vortexed around her.*

*Ritualist, she tried to reduce the world,  
sketching her violent diagrams*

*against a wall of mountains which her stare made totter.*

*Her rhythmic ideas detonated into gestures.  
She would jab her knee into the groin of the air,  
fling her sharp instep at the fluttering sky,  
revise perspectives with the hooks of her fingers,  
and butt blood from the teeth of God.  
She cooked and ate anything. But, being so often busy,  
she hardly ever cooked or ate.*

—Slade Hopkinson, “The Madwoman of Papine”

In the calabash duppy, regret, hunger, remorse, and anger had merged into one howling need. When it killed, or each time it was fed blood, the essences of terror, pain, blood, and death appeased the hunger for a little while. But whenever it brought sweet death to another, it knew that it did murder, that it would once have abhorred its own actions. And it knew that it was denied the rest it had given its victim. Then, fuelled by guilt, the hunger and fury would rage again, stronger. Always stronger. It hated the man who kept it bound, neither alive nor dead. Rudolph Sheldon. One day its chance would come, and then, Rudolph Sheldon, then. But for now, it was compelled to do Rudy’s bidding. This time its captor had set it to a task more complex than the rending of flesh from bone. Watch Tony. Make sure he killed. And the thing Tony didn’t know: once that was done, kill him, too. There was something else about the task, something that gave it joy. Yes. For the first time since it had been bound, Rudolph Sheldon was letting it go home. The spell it was under compelled it to follow Rudy’s orders, but he had made a mistake now. He had given it a chance for freedom.

How to warn them? How to tell them what they must do to free it? It had hovered in the air above the city like a fine mist of blood, considering. A gull had flown heedlessly into the mist. A squawk, a gulping sound, then a clump of skin and feathers had dropped to the ground below, followed by a clatter of small bones, picked clean.

The duppy had realised that it needed to find the woman, the bodily part of itself that wandered the city while its mind was trapped in the calabash. Crazy Betty would give it the voice with which to speak.

Where . . . ?

Ah, there she was, toasting filth on a brick to eat. But it hadn’t been able to take the time to go into her yet, had had to obey Rudolph Sheldon’s orders, had to follow Tony.

Screaming silently with frustration, the duppy had seized the crazy woman’s awareness, turned her toward the little facade house on the farm, had driven her on gibbering ahead of it like that monkey that sees the tiger. No need for Crazy Betty to have sight. It could see.

Soon. Almost there. Soon. Tony had walked so slowly! The duppy had been tempted to reveal itself to him, herd him, too, but men had died with fright before at the sight of it on the hunt. So, patience. Hunger. Sorrow. Anger. Rudolph Sheldon.

It had felt the mad woman-body arrive at the farm, had felt her try to communicate the message of danger. Tony was danger. But Crazy Betty had no intellect to drive her tongue. She had only babbled half sentences that they hadn’t understood.

It could have wept with relief when Tony had finally reached the door of the Simpson House. It had swept into the parlour with him; had filled up Crazy Betty’s eye sockets; let itself be sucked up through her nostrils; slid into her ears; crawled past gappy teeth and then her tongue to glide down her throat; had sunk like mercury in through her pores; had layered itself directly into her bloodstream. Body and mind, they had fallen to the ground, stunned by being reunited. It had always been like that, the few times they had managed to be together.

Now, lying where her family had put her on her old bed, Mi-Jeanne fought her way up from coma synapse by synapse, regaining control of her body that was Crazy Betty.

And awoke. Oh God, to feel again! She lifted! an arm! to her face, feeling the remembered, intricate play of muscles, will, and joints that made such a miracle possible. She touched a bruise on her forehead.

New, that one. The brief pain it gave her was pleasure as strong as anything she knew. Her own touch sent a thrill of sensation through her fingertips. She giggled. Breathing. She was *breathing* again after so long, pulling the sweet substance of air through her nostrils into lungs that obligingly swelled to hold the

gift.

She remembered why she'd come. "Jesus! I ain't have the time for this. Anybody there?" No answer. Just a soft sobbing and a sucking noise. She remembered that sound: a hungry baby suckling its own fist. Her daughter's child.

Mi-Jeanne swung her legs over the side of the bed (tension in the lifting thighs, trembling stomach muscles clenched to counterbalance; her body was in bad shape). She stood shakily, groped until she found the baby in its crib. "Well, child," she said, patting his tummy, "it look like everybody gone and leave we." And that wasn't good. Where were they? Had Tony got to them already? The baby just whimpered.

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Tony sat in the cold mud on the bank of the duck pond and washed and washed his hands. The cold water made them throb and burn. He didn't really care. He'd dropped the hammer with its load of blood and hair into the pond. He couldn't see for weeping. One more. He had to kill one more, or the horror from the calabash would come after him.

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*Give the Devil a child for dinner,  
One, two, three little children!*

—Derek Walcott, *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*

More than the cold, it was her aching, milk-swollen breasts that finally brought Ti-Jeanne to herself as she knelt in the middle of the road. Baby was still back at the house. He would be hungry. He would need to be changed. Mi-Jeanne was sick. Mundane things, they seemed now. How could she think about those things when Mami was dead? Killed. By Tony. Betrayal and grief almost overwhelmed her again, but despite that, her feet took the path back to the house and up the stairs.

To her shock, Mi-Jeanne met her at the bedroom door, holding Baby in her arms. "Who's there?" the blind woman called out.

"Mi . . . Mummy?"

"Ti-Jeanne, is you? Where Tony?"

Mi-Jeanne was aware! Stunned, all Ti-Jeanne could think to ask was, "You feeling better now?"

"Never mind that. Where Tony?"

Ti-Jeanne registered her own keening as that of someone far away. "I don't know where he gone! But I think he kill, he kill Mami!"

"Jesus, I come too late. Look, girl, he go be looking to kill you, too. Is that Daddy . . . Rudy send he to do. You have to stop he."

"Tony? Tony want me dead? How you know?" she challenged the madwoman.

"I know everything Daddy doing." Grief and pain twisted Mi-Jeanne's too old face. "I is the duppy that Daddy does keep in he calabash. I could only inhabit my own body when Daddy let me out to do he dirty work for he. Is my soul he bind to get he power. Is my sight he twist into obeah, into shadow-catching for he."

It was too much. Ti-Jeanne felt herself move beyond hysteria into an odd, shaky calm that she knew wouldn't last. Nothing in her world was what she'd thought. "Motherscunt bastard," she muttered, unsure if she meant Tony or her grandfather. She pushed past Mi-Jeanne, strode into Mami's room, and started opening drawers and cupboards. "I know it have a gun in here somewhere." She heard Mi-Jeanne groping her way to the bedroom behind her. Mi-Jeanne barked her shins against the bed, felt to see what it was she had bumped into, then sat down on the thin, narrow mattress.

"Mami tell me is a dead that Rudy have in he duppy bowl," Ti-Jeanne said.

"Used to be a dead. Then he come to find out the obeah does work stronger if he ain't kill the body, just steal the spirit. What Tony do to Mami?"

Ti-Jeanne described what she'd seen. "How come you taking the news cool cool so? Is your mother?"

"Child, if you only know how much suffering and death I see these past few years, eh? And how much of it I cause. Mami gone . . ." Her voice trailed off to a whisper. "Maybe it better so."

"So, if killing come in like cool breeze to you, why you ain't help we?" Anger. That's what she should be feeling now, not this vague, distanced resentment. "Why you ain't do for Rudy?"

"I could only do what Daddy order me to do," her mother replied. "If he hadn't tell me to come here to watch and make sure Tony carry out he orders, I couldn't even self pass the door. And to talk to allyou, I had was to come back inside my body. When I do that, is like having a fit. It does take time for body and mind to come back together again. That's why I couldn't warn Mami in time. I do what I could, doux-doux. I not going to be able to fight Tony for you," Mi-Jeanne said. Her voice lowered in shame. "Truth is, I supposed to kill Tony, but only after he kill you."

"Oh, is so it go?" Ti-Jeanne replied. Her world had frayed into tattered threads. She felt almost detached as she listened to herself calmly discuss her own murder with her long-lost mother. "Let Tony come then, nuh?" Ti-Jeanne said to her. "Bastard. Say we going to move from here. Say we going to settle down. I go shoot he lying mouth right off he worthless face."

"If you did have to see what Tony watch Rudy do, you woulda be same way. After you see what Rudy capable of, you would do anything he tell you, so you don't end up on that table, feeling Rudy knife strip the skin from off your body."

Ti-Jeanne's body went cold. Was this what she was up against? Her knees wouldn't hold her. She sat down hard on the bed. Mi-Jeanne must have felt the mattress give. She groped along the bed until she found Ti-Jeanne's leg. She held it hard and continued: "Feeling he slit your throat, Ti-Jeanne. Feeling your lifeblood running into he duppy bowl for the monster inside to drink. *Forme* to drink, Ti-Jeanne. Is that Tony see last night. You have to free me. You have to find Daddy duppy bowl and break it."

Ti-Jeanne pulled away from her mother's grasp. She got up and continued searching through Mami's belongings. "Allyou ain't want plenty, oui?" Her tone was bitter. Good. It would hide her fright. "Mami want me to turn bush doctor; Tony want me to dead; you want me to save your wicked soul. What I go help you for? After you abandon me from small?"

She heard Baby's thin, hungry cry from the other bedroom. Her milk let down at the sound, dampening the front of her shirt. "God, not now, child. You ain't see I busy?"

Busy. Ti-Jeanne almost laughed at the inadequacy of the word.

"Turn around, Ti-Jeanne," said Tony from the doorway, in the voice of someone who had looked into hell and seen his own face. "Turn around so I can see your hands."

Holding up her empty palms, she turned to face Tony. His face was swollen with weeping, but he looked determined. He had a gun of his own pointed at her. He kept glancing back and forth between her and her mother. "I have to do this, Ti-Jeanne. After what you did to Crack and Jay and Crapaud, Rudy wants you out of the way."

"It wasn't me. Is Legbara do it. You saw."

"Don't give me that! You and Gros-Jeanne been playing me from the start!"

"For what, Tony?" Mi-Jeanne asked sadly. "You ain't see how the two of them been trying to stay out of posse business? You is Ti-Jeanne baby father, but she leave you when she realise that posse more important to you than she. Man, even your own baby does cry when it see you coming."

That startled Ti-Jeanne. She hadn't thought of it that way. Mi-Jeanne was right. Every time she had started to get close to Tony again, Baby had demanded her attention.

"Too late for everything now," Mi-Jeanne said sadly. "Ti-Jeanne, I sorry. The only way to prevent me from doing what Rudy tell me is to break the duppy calabash and free my spirit. And you not go get to do that now." She stood up, looking in the direction of Tony's voice. "Tony, none of we ain't want nothing to do with you. So do your business, or don't do it. Is all the same to me. Daddy say I must kill you either way. Stop me if you could stop me, nuh?"

She took a step toward him. He swung the gun in her direction. "Stay there," he ordered her. She ignored him. She kept walking.

"Tony, don't shoot," Ti-Jeanne said. He risked a glance at her, swung the gun back at her. Mi-Jeanne reached him. She touched his arm. He turned and shot her full in the chest.

"No!" Ti-Jeanne's calm vanished. "Mummy!"

Mi-Jeanne fell like a sack of bones. A red mist rose from her crumpled body. Ravening jaws, mad eyes, and clawing hands swirled in it. It slammed Tony to the floor. He screamed. The gun discharged into the ceiling.



The thing sat on Tony's chest, gibbering. Almost lovingly it licked his cheek. A strip of skin came away at its touch, disappeared into the swirling mass. The thing made a harrowing moan of pleasure. Terrified, Tony batted and clawed at it, but his hands just wafted through it and came away bloody.

"La Diabliesse. Soucouyant," Ti-Jeanne muttered. This was her nightmare. Her own mother. And it was up to her to stop Mi-Jeanne. She threw herself to the ground, level with the duppy, and shouted, "Mummy! Stop this! Stop now!"

For answer, the duppy dove at her face. Ti-Jeanne pulled back just in time. The hot wind of its attack swept by, millimetres from her cheek. Three of her plaits fell to the ground, sheared off clean. Her mother's duppy had no choice. It was bound to do what Rudy told it to do. "Mummy, wait," Ti-Jeanne begged hopelessly.

To her surprise, the duppy held off for a moment. It was like watching a hurricane rage in a small space. Ti-Jeanne had the impression of a frenzied howling, although she heard nothing. But the duppy's claws were already scrabbling at Tony's whimpering throat. Its daughter's plea held it for now, but in a second it would have to do its master's bidding. *It had to do what Rudy said.* Ti-Jeanne thought fast, opened her mouth before she quite knew what she was going to say.

"Rudy tell you to kill we, yes?"

The maddened red eyes seemed to agree with her.

"But he ain't tell you *when*, Mummy, and he ain't tell you *where*? Ain't?"

Had the duppy's crazed swirling slowed down a little? Desperately Ti-Jeanne started talking again, hoping that some kind of plan would emerge from her babbling. "That's right, that's right. You could take we anywhere, kill we there, you still go be doing what Rudy tell you. Right, Mummy?"

The duppy's claws pulled back from Tony's neck. It seemed to be waiting for Ti-Jeanne to say more. What could she say that would draw out their lives a little more, give them a chance?

"You want, you want me to . . . free you, ain't it? Find Rudy dead bowl and break it, so you don't have to kill no more? Well, take we there before you kill we. Take we to Rudy place."

Tony grabbed her wrist. His eyes were wide. "Woman, like you mad, or what?"

She felt his grip warm on her skin and looked into the eyes of this man she had loved beyond sense or reason. She thought of her grandmother's body lying there with its head broken in, looked at Mi-Jeanne's cooling body lying beside them on the ground.

"Yes, I mad," she answered him, firmly pulling her wrist from his grasp. She stood up. The duppy lifted itself off Tony's chest and coalesced into a red fireball. It hovered above them, waiting. "I mad like France," Ti-Jeanne said. "Mad like that old woman jumbie thing who used to be my mother. I mad at all of allyou for making me run around trying to save allyou, but allyou just digging yourselves in deeper, each one in he own pit."

"But Ti-Jeanne," Tony protested, getting to his feet, "you can't go to Rudy's. He'll just kill you. What's that going to help?"

"I tell you, I going. But me ain't business with what you want to do, oui? You could try to run away again, I guess. But I bet you the duppy go find you."

Tony's eyes slid to the fireball that was now tracing an impatient, sizzling orbit in the air.

"Mummy," Ti-Jeanne addressed it, "let me just go get the baby. He hungry. I could feed he while we walk."

The fireball moved out of the way. Refusing to look at the body of her mother lying on the floor, Ti-Jeanne went into her own room to get Baby; Tony and the fireball followed her as if attached to her apron strings. She stared down at her child in his crib. Leave him here alone, perhaps to starve to death, or take him with them? Baby looked at her, reached for her. Another life tied to her apron strings. She picked him up, put him into his Snugli, and slung it onto her body. "Let we go then, nuh?"

The strange procession filed down the stairs and out into the night.

Mi-Jeanne's body was dead. If Ti-Jeanne did manage to free her mother's soul from the calabash, where would it go now?

## CHAPTER NINE

The operation was routine. It was their patient who was unusual. Margaret Wright was well aware that

she was known for being an unflappable surgeon. During the next few hours, that reputation would be at stake. The media were following Premier Uttley's heart transplant like hawks. They were expecting Dr. Wright to give a news conference as soon as she was out of the operating room. And they'd be talking to everyone who'd been in the OR, too. Every move Dr. Wright made would be on a newscast within hours. If she had snapped at a nurse, if she had made a crooked suture, all of Canada would know. Nothing could go wrong. She wouldn't allow it. She had to make sure that her patient was smiling for the camera within days.

Everything was going fine so far. Uttley had already received a portion of her donor's bone marrow. Uttley's leucocytes had not attacked the donor marrow; that was a good sign. When Wright transplanted the heart, white blood cells from Uttley's bone marrow should migrate smoothly into the foreign organ, and vice versa, a chimerism that would trick her immune system into accepting the foreign organ so that body and heart could coexist peacefully.

Now it was time for the transplant.

Prepped for the surgery, Dr. Wright watched Dr. Fang do his part on the unconscious form of Premier Uttley. The surgical resident had never seen this operation done with a human heart. Wright knew that he wanted to be as involved as possible.

The ventilator was already breathing for Uttley. Her entire body was covered in sterile white sheets, leaving exposed only her chest area: the surgical field. As always, the area of flesh that Wright could see didn't look human. Best that way. Now was not the time for the people in the OR to focus on who their patient was. They needed to concentrate on what they were doing. Don Fang and Jim Nesbit, Wright's associate surgeon, had already cut through the sternum and pried open the ribs with chest spreaders.

They freed Uttley's heart from its pericardial sac. Nesbit leaned closer to inspect the heart.

"Hang on, Jim," Wright said to him. "Let me get a look, too." Jim made room for her. Yes. A clear case of cardiomyopathy. The flabby, distended sack that Uttley's heart had become was about twice the size it should have been. It beat sluggishly.

Jim made a "tsk, tsk" noise. "Whoa. Not a moment too soon, eh?"

"Yup. Let's get that baby out of there."

Wright stepped back out of the way. Jim sutured the ascending aorta and the right atrium, cannulated, injected the heparin to prevent blood clotting. Then he connected Uttley to the heart-lung bypass machine. He made the last few cuts and lifted Uttley's heart out of her chest cavity. The perfusionist and the anaesthesiologist checked their readouts. Doing fine.

"Okay, Margaret."

Dr. Wright stepped up to her place at the operating table. She took a deep breath, looked at the faces around her. "Here we go, guys." She lifted the donor heart from its basin of sterile fluid. Through her gloves, it felt firm and chilled from having been kept cold.

"So that's what a healthy human ticker looks like," muttered Dr. Fang. "Not so different from pig hearts."

"That's all we are," Jim chuckled. "Long pig."

Fang asked, "How old did they say the donor was?"

"Fifty-seven," Wright replied. "A bit old for this, maybe, but we were getting desperate, and she was healthy as a horse. Pathology says she never smoked, looked like she worked hard all her life, had arteries as soft as a baby's. Suction, Jim."

As Jim suctioned the excess blood from the chest cavity, Wright lowered the heart in. *Straightforward stuff*, she told herself. Nevertheless, she anxiously reviewed the procedure aloud. She told herself it was for the benefit of her team. "Four anastomoses: fuse donor heart's left atrial to patient's left atrium; join the two right atrials; attach donor aorta to patient's aorta; attach pulmonary arteries."

Jim looked at her over his mask. He knew all this, had worked with her hundreds of times. She took another breath for calm and positioned the heart.

"Bonding stylus," Jim said. The nurse handed him the pen—the "glue gun," they called it—that would fuse the ends of the blood vessels together with fine lines of a nontoxic organic binder. The cellular growth factors suspended in the binder would promote accelerated healing.

Jim started beading the first join line. Wright maintained pressure on the join as he went.

First line done. Wright poured a bucket of ice-cold sterile saline solution on the heart. Jim finished bonding the left atrium, started on the right. Fang moved in closer to observe what he was doing. As a resident in training, he had to learn every step of the operation.

“Watch that sinus node,” Wright cautioned Jim. Last thing they needed was to fuck with the heart’s electrical activity.

Jim looked up at her again, eyes crinkling. “Little nervous there, Margaret?” The bastard was laughing. “Nah,” she lied with false calm. “Just got a hot dinner date. Gotta be out of here by seven.”

“Tell you what: betcha we’ll be done by six. News conference at six-thirty, tell ’em baby’s had a change of heart and is looking fine. Pasta by seven, you and your sweetie heavy breathing by eight.” He bent his head back down over the surgical field.

“You’re on,” Wright replied, moving in closer beside him to begin trimming the aorta of the donor heart. Finally the heart was hooked up. Wright placed the final lines in the pulmonary artery as they began to warm up Uttley’s new heart. Rich red oxygenated blood was pouring into the heart, feeding the cardiac cells that had been starving for the three and a half hours of the operation. Four hours was the maximum time they could let the heart stay ischemic before it would be damaged. Wright stood back, reached for the defibrillator paddles just in case. “Okay,” she breathed to the transplanted heart. “Do it, baby. Come on.”

There was silence from the team in the operating room. Everyone’s eyes were fixed on Uttley’s new heart. Nothing happened. Then it quivered. Wright could feel her own heart thumping in her chest. Uttley’s heart jumped once, then began to beat.

“Yes!” Jim said.

“Contractions regular and strong,” Fang verified. “Congratulations, Doctors.”

“Oh, God,” Wright sighed. “For a second there, I thought it wasn’t going to work. I’m getting too old for all this excitement.” She was sweating with the strain of the operation. The nurse swabbed her brow.

“Okay, let’s close her up and get her out of here. I got a press conference to hold.”

••••

*Who stole the cookie from the cookie jar?*

*Number One stole the cookie from the cookie jar.*

*“Who, me?”*

*“Yes, you.”*

*“Couldn’t be.”*

*“Then is who?”*

—Children’s rhyming game

“Yes, man. Tomorrow do me fine, Mr. Baines.” Rudy signed off. Slipped his palmbook into a pocket. The hospital was happy with their newest acquisition, had flown it to Ottawa immediately. The operation was under way, and he would get his money, with extra compensation for his three men who had been injured in the process of retrieving the heart. Tony had done what he was supposed to. Everything was going smooth like cool breeze, except that Tony hadn’t yet reported back that he’d killed the interfering girlfriend. *The women in that family been giving me trouble from so long*, Rudy thought. And the duppy wasn’t back in its calabash, either. What did that mean?

“Crack!” Rudy shouted. Crack opened the office door and hobbled inside. The dark, mongoose-thin man looked like he’d been to war. He was using a cane to help him walk; he’d cracked his leg when Legbara dropped him. His arm and his side were a mass of bruises from the same fall. There were two fingerprint-shaped contusions under his chin, where Legbara had lifted him into the air. He complained of a persistent headache, for which the hospital had given him pills. And he was the best off of the three. He had insisted on coming right back to work. Gingerly, Crack stood to attention. “Yes, boss?”

“You hear from Tony yet?”

“Tony. No, boss.” Crack spat out the words as though they were bitter in his mouth. He had a personal vendetta against Tony now, for humiliating him like that at the hands of a woman. Rudy didn’t mind. It would make Crack more diligent in exacting retribution, if it turned out that Tony had disobeyed orders. What was really going on? Tony had obviously had the balls to kill the old woman; what was taking so

long to finish off the rest of the job? And if he hadn't done it, why hadn't the duppy obeyed its orders and returned?

"Shoulda never let she go back by she mother," Rudy muttered.

"Boss?"

"Nothing." He came to a decision. "You could drive?"

"I could drive."

"Come, then. We go find Tony weself."

Crack grinned like a dog that had been offered a steak. He hobbled out of the room ahead of Rudy and pressed the button for the elevator. "Boss, if the so-and-so ain't kill that leggo beast of a woman he have there, let me deal with the two of them, all right?"

"All right." Where the rass was the duppy?

••••

*Lord, what a night, what a night,*

*What a Saturday night!*

—Traditional song

"People are going to see that *thing* herding us along," Tony whispered in Ti-Jeanne's ear, jerking a thumb in the direction of the fireball duppy that buzzed through the air behind them.

"And that is all that worrying you? What they go do? Try and stop it?"

"I guess not," Tony replied in a regretful tone of voice.

Pursued by the duppy, they were stumbling toward the southernmost end of the city as fast as they could. The streets were pretty empty, in that lull before the nightlife of the city awoke. Once or twice Ti-Jeanne had caught Tony eyeing dark alleyways as they went by. She knew he was trying to gauge the odds of running off and losing himself somewhere in the city before the duppy could catch up with him. Let him try, then, nuh? She didn't care what he did. Every time she looked at him, an image of Mami's body burned across her vision.

Night had fallen again, even colder than the night before. Winter was slowly enveloping the city. Here and there a lone snowflake spiralled to the ground. As they walked, Ti-Jeanne opened her jacket and put Baby to nurse. Her breasts were achingly full. As Baby began to suckle, the familiar draining weariness tugged at Ti-Jeanne, as always when it had been a long time between feedings.

Baby's little fist opened and closed against her skin. He looked deeply into her eyes as though he were trying to communicate something. He seemed reluctant to take her breast. He'd suck a little, then spit out the nipple and whimper, staring up at her. She was probably taking him to his death. "Child, I sorry," she whispered at him. He fussed and kicked. "She gone, doux-doux," she said to him. She'd never used that endearment with him before. But now he was the only one of her family left, unless she counted the disembodied woman who was bound by Rudy's obeah to kill her. "Mami gone." She wanted to cry, but no more tears would come, only a sort of dry, gasping noise. Baby suckled halfheartedly and eventually fell asleep.

They were out of the Burn now. They had passed Church Row and crossed Sherbourne, the boundary street that had given the Burn its name; had gone down Jarvis Street past Allan Gardens and were passing the Clarion Hotel, where Mami's friend Romni Jenny had claimed a living space on the main floor. Lamplight flickered from the first few floors of the hotel. The glassed-in main floor was covered with sacking, old curtains, and sheets to make a privacy screen. Against the jerky backlight, the shadows of the people inside moved eerily against the hangings. Outside in the driveway of the hotel, two old women and a younger man were barbecuing a haunch of meat over a fire pit. They looked at Ti-Jeanne and Tony, then up at the fireball. One of the old women crossed herself. The other two people gaped briefly, then became very interested in the precise placement of the blackened, smoking slab on its sheet of tin. In the city, it was best not to meddle in other people's business. The smell of cooking meat made Ti-Jeanne's mouth water. She hadn't even had a chance to taste the soup that Mami had been cooking for her.

Ti-Jeanne regretted that she couldn't go in and tell Jenny that Mami was dead, but the duppy wouldn't let them slow down, certainly wouldn't let her out of its sight for a moment. She wondered how long it could

delay its own hunger and the task it had been commanded to do.

They were now angling through the Ryerson University campus, picking their way past the old stone buildings and the flickering lights of the tents that formed the squatters' camps on the university grounds. They were coming up to the Strip; Yonge Street, the dividing line between the east and the west sides of the city. For some minutes now they'd been able to hear the buzz of voices and music and see the glow of light that rose from the Strip, above the city buildings. The Strip came alive at night. To Ti-Jeanne's surprise, the duppy herded them down Yonge Street, instead of crossing it and continuing down to the lake by a less crowded route. Maybe it wanted to give them the chance to escape it in the crowd? But Ti-Jeanne was determined to go to Rudy's place and make an end to this madness, one way or the other.

The noise and lights crashed on their senses. If you didn't look too closely, you could believe that the Strip was the same as it had been before the Riots. Garish storefronts flashed crazed neon outlines of naked women with anatomically unlikely endowments. Deeplight ads glowed at the doors to virtually every establishment: moving 3-D illusions that were hyped-up, glossy lies about the pleasures to be found inside. If you believed them, Shangri-la lay beyond each door, in the form of fragrant, compliant women and men, drinks that shamed the nectar of the gods, and music that would transport you to ecstasy. The Deeplight tableaus shimmered, whispered, fucked, came, beckoned.

The Strip was fuelled by outcity money. It was where people from the 'burbs came to feel decadent. The *thok-thok* sound in the air was the copter limos that bussed people in from the 'burbs to the rooftops of the Strip. From there they would descend staircases that led down inside the buildings. With enough money, you got a taste of the city without ever setting foot on its streets.

Ti-Jeanne and Tony began to push their way through the crowds. Underdressed teenagers jittered in lineups to the clubs, both sexes trusting in the cloaking of makeup and the heat of sexual tension to keep them warm. Every few feet came a request for "spare change for a coffee," accompanied by a grimy cap or a cardboard coffee cup shoved under their noses. Those people took one look at the duppy and then fell back in silence. But other than that, surprisingly few people seemed to notice. In the fuzzy, glittering radiance of the Strip, the duppy became just one more lightflash to the eyes. She all but disappeared. Except to one young man lounging lazily with his girlfriend against the outside of a virt arcade. He looked up as they approached, nudged his girlfriend with a smirk, and said, "Hey, check that weird shit. That ball floating up there. Bet I bust their bubble."

To Ti-Jeanne's Deeplight-dazzled eyes, he looked like all points, and she all black circles. He was spiked green hair; sharp metal points running down the outside seams of his jeans; the arrowhead hanging from a piercing through his bottom lip. She was black rings drawn around her eyes; the black thighband of fishnet stay-up stockings biting into the meat of her thighs; the black-lipsticked "O" of her mouth when her boyfriend chuckled evilly, leapt up to bat at the duppy, and came howling back down, blood-slicked palm denuded of skin. He crouched on the ground, staring at his dripping hand, too amazed to scream. Not his girlfriend, though. She ran to his side, took one look at the mess, and started shrieking for help. The duppy had brightened briefly as a result of its snack. In the confusion, it moved them onward. They reached the Dundas intersection of the Strip. The Paramount Eaton Centre loomed black and silent ahead of them, a block-long "elite" megamall complete with coded security fence. If your biocode wasn't in the mall's data banks, you got an electric jolt rather than admittance. The crowd flowed past the structure at a respectful distance.

Just as Ti-Jeanne and Tony were about to cross Dundas, the duppy flew in front of them and hovered at chest level, so that they had to back up or be burned.

"What the rass . . . ?" Tony swore.

It was Rudy's Bentley, coming slowly west along Dundas, horn blaring as it tried to clear a path through the people milling in the streets. As the only car on the street, it stood out, and people were stopping to gawk. Its mirrored windows were a sinister camouflage, hiding its occupants.

"Shit." Ti-Jeanne grabbed Tony's arm and pulled him into the shelter of the building on the corner. The duppy followed, hovering fretfully over their heads. "You think him see we?"

"What difference does it make? You're the one who was going to march right up to his place and deal

with him, right?"

"I know, but . . ." But now that she was actually faced with Rudy, some sense of reality intruded on the false bravado that grief and anger had lent her. What had she been thinking? This was the man who skinned someone alive on a whim! "Not here. We can't meet here, like this. I not ready."

"Not ready?!" Tony's voice climbed an octave. "Ti-Jeanne, don't you get it? You'll never be ready to face a monster like that!"

"We have to run."

"But if we do, the duppy will get us! It has to kill us if we're not going along with it, remember?"

He was right. She ignored him. Panicked, she stepped into the street and began edging through the crowd to the other side. "Pardon. Pardon, please. Pardon." There was an alleyway there. Maybe they could hide. Tony followed and the duppy, too, a little too close for comfort. Now that she was forcing it to chase them, it was going to have to carry out its orders to kill them. She heard a shout. She looked back. Crack Monkey had opened the driver's side door of the Bentley. He was standing on the running board of the car. He had seen them. Ti-Jeanne started using elbows and knees to shove through the crowd.

"Jesus," Tony panted behind her. "He get out the car."

They were on the other sidewalk now, just a few yards from the cover of the alleyway. The duppy made a halfhearted swipe at Ti-Jeanne, leaving a burning trail of blisters on one cheek. She smelled burning hair, batted at a few of her plaits whose ends had caught on fire. "Mummy," she yelled, "stop it!"

"It's not your mother," Tony hissed. "It's a thing that's hunting us down. Come on."

He grabbed her arm and started dragging her toward the alleyway, clearing the space ahead of them with powerful sweeps of his right arm. The duppy swooped at him. He ducked. When he straightened up, Crack was standing barely twenty yards from them, gun trained right on Tony, grinning like the smile on the face of the tiger. Crack fired. Tony was thrown backward into Ti-Jeanne. She staggered back, trying to hold him upright. The blast made her ears ring. Was Tony dead? People were screaming, running away. Baby was howling with fright. Tony moaned, tried to get to his feet. Ti-Jeanne saw the steps leading down to the abandoned subway. "Tony, you have to walk," she begged.

He pulled himself upright. His right shoulder was torn and bleeding, but his feet were moving. Supporting him as best she could, Ti-Jeanne staggered down the stairs to the subway.

They got only halfway down. The duppy was blocking their way. It sizzled and hissed, threatening her.

"Mummy," Ti-Jeanne said. "Try to let us pass." She took another few steps. Ravening eyes appeared in the fiery mass. Claws reached out to grab them.

"Duppy!" The deep voice was Rudy's. "Where you? Come and give us some light."

And the fireball went flying past them to its master. Ti-Jeanne hissed at the heat of it. She and Tony stumbled the rest of the way down the stairs.

It was dark. And it smelled of stale urine and rotting garbage. "Oh, God," Tony muttered, "I feel weak."

"Keep your feet moving. Just concentrate on that." Ti-Jeanne felt her way along the cool tiled wall, trying to remember how Dundas station had been laid out when there had been a functioning subway system.

Ti-Jeanne could hear Rudy and Crack making their way down the stairs.

"Look fresh blood there so," came Rudy's voice. Tony's wound was leaving a trail. Baby stopped his crying almost instantly, as though he were aware that his bawling could lead their pursuers to them.

The heavy, even tread of Rudy's footsteps got closer, punctuated with the tricky triple thump of Crack

navigating the steps with his cane. Ti-Jeanne prayed that Crack's injury would slow them down. She

moved a little faster, kicking what felt like sheets of newspaper and old tin cans out of her way. Her foot

connected with something fleshy that scrabbled at her running shoe and then fled, squeaking. Her hands

touched plexiglass. The ticket collector's booth. She felt her way around it, palms hitching on rubberiness

that she hoped was only old wads of gum. Her hands found the turnstiles that led to the platform. She

reached to push through the first turnstile. It was chained shut. The rusty chain flaked in her palms.

Desperately she groped from turnstile to turnstile.

"Shit. Tony, all of them lock off."

"Oh, God, they're gonna get us."

“Climb,” Ti-Jeanne said. She clambered clumsily over the obstruction, taking care not to drop Baby. The turnstile was wet and sticky. No matter. She helped Tony over. He whimpered with the pain. She could see the glow of the duppy now, filling the vestibule. Biting her lips in terror, she started a lumbering run down the length of the platform, groping along the wall in the near darkness, pulling Tony after her. He was breathing hard through his mouth. There was a chittering noise coming from the black furrow that was the subway tracks. Ti-Jeanne imagined the tunnel filled with squirming, toothy rats. There must be millions of them living in these old tunnels. The three of them had to stay away from the edge; Ti-Jeanne couldn’t bear the thought of falling into a swarming mass of rodents. Feeling along the tile wall, she kept moving. The cracks between the tiles were slimy. It smelled mouldy.

Rudy and Crack must have investigated the vestibule. They were now at the turnstile. Hovering about them, the duppy flared fire red. “I could hear them moving, boss,” came Crack’s thin, sharp voice.

Ti-Jeanne brought them to a halt. She pressed herself against the wall, using one hand to push Tony back, too.

Rudy sucked his teeth in disgust. “Rasscloth. Enough of this. Duppy, go find them and do your job, then come back and bring we to them.” Ti-Jeanne could hear Rudy and Crack climbing over the turnstiles. The duppy flew toward them like a flaming rock from a slingshot. In a corona of fire, Ti-Jeanne could see her mother’s anguished face. She stared full into the duppy’s eyes while Tony whispered, “Oh God oh God.”

Suddenly a sea of screaming children’s bodies boiled up from the tunnel below them and fell on Rudy and Crack. The duppy pulled back, a look of surprise on its unearthly face. Ti-Jeanne felt small hands pulling at her and Tony, taking them to the end of the platform. No time to protest; she just went along. Crack’s pistol went off twice, three times. Ti-Jeanne looked back. Agile as snakes, a knot of squirming children had borne Rudy and Crack to the ground. The children were attacking them with what looked like rocks and torn tin cans. Two or three little bodies lay bleeding, but the rest kept at it, screaming with a fierce glee. Rudy shouted, “Duppy! Take we home!”

Crackling, the duppy rushed the swarm of children, growing in size as it did so. Battered and bleeding, Rudy and Crack fought their way clear, leapt into the heart of the duppy’s flame, but were not burned. They hung suspended in the glow.

. . . And the illusion of a battalion of feral children winked out, leaving only a small, grimy band of eight or ten surrounding Rudy and Crack. Rudy gaped, then narrowed his eyes in fury at Ti-Jeanne. His stare washed over her like cold ice. He gestured toward her, opened his mouth to speak, but the duppy fled, taking him and Crack. In a blink it was gone.

“C’mon, lady,” said Josée, the young woman who’d brought Susie to the balm-yard to have her broken leg set. “We gotta hide in case Rudy comes back.”

Carrying their injured, Josée and her troupe led Ti-Jeanne and Tony down the short flight of stairs into the tunnel.

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*Gal, show me your motion, tra-la-la-la-la,*

*For you look like a little sugar plum (plum, plum).*

—Ring game

The little children carried flashlights, the older ones flares. Ti-Jeanne could see mice and rats—and a raccoon?—scurrying away from the noise and light. With every step, Ti-Jeanne’s shoes stuck in degenerating gum wads, fluorescent pink and green. She had to kick at squashed pop cans that rolled tinnily away. Torn subway posters flapped at them as they passed, thin men and women posturing in outmoded clothes, gesturing at obsolete appliances. NOW, they said, and TOWER, and TROJAN. Baby’s eyes were wide, his head turning from side to side as he tried to take it all in.

The raggle-taggle children ranged in age from about seven to fifteen. One little girl was holding a bleeding wrist and whining from the pain. A tall young man half carried, half dragged another along, saying, “Come on, Chu, come on, buddy, you can make it.” Chu held a hand to his stomach. In the reddish light of the flares, it looked like molasses was leaking through his fingers.

“He need help,” Ti-Jeanne told Josée, jerking her chin toward Chu.

“Yeah, so does the guy you’re carrying, and Alyson. Can’t stop. We’ll be home soon.”

“At least wrap something snug around he waist to slow the bleeding little bit.”

Josée called out for what she needed. Somebody brought forth an oversize hockey sweater and tied it around Chu’s middle the way Ti-Jeanne had described.

“Alyson,” Ti-Jeanne called out to the little girl, “close your hand tight around your wrist, but *above* the cut, you understand? The side closest to your elbow. . . . Yes, like so. Now, hold your hand high up against your body.”

“Like this?” Alyson sounded scared.

“Little bit higher, doux-doux, higher than your heart. Yes, just like that. That go slow the bleeding down. Good girl.”

Then Ti-Jeanne had a look at Tony’s wound. He knew what to do, was pinching the torn edges of the hole in his shoulder closed with one hand. He didn’t look good. His breathing was shallow, his eyes unfocused. His body felt cool against her side. He was going into shock. “Tony,” Ti-Jeanne said, “you still with me?”

“I’m here, but I’m feeling faint.”

“Hold on. Them say we nearly reach.” They kept walking.

“Josée,” Ti-Jeanne asked, “is what allyou do? To fool Rudy, I mean?”

Josée’s grin was feral. “That was Mumtaz,” she replied.

A girl of about twelve returned the grin, flicking a hank of black hair out of her eyes. Her brown face was difficult to see in the dark of the tunnel. Her teeth gleamed. Mumtaz was carrying some kind of jury-rigged electronic box, about the size of a loaf of bread, held together with patchy layers of masking and electric tape. Ti-Jeanne could just make out toggle switches bristling from the top of it.

“Listen,” said Mumtaz. She flicked a switch, and Ti-Jeanne jumped as the tunnel filled with the din of hundreds of children screaming. She could discern the words “Die!” “Fuckers!” “Kill you!”

Mumtaz shut off the noise. “I layered all our voices. That way, it sounds like there’s more of us than there are.”

“And the visuals?” Ti-Jeanne could have sworn there’d been a good forty kids.

“Deeplight projector hooked up on the subway tracks. I rigged it myself a long time ago. Keeps people out of our space. It’s a tape I made of all of us, dubbed on six waves so it looks like a lot more. You tripped my beam when you came down the stairs, so we knew someone was there. We came to scare them off, in case the projection didn’t do it. Smart, huh? Then we realised it was you.”

Ti-Jeanne had to smile. “Smart, yes. But why allyou save we? You coulda get away safe.”

Hatred twisted Josée’s face. “Because of Rudy. Wish we’d killed the bastard. He’s killed enough of us.”

Josée and Mumtaz told Ti-Jeanne about the street children that the posse had kidnapped. They never came back.

“What they do with them?”

“We’ve followed them as far as Rudy’s, but we don’t know what happens to them in there.” Her tone got sad. “But we found a body once.”

“Emily,” said Mumtaz in a frightened voice. “Her throat was cut. She was really, really pale.”

Ti-Jeanne thought she might be sick. Rudy bled the children to feed the duppy—her mother. She remembered Mi-Jeanne’s anguish and shame when she talked of the things Rudy had forced her to do. She understood why her mother was begging for death.

They had reached College Station. The double weight of Tony on Ti-Jeanne’s shoulder and Baby in his Snugli was exhausting. Ti-Jeanne hauled them both up the narrow dirty stairs that led to the subway platform. They went through another creaky turnstile and up the stairs for the College Park Mall exit.

Ti-Jeanne hadn’t been into a mall since the Riots. Mami had told her they were too dangerous, that the squatters would attack her. Right now she’d have rather faced starved street people than spend another minute in the subway tunnel.

The swinging glass doors had been broken a long time ago. They crunched their way through little squares of shatterglass and came out into what had been the food court for the mall, with its bolted-down Formica tables and plastic chairs of institutional orange. Like everything else in the city, the food court



showed the marks of the Riots. Many of the chairs had been broken, their plastic burned, melted, and blackened. A few of the tables had nearly been pulled out of the floor. They sat at crazy angles, bent bolts sticking up out of the ground like mushrooms. The stalls that boxed in the eating area used to sell fast food: GENERAL GEORGE FRIED CHICKEN, proclaimed one sign; BURGER DIVINE, another. Now, almost all of them had ash-blackened walls. Refrigerators lay crashed and broken on their sides, robbed long ago of the pop and fruit juice that had been in them. From where Ti-Jeanne stood, drooping under her charges, she could make out debris piled chin high in many of the stalls. The mounds seemed to consist of heat racks, aluminum chafing dishes, and orange plastic trays.

Something was odd. The lights were on! "It have electricity in here!" Ti-Jeanne exclaimed.

Tony said groggily, "'S a mall. They all have power."

"Yeah," Josée said. "Malls were built with their own generators in case of power failures. We can cook in here, and everything. C'mon. Let's lie these two down over here."

Not a moment too soon. Tony was almost incoherent, and Chu had gone completely unconscious at some point during the trek. He'd lost a lot of blood; the front of his body was soaked with it. His friend was now carrying him in his arms. He tenderly laid Chu down and cradled his head in his lap. Chu moaned slightly but didn't rouse. The young man stroked Chu's hair away from his face, leaned forward, and kissed his forehead. His tenderness was that of a lover. He asked Ti-Jeanne tearfully, "Is he gonna be all right?"

"I ain't know. He need medical attention."

"Hospital won't come. We can't pay. You're a healer, can't you do something?"

Panicked, she stared down at Chu. "If the bullet rupture a organ, or bust into he intestines," she told the young man, "I might not be able to help he."

The young man reached for Chu's hand, stared down at his face as though trying to imprint its features on his memory. "Josée," Ti-Jeanne called out, "I need some blankets to keep them warm with."

Josée brought two heavy, lined drapes. They'd do. To her surprise, Mumtaz handed Ti-Jeanne a battered first-aid kit, too.

"'S not much," said the girl.

It wasn't. It contained only some cotton swabs and an aged bottle of alcohol. Ti-Jeanne sniffed at the alcohol. Not completely denatured. That would be of some use. There was also a rusted pair of tweezers in the kit. At least she could use that for fishing out the bullets.

"I need plenty of cloth," she said. "Tear it into strips. Clean cloth, mind." She unbuckled the Snugli and put Baby on the ground beside her.

"Ti-Jeanne," Tony said faintly, "they're going to come after you again. Rudy and them, I mean."

"He don't know is where we gone."

"He found us at the Parkway," he reminded her.

Ti-Jeanne's heart shrank within her. He was right. She looked over at Chu. His face, where it wasn't smeared with his own blood, was pale. "I can't leave just yet, Tony."

The next half hour went by in a blur. The bullet had fragmented as it entered Chu's body. The rusted tweezers were absurdly inadequate to the job of trying to find and fish out the bullet fragments. Chu bled and bled. "I need sterile tools, and seven pair of hands, and whole blood," she muttered angrily. And now she could detect the smell of feces from the wound, which told her that what she was doing was useless. His intestine had indeed been punctured. If the damage from the bullet didn't kill him directly, peritonitis would.

Eventually she didn't know whether it was the blood loss or the rupture of a vital organ that caused Chu's death first. The other young man was still holding Chu's hand tightly. She put her hand over both of theirs. "I too sorry."

She jerked herself to her feet and went and sat at one of the food court tables, giving the boy some privacy. She realised that she was stabbing the bloody tweezers over and over again into the cracked Formica of the table.

"You tried," came Josée's voice. She put a bundle down on the table. Clean clothes. Or unbloodied, at least.

“Allyou was only trying to help me,” Ti-Jeanne wailed.

“Yeah, we thought it’d be a lark. Besides, you and your granny helped us, eh?”

Ti-Jeanne realised that the girl’s eyes were brimming. The tough words were just a cover-up. “Josée, I sorry.”

“I know. Just change your clothes, all right?”

Ti-Jeanne obeyed. The pants were too big. The collar of the shirt was streaked with dirt, and it hung from her shoulders almost to midthigh. It would have fitted Chu. Hot tears fell on her hands as she tied one of the bandage strips like a belt around her waist. Sniffing, she told someone to swab and bandage little Alyson’s cut while she checked on Tony.

“You luckier than that boy,” she said bitterly to her grandmother’s murderer. “In the shoulder and out the back. Some bones crack, but that go heal.”

“Thank you, Ti-Jeanne.”

“Don’t thank me!” She wrapped up his injury, more roughly than she needed to. He didn’t complain. She laid him back down, yanked the blanket up over him. Chu’s body had been wrapped in his coat. Josée was organizing a bunch of kids to take him out and bury him.

*The cold slicing through my shirt like knives. I find myself standing outside, no jacket or boots or nothing, just my blouse and jeans and my runners. I know this building—they used to call it the CN Tower. Now we does just call it Rudy office. Mami tell me is the tallest freestanding building in the world. Is must be true. Anywhere you is in the city, you could look south towards the lake and see the needle shape of the tower stretching up to the clouds, with the bulge of the observation deck in the middle. One night, I see lightning strike the tip. The whole sky go white. For a hour after, every time I close my eyes, I see jig-jag lightning flashing behind my lids. I look up, up. I almost have to crane my neck backwards to see all the tower, like I trying to look up into God Father face heself. I ain’t go see He face today, though. The cloud cover so low it hiding even the observation deck. I swear, that tower reach right to the stars. It make me giddy, like I can’t tell top from bottom no more, and gravity ain’t have no meaning. I frighten too bad. Either I going to fall off the earth into that forever sky, or the whole tower going to come crashing down upon me.*

*“It long, eh?” somebody say from right behind me. I jump and whip around. The whole world do a spin with me and right itself again. The Jab-Jab standing there. Too close. I back up. It just bust a grin and say, “You coming?” It run up to one of the deep, curving walls of the tower and it start to climb up the side, digging it fingers in like the cement is cheese. It climb ten feet, twenty, thirty. Then it stop and look back down on me. “You ain’t coming? Ain’t is Rudy you want to go and see?”*

*“I have to, yes. I can’t make this go on no longer. But I can’t climb like that,” I say. All this time it been haunting me, and now is the first time I find voice enough to speak to it.*

*It frown and jump back down beside me, with a sound like two-by-fours falling in a pile. It shake a wood pencil finger at me. “And I suppose you won’t even try.” It sigh a big, jokey sigh, raising and dropping it shoulders-them like all the weight of the world there upon them. “You have to stop he, you know,” it tell me. “Is only you leave. Gros-Jeanne dead and Mi-Jeanne get trapped. Is up to little Ti-Jeanne. So how you going to get in there? Think! Think fast and tell me, nuh? Think!”*

*“No, Jab-Jab,” I say. “If I let myself think about what I going to meet up in there, I won’t do it. I have to find another way.”*

*“So you won’t use force of body, and you won’t use force of will, neither,” it say, smiling. I ain’t know why it smiling. Body and will. Brawn and brains. It ain’t have nothing leave to use after brawn and brains, oui. But then I get a idea. “I think I go have to trick Rudy into letting me in.”*

*“Yes!” The Jab-Jab start to jump and prance like a marionette on strings, dancing in glee. “Is so the story go. Force won’t work against a greater force. Rudy is Bull Bucker, so you have to be Duppy Conqueror. You must use cunning. Cunning and instinct, that’s the trick, my doux-doux*

*darling.”*

*“Bull Bucker? Duppy Conqueror? I ain’t understand.”*

*“Rudy tough, so you have to be tougher.”*

*Tougher than Rudy? Jeezam Peace. “I wish if I could be invisible, like when I try to smuggle Tony outcity.”*

*The Jab-Jab stop smiling. It stop dancing. It give me a disgusted look. “Well, like you know everything already, then. You ain’t need me.” And it disappear.*

*“Wait! Come back! I need you, yes!”*

*But it ain’t come back. The wind spring up hard around the foot of the CN Tower and start buffeting me about. The wind only calling my name: “Ti-Jeanne, Ti-Jeanne.”*

Josée had her by both shoulders and was shaking her. “Ti-Jeanne, snap out of it. Ti-Jeanne.”

Ti-Jeanne put up her hands to stop the girl from shaking her. “You could stop now. I come back.”

“Come back from where?” Josée crouched in front of her, looking at her with concern. “You didn’t go anywhere. You was just sitting there, and your eyes glazed over, and you wasn’t answering when we talked to you.”

Ti-Jeanne wasn’t paying attention. The Jab-Jab had disappeared when she wished she could become invisible again. Said it didn’t need to tell her any more. Maybe she could do it, then.

“Ti-Jeanne?” Josée was reaching out a hand to shake her shoulder again.

Ti-Jeanne held her off. “No, no, I all right. I only thinking.”

She realised that the vision had spoken true, even if its message was confusing. She’d go and face Rudy.

She would take Tony’s gun. Maybe she’d have time to use it on Rudy before his raggas reached her.

She’d have to sneak in. She thought about what the Jab-Jab had said. The last time she had been invisible, it was with Legbara’s blessing. Mami had performed the ritual and begged the help of the spirits, and Legbara had answered, had hidden Ti-Jeanne from human eyes, midway between the real world and Guinea Land. And she had been able to extend the invisibility to Tony because she was carrying a gift of his concealed on her body.

Something about that thought was pricking at her consciousness. Extend the invisibility, extend . . . slowly the idea unfurled in her, tentative as one of Mami’s wild roses opening to the sun. As her thought bloomed full, Ti-Jeanne felt a small, fierce smile creeping around her lips, like the fighters’ grins she’d seen on Josée’s and Mumtaz’s faces. The Jab-Jab was right. Cunning, not force. She didn’t have a plan yet, but maybe she had a way of getting unhurt into her grandfather’s office. She would give Rudy the Bull Bucker more than he’d bargained for.

“Josée,” she said, “I going to call on Mister Rudy. I need some candy. And a cigar.”

The young woman looked puzzled, but didn’t ask any questions. “It’s your funeral,” her shrug seemed to say. As it well might be. Josée polled the other children, and in a matter of seconds they produced two striped peppermint candies dotted with pocket lint. “Cigarette okay?” Josée asked, flipping one from behind her ear. “We ain’t got cigars.”

“Yes, I think that go be good enough.” It would have to be. “You have matches?”

Legbara was an Eshu, but she had nothing to use to represent his head, no white rum to spray him with. Just the offerings of dusty candy and stale cigarette smoke. Maybe Legbara would understand that that was all she had. She gave Baby to the little girl who had asked to hold him back at the farm. No qualms this time about whether she was clean enough. Ti-Jeanne had the guilt of Chu’s blood on her conscience. So who was the dirty one?

Ti-Jeanne asked the children to give her privacy for a while and went into a secluded corner of the food court. The children watched curiously but didn’t approach her.

Ti-Jeanne crouched, facing the wall. How to start? Suppose she got it all wrong?

Use your instinct, the Jab-Jab had said. She looked over at the coat that wrapped Chu’s body. Blood had seeped through it. She went over there and rolled a forefinger in it, silently thanking the young man for the gift of his life’s blood.

Back in her corner she traced the Eshu image in Chu’s blood on the bare ground: oval face, bulging eyes, and pursed lips. She waited. Nothing happened. No angry spirit appeared to strike her dead for her

presumptuousness.

Mami had given the candy as offerings to the Eshu. Ti-Jeanne put the peppermints in front of the image she'd drawn. Then she lit the cigarette and, coughing, blew smoke gently over Eshu's face. She didn't dare beat out a rhythm with her fingers, for fear it would be the wrong one. All she could do was call on Legbara, her own personal Eshu:

"Papa Legbara," she whispered, feeling foolish, "I going to try and end the work that Mami and Mi-Jeanne couldn't finish. I going to try and stop Rudy." She knew that by calling the spirit "Papa," she was acknowledging a bond between them. Strangely, that felt safe and right, not the imposition on her that she had thought it would be. That gave her the courage to say a little more: "Help me, please, Papa, and I go make a proper meal for you. Send me to the shores of Guinea Land again, so I could get into Rudy office without anyone seeing me."

All right, she'd done it. She sat back on her heels to wait, then remembered the trick she wanted to play, if Legbara would accept the truth as she explained it and go along with her. "Oh! Papa, another thing: I want to extend the invisibility to someone else. I carrying he gift in secret. Papa, I carrying Rudy blood in my veins."

Ti-Jeanne smirked in satisfaction. That should give Rudy a shock, when all of a sudden no one could see him. This battle would be just between him and her. If it worked.

She waited long minutes to see if Legbara would accept her gift. Behind her, she could hear the children shuffling, mumbling. A young voice said, "But what's she *doing*?" Someone hushed the child.

It crept up silently, the fog that only she could see, around the edges of the food court at first, then slowly narrowing in. Papa had heard her! She had to move quickly. She stood, stamping the feeling back into her feet, and hurried over to the group of children. "Josée, listen. I don't have plenty time. If I lucky, I go stop Rudy for good." The fog was curling about the floor now, poking thin fingers up into the room.

"And if you're not?" Josée asked.

"Never mind that. You know Romni Jenny what live in the Clarion Hotel?"

"The Gypsy lady? Yeah. She's the one told me to bring Susie to your grandma."

"Good. Take Baby to she. Right away! Tell she to look after he if I don't come back. Promise me you go do it, Josée!"

"Yeah, sure, I promise. But . . . !?" The fog reached Ti-Jeanne's knees, climbed to her waist. Josée started to protest, to ask questions, but her eyes popped as she saw Ti-Jeanne slowly disappear before her eyes, toe to top.

"Magic," breathed Mumtaz. She put her hand to her mouth. The children backed away.

Ti-Jeanne took the first few stairs up to street level at a run. The gun! She'd forgotten it. She went back and got it out of Tony's jacket pocket. She held it awkwardly. It was heavy. Was it loaded? She didn't know how to check. Was that thing there the safety? "This is sending fool to catch the wise, oui," she murmured.

Josée was sitting on the floor, awkwardly putting Baby's coat and mittens back on.

"Where're you taking him?" asked Mumtaz.

"Um . . ." Josée frowned as though she were trying to remember something. Then her face brightened.

"Um, well, he can't stay here. I just got this idea to leave him with that Gypsy woman, you know, Jenny? Maybe she can look after him for a while."

They seemed to have forgotten that Ti-Jeanne had ever been there.

## **CHAPTER TEN**

**Bloodcloth!**" Rudy cursed when he felt the sting from the cold compress Crack was pressing against the burns on his face.

"Sorry, boss."

Rudy didn't bother to answer that. The duppy had transported them quickly back to the old nightclub at the top of the CN Tower, but even in those few seconds, her heat had begun to blister the exposed parts of their bodies. Crack's left palm was one angry, weeping sore where his gun had overheated in his hand. Luckily the bullets hadn't discharged.

Anger bubbled up in Rudy like a pot boiling over. To make everything worse, the duppy was probably

hungry again, after the burst of energy it had used to carry them. He was going to have to feed it soon, which meant sending someone out at this time of night to hunt down some street kid or vagrant. He glared at the round-bottomed calabash sitting on its ring of cloth. The duppy had caused him a lot of trouble. He could punish it by withholding the lifeblood it needed, but he had to be careful with that. The power he had over it would only hold as long as he fed the spirit regularly and kept a container for it. He had once heard of a shadow-catcher who broke the rules of her pact with her duppy. It had turned on her. The people who found her said it looked as though she'd taken hours to die and that they'd never forget the stare of horror frozen on her dead, ruined face.

"This is war between me and that Ti-Jeanne woman now," he said to Crack, taking the compress from him to pat at his stinging face himself.

"Me understand, boss. So long as you leave Tony for me."

Rudy's burns were already healing as the duppy bowl worked its magic, sucking the death force from Rudy into itself, keeping him young and healthy. Another drain on the duppy's energy, but Rudy sighed happily as the pain eased. Crack was not so lucky. He winced every so often. The fingers of his left hand were curling in on themselves as the cut dried, but Rudy knew that the man wouldn't call attention to his own wounds until he was given leave. Rudy had trained his men so, and he demanded obedience to his rules. But he would need Crack in functioning order tonight, as they hunted Ti-Jeanne and Tony. "Go and get Barry to bandage your hand."

The man limped painfully out of the room. He couldn't use his cane with his burned hand.

Rudy's burns were completely healed now. He went to one of the windows to look down at the city that was thousands of feet below the observation deck of his tower. Toronto was in darkness now, except for the lights that picked out the malls with their independent power sources. To his left was the dark mass of Lake Ontario and the red glow of Niagara Falls on its horizon. This ruined city was his kingdom. He wasn't going to let Gros-Jeanne's brood take it away from him.

A reflection in the window caught his eye, and he whirled around. From the floor up, the room was filling with smoke.

"Crack! Barry!" No answer. He had to keep the duppy bowl safe. He picked it up, cradled it protectively to his chest, and barrelled out of the room. Then he stopped running. He wasn't smelling any smoke-reek of burning from the fog that was filling the room up. It wasn't a fire.

The odd fog was in this section of the observation deck, too. It cleared a little, leaving a dim haze over everything, as though he were seeing through the light of dusk. Crack was perched on the edge of a desk, grimacing as Barry wrapped a length of gauze around his wrist. What the ass was wrong with them? "So what," Rudy challenged them, "oonuh nah see what happening in here?"

"Band it tight," Crack told Barry, as though Rudy hadn't spoken. "I want to be able to use my hand tonight to break that Tony jaw for he."

"Yeah, man," responded Barry.

Incredulous at being ignored, Rudy strode up to Barry and put his hand on the man's shoulder. Barry brushed it away as he might a fly and went on bandaging.

The elevator pinged. "What the rass . . . ?" cursed Crack. The elevator doors slid open and out stepped Ti-Jeanne.

"Hey!" Rudy shouted. Ti-Jeanne jumped when she saw him, but neither Crack nor Barry seemed to take any notice of her presence.

"Bloodfire!" exclaimed Crack. "How the damn thing reach up here with nobody in it?"

"Idiot! Look she right there." Rudy pointed. No response from Crack.

"Like it haunted, oui," joked Barry. He jumped to hold the door open. Ti-Jeanne slid out of his way along the wall, keeping her eyes on Rudy. "Let we just go and make sure everything all right downstairs."

"Seen," Crack agreed.

Astounded, Rudy watched the two men leave. He was beginning to understand what was going on. The bitch was responsible. "Girl-pickney," he said to Ti-Jeanne, "like your granny teach you some of she antics after all."

She didn't say anything. Maybe she couldn't see him, either? Her lips were pursed tightly together.

Gros-Jeanne used to do that when she was frightened. Rudy put the calabash on the desk that Crack had vacated. He took a step to the side. She could see him all right. She was tracking him with her eyes. Then, before he could rush her, Ti-Jeanne pulled a gun out of her pocket. She closed her eyes and, with one hand against her ear, shot him. Rudy staggered back from the impact, sharp pain blossoming in his chest. He gripped the edge of the desk for support, strong nails biting into the old oak. He growled, gritted his teeth, and forced himself to stay standing, broad chest thrust out proudly so that the bitch could see the hole she'd torn in it. And watch it begin to heal before her eyes. The pain was already subsiding. He could feel flesh and bone knitting, the flow of blood out of the wound slowing. Rudy smiled at Ti-Jeanne, who goggled at him and ducked behind the wall into the nightclub part of the tower. Rudy chuckled. "The old woman tricks ain't help she, and them nah go help you. You go dead here tonight, granddaughter." He didn't waste any more time on her. "Kill she," he ordered the duppy. With the crackling sound of green wood in a fire, a spume of glowing sparks fountained up out of the calabash. The pleading and anguish on the disembodied spirit's insubstantial face were so plain that Rudy was struck by its expression. He hadn't known it could still feel. It howled soundlessly at him, and for a brief second he was afraid that the thing wouldn't attack its own child.

"Mummy?" Ti-Jeanne's voice was soft.

The fireball jerked at the sound. Sparks were raining off it, draining it of substance. Rudy's heart clenched in fear. The thing was nearly depleted of energy, and he hadn't fed it. He was losing control over it. Quickly he stammered the words of his ritual. "I give you she blood to feed on. Kill she!" It made claws of its hands, raking at its own face, but it was still his. It had to obey. It rushed at Ti-Jeanne, who screamed and fired into it. It absorbed the bullet, glowed brighter, and fell on its daughter.

••••

*I can do this, Punchinello little fellow,*

*I can do this, Punchinello little boy.*

—Ring game

"Mummy!" Ti-Jeanne threw up her hands to protect her face. The fireball charged her again. She felt its heat, felt red-hot talons score deep trails through her cheek. She hissed at the pain. Fingers of flame tugged at her jacket as the duppy pulled her close to itself, eyes begging forgiveness, to lick the blood hotly off her torn cheek. The skin of her cheek bubbled as its touch seared her. The duppy glowed brighter still at the brief taste of blood. Screaming in panic, Ti-Jeanne batted at the thing. It clamped fiery teeth in her wrist, ripped away a mouthful of skin, devoured that. It latched on to her arm. The flesh sizzled like meat on a grill. It put the hot crimson hole of its mouth to the wound. Hysterical, Ti-Jeanne tried to shake it off. It held on, staring right at her with crazed eyes. Then it released her. Ti-Jeanne snatched her arm away. Drops of her blood spattered the floor. The fog about them lifted. Rudy's blood spilling from her veins had yanked them fully back into reality.

"Bumbocloth! What the ass is this now?" came Rudy's agitated voice.

Ti-Jeanne barely spared a thought for all that. Shuddering, nearly out of her mind with pain and fright, she waited for the duppy's next attack. In a shaking hand, she pointed the gun at the duppy, knowing it would do no good. But instead of pouncing on her, it lowered itself to the ground and licked up the drops of her blood, one by one. Rudy loudly ordered it to finish the job, but it kept licking, one drop at a time. It was obeying him, but at its own speed. Ti-Jeanne had shown it that trick. It looked up at her pleadingly. It was trying to convey something to her.

"What, Mummy?"

Only a few drops left on the ground. One more. Last one gone. The duppy snarled soundlessly at her, gathered itself catlike to leap at her again. That thing wasn't her mother. It was a Soucouyant, and it was going to suck her dry of blood.

It was a *Soucouyant*. Suddenly Ti-Jeanne remembered how you delayed a Soucouyant. Praying that the old-time stories had it right, she shook her bleeding arm, scattering more drops of blood. The Soucouyant hovered over them again, licking them up one by one, like the Soucouyant in her dreams had been compelled to pick up single rice grains at a time. Duppies could be delayed by tricks like that. She

had dreamt true.

Rudy snarled in exasperation and rushed at Ti-Jeanne.

Intuitively she fired past him at her mother's prison. *Instinct. Don't think.*

The calabash exploded into shards. Noxious things flew from it: reeking clumps of dirt; a twist of hair; white knuckle bones; the black, mummified body of what looked like a dead cat. The duppy swelled, flared to incandescent, its freed hands outstretched in thanks to Ti-Jeanne. It dove at Rudy, who backed away, hands beating ineffectually at the roaring flame. Ti-Jeanne thought her troubles were over. Her mother had turned on Rudy. But then the duppy shrank to the size of an ember and winked out. Gone. Her mother was finally fully dead, and Ti-Jeanne was alone with Rudy.

Rudy screamed, fell to his knees. A network of wrinkles was stitching itself over his face. Swollen veins wormed their way over the backs of his hands, while the knuckles bunched like the knobs of ancient roots; he put his arthritic hands to his mouth, spat his teeth into them. His lips sank in on themselves; a ray of fine lines etched themselves around his pursed, trembling mouth; his hair blanched to grey; his shoulders rounded as his spine curled. Ti-Jeanne gasped. Old; he was old!

Pain exploded in Ti-Jeanne's hand as Barry kicked the gun out of it. Ti-Jeanne hadn't heard the two posse members come back up in the elevator. "Lord Jesus," breathed Barry. His gun was trained on Ti-Jeanne, but, eyes the size of dinner plates, he was staring at Rudy. Ti-Jeanne started toward him.

"Don't move, sweetness," drawled Crack. She stood still. Neither his gun nor his eyes wavered from her. "Look like we not going to have that chance to get to know one another better after all."

"No, don't shoot she," came Rudy's querulous voice. The words were mushy in his toothless mouth. He pushed himself painfully to his feet. "Hold the bitch. Me can't stay old so. Me need a new duppy."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*BOLOM: Ask him for my life!*

*Oh God, I want all this to happen to me!*

*TI-JEAN: Is life you want, child?*

*You don't see what it bring?*

*BOLOM: Yes, yes, Ti-Jean, life!*

—Derek Walcott, *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*

*As the duppy bowl cracked, another soul than Mi-Jeanne's flew free of it. Rudy had reserved a special agony for this victim. He had forbade him full death, had ordered the duppy to chain and torture his soul down inside the microcosmic hell that was the world of the duppy bowl. For nearly twelve years, divorced from sense or logic, he cowered and gibbered in his purgatory, was chased endlessly through his nightmare existence by a yowling cat, a ball of fire, and a hand that clawed with no arm or body. Cats must howl and hands must clutch, but he knew that the fireball would have left him in peace if it could have. Sometimes, even as he fled his goads, he could see deep into Guinea Land, see what would be the fate of the woman he had loved, if he couldn't warn her. He cried out for help. It had taken nearly twelve years for his call for help to worm its way through the duppy bowl world to his spirit father. Unable to reach the soul in torment, Legbara had provided a bodily housing for his soul, then set events in motion to have him freed from the duppy bowl. But too late, too late. His earthly body had tried its best, but she was gone again.*

*Oh, the sound of that calabash finally cracking was a world exploding, a heart breaking twice.*

*Flying to join its body, the soul ember took comfort that the union would bring forgetfulness. The still-growing brain wouldn't have room for the memories.*

Sleeping fitfully in Romni Jenny's arms, Baby jerked once, hard. Dunston's soul and his new body finally were truly one. Then he fell into a peaceful, coma-deep sleep. No longer Gros-Jeanne's doomed second husband. Nothing but a baby now.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Egg don't have no right  
at rockstone dance.*

—Traditional saying

Held down on the table by Barry and Crack Monkey, Ti-Jeanne glared defiantly at Rudy. Inside she was quailing in fear, but she refused to show it. She watched as Rudy came out of what had been the restaurant on the observation deck level of the CN Tower. He was bearing a large pot. His newly old body walked with a stoop. He bent painfully and scraped the grave dust that had been in the calabash into the pot. Grimacing, he straightened, put the pot on top of the console that displayed the world's weather. "This pot for you," he told Ti-Jeanne in his breaking octogenarian's voice. "For your spirit when I catch it." He reached into a cupboard under the console and came to stand over her. He held a calibrated phial of buff powder. Tremors in his hand made the cobalt blue crystals slide restlessly back and forth. He asked Crack and Barry, "How much I should give she? How much oonuh think she weigh?"

"Bout one forty, boss," Barry replied. "And hard, too, you see? No fat on she bones." He gave her a slimy grin.

"I hope you did enjoy feeling me up," Ti-Jeanne taunted him. "For I go be the last woman you touch. I is a seer woman, and *Idream* it."

Lies, pure lies, but she had the small satisfaction of seeing a look of doubt and unease creep over Barry's face. "Shut up," he told her.

"You go make me?"

He released her arm, hauled back his hand, and slapped her face hard. Stunned, she nevertheless swung out with her free arm, felt it connect with his jaw.

"Ow! Bitch!"

"Barry!" Rudy's voice still had the sound of command, although it shook with the weight of the years that had fallen on him in seconds. "Mind me, man! If you only get me vex tonight, me will take you out and shoot you myself. Just hold she. And ignore what she say." Barry sucked his teeth but grabbed her arm again, slamming it down to the table harder than was necessary.

*Not to think, not to think. Instinct alone.* Ti-Jeanne had been using the words as a mantra ever since she had set out for Rudy's this night. But her heart was trying to fight its way out of her chest. If she were truly to obey her instincts, she would be begging for mercy, promising anything, if only the three men would let her go free. She bit her lips and just breathed, in and out. The need for breath was a deeper instinct than even fear.

"Hold she good now, Crack," Rudy instructed the man restraining her legs. No need to reinforce the order. Crack's grip on her was already hideously strong, his fingers digging into each leg just above the knee. But she would not cry, she would not speak.

Rudy picked up the butcher knife, turned it from side to side, inspecting it.

Ti-Jeanne found she couldn't keep her promise of silence. "What you going to do?" She followed the glinty twists of the knife with her eyes, unable to look away from it.

"Let in the poison, my darling," quavered Rudy. He picked up one of her plaits, gently touched the knife to it. The blade sliced clean through. "You ever slash buff, granddaughter?"

"Uh-uh." Her voice came out high and childish. She would not cry, she would not beg.

"Is Haiti people first make it, you nah know? From poison toad and some herbs. Bufo toad. Is that name that buff come from." He rotated the phial in front of her face. Crazy, all she could think was what a beautiful shade of blue they were.

Rudy picked up the rubber gloves he had placed on the table and snapped them onto his hands. Even through the gloves it was obvious how veined and arthritic they were. He scowled at them.

There was another measured phial on the table, a molasses-thick liquid. He carefully poured a measure of it into the buff crystals, using one hand to still the tremors in the other. "When people slash buff," he said, swirling the phial to mix the two substances, "them only use little bit, cut it with crack. It make them feel say them flying. We go give you a different mixture of it, though. Buff with some other Haiti medicine mix in. You know what buff does do you, Ti-Jeanne?"

"Nerve and muscle paralyzant," she whispered through clenched teeth. She'd seen the deceptively relaxed bodies of people who'd OD'd on buff.

"Yes, my darling. Your grandmammy teach you good. So you know why I have to be careful how much



you get. Nah want your heart and lungs to stop working, right? Want you to be awake and know what we a-do to you. And the other things I mix in? They go lower your emotional resistance, make you more suggestible. For you see that paralysis, Ti-Jeanne? Is the first stage in making a zombie.”

Then he took the knife and slowly made a deep incision in the meat of her thigh muscle. Ti-Jeanne arched her back as the knife traced a line of agony up her leg. The trembling of his hand made the pain even worse. The grunting sounds issuing past her teeth weren't sobs, not quite.

“It stinging you, nuh? Good. I coulda give a injection, but I want you to feel me make the cut. For all the trouble you cause me today.” She tried desperately to heave herself free of the restraining arms, but it was no use. Rudy poured some crystals from the phial into the gash on her leg, checked the level in the container, poured some more. Then he used his thumb to work the mixture deeply into the wound. Her leg began to go numb immediately. With every beat of her heart, the poison was moving deeper into her body.

“Yes, the first stage for making a zombie. Combine the paralysis and the suggestibility with the right kind of um, *indoctrination*, and the zombie go do anything me tell it. Sometimes me want little help 'round here, you understand? To keep the place clean and so.”

Both legs were numb now. An eerie sensation of cold crept over Ti-Jeanne's trunk as the superficial nerves went dead.

“A zombie can't do nothing complicated,” Rudy continued, “but if you tell it to wash the dishes, it go wash every dish in the place.”

“Clean ones and all,” Crack sniggered, “if you don't say different.” Rudy smirked at the comment. Ti-Jeanne found she couldn't turn her head.

“Sometimes me only want to teach somebody a lesson. Like that Melba, holding back some of she earnings from me. But for you, sweetness,” Rudy said, holding her by the chin to look deeply into her eyes, “me have more than that in store for you. If you could convince a spirit from out a dead body to serve you, then you nah have to fear nothing again. Not enemies, not bullets, not age, not death. The duppy could kill your enemies, trap them souls in it duppy bowl, if you want. It could stop bullets, eat death. If you only have the balls to kill somebody and trap their soul in bowl to serve you. Is Legbara tell me that.”

*Not Legbara!* Ti-Jeanne tried to shout. *Him woulda never tell you how to do this!* But all that came from her flaccid mouth was a vague, grunting noise.

“Stupid spirit.” Rudy chuckled. “Him think say I woulda find that so horrible, I wouldn't do it. Him think wrong.”

He slapped Ti-Jeanne in the face, right where Barry had just hit her. She felt involuntary tears start to her eyes. She couldn't blink them away.

“And I come to find out something him nah tell me. A duppy from a dead somebody not too smart. Smarter than a zombie, but you still can't give it nothing too complicated to do, seen? But if you split off the duppy from it body while the body still alive! Well, then you have a servant for true. One that could teach you everything it did know in life. You know your mother was a seer woman, right?”

He slapped the other side of her face. “Ah, like you ain't feel that one, granddaughter?” She hadn't. Her head had rocked to the side with the force of the blow, but there was no pain. Her tears flowed freely for her mother and for the man who had trapped his own daughter's soul in a container so that he would never have to die.

“All right, she ready now,” said Rudy. “Let we start.”

*Start?* She had thought they'd already started.

They lifted her inert body from the table to the floor. She couldn't help but see what they were doing. She couldn't control the muscles that would close her eyes. Rudy produced an old, fire-blackened knife, on the blade of which he heaped a few mounds of some kind of powder. “Gunpowder,” he said conversationally to her. “Me know say your body can't speak, but when your spirit agree to serve me, this gunpowder go burst into flames. The body could lie, but when your spirit ready to accept my bond, it go tell me true.” They put her in a black sack. She could smell the white rum that was being sprinkled on it. Some of it dripped through the sack and made her open eyes burn.

She heard Rudy grunt as he eased his old body onto the ground by her head. Then he spoke to her once more. "Ti-Jeanne? Me know say you could hear me, granddaughter." Coming from Rudy's lips, the word "granddaughter" sounded as obscene as a curse. Ti-Jeanne prayed that he'd given her too much of the bufo poison, that her heart would stop of its own accord. But she remained stubbornly alive.

"I go tell you a little something, Ti-Jeanne." His voice sounded companionable, as though they were sharing an intimate secret, just between the two of them. "Is your mother sheself ask me to put she duppy in the bowl."

*You lie*, Ti-Jeanne thought.

"A-true, me tell you," Rudy said. "Mi-Jeanne come running to me for help. Your grandmother did putting visions in she head, trying to control she. Trying to make Mi-Jeanne stay with she. Making she see things to frighten she."

Ti-Jeanne remembered that night so many years ago when her mother had woken up screaming. Mi-Jeanne hadn't wanted Mami's comforting. She and Mami had been arguing a lot. Dunston had moved in and Mi-Jeanne was talking about leaving, taking Ti-Jeanne and finding their own place to live. Rudy's words echoed in Ti-Jeanne's head. Maybe he was telling the truth, and Mami was at the root of all their problems. Maybe Mami had tried the same trick on both Ti-Jeanne and Mi-Jeanne; caused the visions and made them feel that their only chance for being rid of them was to stay with her and receive her help. Ti-Jeanne was confused. The drug made it hard to breathe, hard to think clearly. Rudy's voice came again:

"Think about it little more, sweetheart. You nah see the power I did give Mi-Jeanne? Knife couldn't cut she, blows couldn't lick she, love couldn't leave she, heart couldn't hurt she. She coulda go wherever she want, nobody to stop she."

His voice flowed soothingly over her. *Heart couldn't hurt she*. What if Tony hadn't been able to slide into Ti-Jeanne's heart like a thorn from a rose and stick there, aching and aching? She probably wouldn't have got pregnant. There would be no Baby constantly demanding her attention and her energy. *She coulda go wherever she want, nobody to stop she*. Suppose she could have chosen her own way, instead of trying to tear herself in three to satisfy Tony, and Baby, and Mami?

"Mi-Jeanne beg me to help she live only in she spirit, for she didn't want the pains of the body no more. The only part of she flesh that she take into that calabash with she was she eyes, so she could see for me. She gouge them out sheself and put them in the duppy bowl, Ti-Jeanne."

Ti-Jeanne's mind reeled at the image of Mi-Jeanne digging her own eyes out of her head. She must have been desperate to become a duppy!

"And, granddaughter," came Rudy's soft whisper, "if you hadn't break she bowl, she woulda never dead."

Rudy was right. She had killed her own mother. "Uh, uh," Ti-Jeanne moaned through her paralyzed larynx. She couldn't feel the tears that she knew were rolling down her face.

"Granddaughter, I giving you a chance to be free of all this right now," Rudy told her. "That body don't have to be your home no more. You don't have to feel pain no more, sweetheart. Your granddaddy could help you. After I speak the right words, the powder you take will give your spirit strength to act on it own, without the body. Let your spirit talk to me, Ti-Jeanne. Let it light the gunpowder."

He started mumbling the words of a ritual in a language she didn't recognise. The mumbling went faster and faster, the words running together into a gargling noise. A gurgle. A thumping like a low drum tattoo, as though Rudy's body were jerking about on the floor.

The effect of the bufo powder on Ti-Jeanne was increasing. She felt herself floating free of her body. She lifted clear of the black sack. She could see Rudy quivering on the floor at her head as his lips moved in the words of the ritual. He was in some kind of trance. Crack and Barry stood nearby, watching the knife blade. She could feel the bonds parting between herself and her body. The ants-under-the-skin feeling had become distant. The pain of her distended belly had eased, and the burning in her body's fixed-open eyes. Her astral body saw clearly through Guinea Land eyes instead, saw the spirits of the three men sitting like slipcovers over their corporeal bodies. Rudy's fluttered and shuddered in synch with the quivering of his tranced flesh. She could still feel her body, nothing but an aching weight dragging her

back to the pain of her life. If she said yes to Rudy, she could fly. She could burn bright as fire and never hurt. It was what she'd always wanted. Something clenched and released in her astral form, like an unfamiliar muscle flexing. The first mound of gunpowder on the knife burst into flame, sizzled instantly to black, and died out, leaving the rest of the gunpowder untouched. Barry pounded Crack on the shoulder, pointed at the knife. Crack nodded, his narrowed eyes holding satisfaction. Rudy kept up the incantation. Ti-Jeanne made the strange inner motion again, almost just to see if she could do it consciously. Gleefully she watched the second mound of gunpowder flare. Two more to go.

Ti-Jeanne did an experimental roll through the air, a full 360 degrees. Her flesh body always got dizzy easily, but her duppy body had no sense of disorientation from the spinning. She dove down toward the floor and, to her delight, went right through it to the level beneath. Moving through the solid surface tickled, like swimming through bubbles.

She was hovering above the CN Tower's famed glass-bottomed floor. The sight of the 1,800-foot drop to the city below her would have made her flesh body queasy and afraid, but her duppy body claimed air as its home.

*Knife couldn't cut she, blows couldn't lick she. She could go wherever she want, nobody to stop she.*

*Yes, is this I want for true,* Ti-Jeanne thought. She flowed back up to the observation deck level, mentally reaching out as she did so to flame the third mound of gunpowder. One more mound left.

The Jab-Jab was perched on the deck, knees crooked upward, feet flat on the surface. It hugged its angular knees and peered at her through the branches of its limbs. "Having fun, daughter?"

She heard the censure in its voice. Somebody else trying to make her do what they wanted, not what she wished. "You can't stop me," she told it sullenly.

"You right, doux-doux. And I can't stop the shadow-catcher, neither," it said, jerking a pencil-point chin in the direction of Rudy. "He did make up he mind long time to turn to the dark side. We lose he now. We can't talk to the ones who won't talk to us."

Rudy's mumbling had taken on a rhythm. It seemed to fill the air. Its cadences pulled at Ti-Jeanne's duppy body. Her gaze kept being pulled to him.

The "scree, scree, scree" of a noisemaker jerked her attention away from Rudy. The Jab-Jab was smiling its jokey smile at her and swinging its hand around on its wrist. The hand whirled round and round on its unnatural joint. The three men didn't seem to hear the racket. The Jab-Jab steadied the swinging hand with the other, stopping the screeching noise. "You ever ask your grandmother what she was?" the Jab-Jab said.

"She was a seer woman," Ti-Jeanne replied. Even the memory of her just murdered grandmother caused her little pain. She was impatient for the Jab-Jab to stop its chatter. She had business with Rudy.

"Yes, it have plenty names for what Gros-Jeanne was. Myalist, bush doctor, iyalorisha, curandera, four-eye, even obeah woman for them who don't understand. But you what she woulda call it, if you had ask she?"

"What you want, Jab-Jab?"

"Gros-Jeanne woulda tell you that all she doing is serving the spirits. And that anybody who try to live good, who try to help people who need it, who try to have respect for life, and age, and those who go before, them all doing the same thing: serving the spirits."

Ti-Jeanne remembered all the slaps and whippings she'd received at her grandmother's hand. How was that "living good"?

As though she'd spoken, the Jab-Jab narrowed its eyes at her and nodded. "Yes, Gros-Jeanne was a hard woman. Now Rudy, he does try and make the spirits serve *he*."

And the visions flashed around her, *through* her, invading sight, smell, sound, touch:

*A blow to the side of her face jolted her, sent her flying back into a cheap aluminum folding chair. She was Gros-Jeanne as a younger woman, and Rudy had just backhanded her. He stood over her, fist pulled back for a second blow. He roared, "You think say is money me make from? Eh?" Through tears and the blood in her eyes, she could see her young daughter, Mi-Jeanne, watching, fist jammed into her frightened mouth, from the bedroom doorway of the run-down apartment.*

*Hunger. It filled her, burned her up. She would die of it, kill for it. She was Mi-Jeanne's duppy, looking up at Rudy from the little world of the calabash. From that angle, shadows limned the underplanes of his face, made him look otherworldly. He tipped a cup into the calabash, and blood poured over her, intoxicating in its heat and smell. She drank eagerly, but the cupful was not enough. "You could have more," he told her, "when you kill Dunston for me. Kill he and trap he soul in there with you, and you could have all he blood." She railed silently at him, but the hunger was too much. It made her a thing without a will of her own, obedient only to Rudy's commands. She knew that she would murder her stepfather.*

*She was slumped in a chair in this same room, belly painfully swollen and eyes fixed open from the effects of the zombie drug. She couldn't move. She was Tony, watching Rudy tear a strip of living skin . . .*

"Ai! Stop, Jab-Jab, stop." The images of Melba's last moments were too much to bear.

Rudy had lied to her. And she had wanted to believe it. Her grandmother had abused her offspring and had suffered for it, in her own heart's pain as she watched her daughter and her granddaughter reject her. *Love couldn't leave she.* Rudy cared nothing for love or loss. What would she be if she became his creature? Hesitantly she said to the Jab-Jab, "I can't keep giving my will into other people hands no more, ain't? I have to decide what I want to do for myself." No answer. It wasn't going to tell her. "But Jab-Jab, how I go stop someone as powerful as he?"

"Rudy is Bull Bucker," it said quietly, "so you have to be Duppy Conqueror."

She looked up, but the Jab-Jab was gone. She had to figure out how to stop Rudy herself.

She remembered her grandmother's words: *The centre pole is the bridge between the worlds.* Why had those words come to her right then?

Ti-Jeanne thought of the centre pole of the palais, reaching up into the air and down toward the ground. She thought of the building she was in. The CN Tower. And she understood what it was: 1,815 feet of the tallest centre pole in the world. Her duppy body almost laughed a silent *kya-kya*, a jokey Jab-Jab laugh. For like the spirit tree that the centre pole symbolized, the CN Tower dug roots deep into the ground where the dead lived and pushed high into the heavens where the oldest ancestors lived. The tower was their ladder into this world. A Jab-Jab type of joke, oui.

She was halfway into Guinea Land herself. She could call the spirits to help her. She wouldn't have to call very loudly.

What were the names Mami had told her? "Shango!" she called in her mind. "Ogun! Osain!" Her flesh body moved its lips slightly, trying through the paralyzing effect of the drug to form the same words.

"Shakpana, Emanjah! Oshun, Oya! And Papa Legbara, my Eshu! Come down, come down and help your daughter!"

With a flash of instinct, she knew that the call to the heavens should be mirrored by a call to the earth.

"All you children; every one Rudy kill to feed he duppy bowl—come and let we stop he from making another one! Dunston! And Mami! And Mi-Jeanne! Is Ti-Jeanne calling you! Come up, come up and help your daughter! Melba, you come, too! Climb the pole, allyou; climb the pole!"

She wanted to wait in her duppy body to see what would happen, but her flesh body was reeling her in again. Its pain was descending upon her. Like tumbling headfirst into mud, she rejoined her flesh body, which had worked itself partway out of the bag. The drug was beginning to fade. She could move her head a little and blink her eyes.

The chandelier was swaying. In fact, the whole structure of the CN Tower was shaking. An 1,800-foot needle, trembling. Rudy grunted. He sat up out of his trance and in his old-man voice asked, "What the rass a-go on?"

No one answered him. The bottles of alcohol on the bar started to clink together. The chairs shuffled around under the dinner tables. The lights flickered, and there was a low, tooth-rattling hum. Ti-Jeanne's head felt stuffed full. She could hear the rhythm of the blood vessels in her brain, pounding like drums. Rudy was standing. He tottered on his ancient legs, grabbed for the edge of a table to steady himself. "Must be an earthquake," Barry said nervously. He took a small step and looked around as though he could see the source of the disturbance.

Ti-Jeanne was facing one of the windows that ringed the observation deck, so it was she who saw the flash of white light flower in the night sky, zigzag down, and strike the glass. The building flashed into the negative against her abused retinas. Black flared to blinding white, colour to dead black. The structure of the tower creaked. Outside in the miles-high air, Shango Lord Thunder drummed his rhythm while Oya of the storm flashed and shattered the air like knives. Ti-Jeanne had an impression of an ecstatic woman's features, silver dreadlocks tossing wildly as she danced around a hugely muscled, graceful man who clasped a tall drum between his knees. The lightning flashes crawled, whipping around the length of the tower. The first of the Oldest Ones had arrived.

Rain pelted down like boulders. The lightning cracked fissures into the tower's structure, and water began to leak in, buckets of it. The water traced forms along the wall, and two majestic Black women stepped out from its current: graceful Oshun and beautiful Emanjah, water goddesses both, anger terrible on their unearthly faces.

Crack groaned. His body twisted. His skin erupted in suppurating sores. Ti-Jeanne could see the halo of the spirit inhabiting his head, overpowering his own spirit. Shakpana, lord of disease. Crack reached a palsied hand to Barry for help. At Shakpana/Crack's touch, pus-filled buboes blossomed on the other man's body. Barry trembled, clutched at his own throat, and fell dead to the ground. His corpse began to swell immediately with putrefaction. Oshun wrinkled her nose in distaste and fanned her face with the intricate cutwork fan she was holding. It appeared to be made of beaten gold. She delicately picked up the hem of her white-trimmed yellow robe and stepped out of the way. Her sister Emanjah simply quirked an eyebrow in amusement. The tribal scars shifted on her cheeks when she smiled.

Then Ti-Jeanne felt the beneficence of Osain, the healer, leaching the poison from her body. Her burns and cuts healed. She could move again. She was holding Osain in her head, but it was as though he were cradling her consciousness in his hands, allowing her to remain aware simultaneously with him. Ti-Jeanne sat up and thrust off the black bag. She felt both light and heavy, part spirit, part flesh. Her eyes searched and found the knife with which Rudy had tried to bind her. It had kept its weight of gunpowder. With her spirit strength, she melted the knife where it lay. It shrank into itself in a glowing lump of slag, leaving the last mound of gunpowder unfired. "No," she said simply to her grandfather.

Ogun-who-wields-the-knife nodded his satisfaction at her. He picked up the red-hot lump of metal and popped it into his mouth like a toolum candy. He smiled, pleasure in every deep line of his broad, brown face. He licked the last sweetness of the iron off his fingers, then with his square, strong blacksmith's hands, he bent to the floor, brushed the gunpowder away, and was gone.

Lightning cracked once more, then the storm vanished as suddenly as it had arrived.

"One more of we left to appear, cousin," said Osain with her lips. Rudy fled to the elevator and started frantically pushing at the button.

The pressure in Ti-Jeanne's head was almost gone, now that the Oldest Ones had manifested. Except for Legbara. Where was her Eshu?

She understood then. She knew why the Jab-Jab was always grinning. She laughed, starting deep in her belly. She laughed at all her fears, all her sulks. She laughed for the pleasure of knowing that Mi-Jeanne's and Gros-Jeanne's spirits had reached home safe to Guinea Land. She laughed at the sorry man who had thought he could hold death forever in a calabash. She laughed, because now she knew who the Jab-Jab was.

The elevator dinged. The door opened, and there he was, tophatted, skull-faced, impossibly tall. He held a pretty sprig of nightshade coily in front of his mouth and giggled along with her. Papa Legbara, Prince of Cemetery. Her Eshu. The Jab-Jab.

He was supporting a child in his other arm. Her arms were wrapped trustingly around his neck. She turned her head to look at Rudy, and the lips of the deep slash in her neck rubbed against each other. Rudy's toothless mouth dropped open. He mewled and backed away. "Yes," said Legbara in his death-rattle voice, "is you send this one to me, Master Sheldon. In fact, all of these my children." He stepped out of the elevator, followed by ghoul after ghoul, many of them children, all bearing the marks of Rudy's knife on their bodies. A man dragged himself along the floor on the stumps that had once terminated in hands and feet. Melba held her own skin draped over one arm. Her stride was determined.

And . . .

“Mami,” Ti-Jeanne said. Her grandmother smiled proudly at her. Her chest gaped open where her heart had been removed. “You do good, sweetness,” Mami told her.

“No!” It was Rudy. “Oonuh can’t touch me! I move beyond where the powers could reach!”

Mami turned to him, hands on her hips. “Rudolph Sheldon. What a man I take for my husband, oui? You have to understand, Rudy. The powers deaf to you, is true. Them won’t come if you call. But is not you call them this time.”

Rudy tried to flee, hobbling on his aged legs. His face was a mask of terror, lips gaping. He tripped over Barry’s corpse and fell hard. The distended cadaver split open under his weight. The stench was appalling. Whining, Rudy tried to wipe the gore off his body and crawl away from the corpse at the same time. The ghouls silently blocked his way.

“No, master,” said Legbara. “You ain’t going nowhere. You try to give me all these deaths in exchange for you own, but I refuse the deal. I give them all back to you.”

Rudy screamed as the weight of every murder he had done fell on him. Ti-Jeanne had to look away then. The sounds coming from him were bad enough: a desperate plea for mercy; a choked-off gargle; a cracking; then a wet, ripping noise. When she looked back, the chunks of flesh lying there looked like something that should have been on a butcher’s block. It was fair, but it sickened her.

“Papa,” she said to Legbara, “take him away, please. Rudy, I mean.”

“Your grandfather,” Osain reminded her.

“Yes.” Though it had come to this, he’d been her grandfather, her blood.

A deep, warm voice interrupted. “Nah give the child any more to fret about, Osain. Me know say she not going forget is who blood she come from.” It was Emanjah. Her blue-and-white robes clung to her ample body like water droplets on skin. She was very beautiful. “Sister,” she said to Oshun, “help me wash away this garbage, please.”

The water leaking into the room was already ankle deep. Now it rose, swirling, as high as Ti-Jeanne’s knees. She shivered in its cold. She could see fish dancing in it, could hear the cry of gulls. For a second she thought she could smell the sea. Then the flood subsided. Barry’s body and Rudy’s remains were gone. Oshun and Emanjah had taken them away. Ti-Jeanne felt a longing pull at her. Emanjah’s voice had had something of her mother’s in it.

The elevator door opened again, and the ghouls all trooped into it. Mami blew a kiss at Ti-Jeanne.

Legbara set the little girl he was carrying on her feet. “Go on, sweetheart,” he said to her. “I go follow soon.” But she clung to his hand, looking at Ti-Jeanne. Then in a soft voice (for much of the air was whistling out through the slash in her throat), she said to Ti-Jeanne, “I’m Emily. Tell Mumtaz. She’ll remember.”

Then she turned and ran into the elevator to join the others. The door closed to take the passengers back down into the earth.

“Crick-Crack,” said Crack Monkey. Ti-Jeanne gasped and whirled around to face him. Shakpana was still riding his body: Ti-Jeanne could see the halo surrounding his head. The lord of disease laughed at her, a sound halfway between a wheeze and a cough. “Like you still can’t take a joke, doux-doux!”

“That ain’t funny!”

“No, I guess you right.” Crack’s voice was fading fast. His eyes were sunken in his head, his lips cracked and dry. He was probably burning up with fever. His sores oozed. His spirit light was fading. Shakpana was riding him to death. But Crack’s eyes blazed out at her from the dying body, hatred flashing from them. Ti-Jeanne feared his gaze alone could strike her. She stood well out of his way. She looked around for something heavy to beat him off with, if she had to. But Crack dropped to his knees, huffing for breath. “Just a little more,” panted Shakpana with his lips.

Crack slumped to the ground. The Shakpana glow left his head. His spirit casing dulled and frayed away to nothing. He was dead.

“Good,” said Osain. “That bud pinch off the vine.”

“Well, brother,” came a voice like the wind creaking in tree boughs, “what you still doing there in my daughter head?” The Jab-Jab was walking on its hands around the room. Its legs waved awkwardly in

the air. It crooked its head up at Ti-Jeanne inquiringly. She couldn't help it. She laughed.

"Legbara, your daughter still need plenty healing yet," said Osain with her mouth. "Body get better, but spirit still bust-up, I think."

"Is okay, Papa Osain, thank you," Ti-Jeanne told him, a little surprised at her own audacity. "I think you start the healing good already. I could do the rest myself."

"All right, cousin. Till later, then."

"Later." *Later?*

"Walk good." And her head was her own again. She could see the sun coming up on the horizon. The day was new.

With a clattering noise, the Jab-Jab righted itself. It cackled at her, patting its two-by-four belly in self-congratulation. "Heh-heh! Daughter, ain't I tell you you go be Duppy Conqueror this day?"

"Is allyou do all this, Papa, not me."

"Well, is you call all my duppy to come do your bidding. And child, you do a thing I never see nobody do before. For a few minutes there, you hold eight of the Oldest Ones in your head one time." His face got serious for a minute. "Don't try it again, eh? It could burn your brain out."

"No, Papa."

She was speaking to thin air. She hadn't slept for two nights. It was time to go home. She took the elevator down to the ground.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Beat big drum, wave fine flag-o,*

*Quashee come to town.*

*No more fear Jack's obeah bag-o,*

*Quashee knock him down.*

—Traditional song

Daylight made Ti-Jeanne squint. Light glinted off the windowpanes of those mega-high-rises that still had them. She walked east along Front Street. She grinned idiotically at the familiar tall, narrow wedge shape of the Gooderham Building jammed into the tip of Berczy Park. Mami called it the flatiron building. *Had* called it. Sadly, she remembered her last glimpse of her grandmother's face, blowing a kiss. As she got closer to Saint Lawrence Market, she began to see stalls piled high with goods for sale. It was market day. She had forgotten. The sunny day had spilled the marketplace at Front and Jarvis out onto both sides of the street. The clamour of people was deafening. Despite her fatigue, though, Ti-Jeanne edged her way happily through the crowd. She had a yearning to lose herself in this noisy throng of people going about the business of staying alive.

Bob Kelly's cabbages were round and fat this year. She must come back and get some; Pavel had been promising to show her and Mami how to make cabbage rolls. Now it would just be her.

Bob nodded at her, too busy dickering with a customer to stop and chat. She nodded and smiled back.

The smile felt so good on her face that she kept it there for a little while after she'd passed Bob's stall.

The next stall was the shoe repair. Sweat trailing down her plump neck into the deep cleavage of her bustline, Emma Joyce was busy tracing the shape of a young woman's patched running shoes onto a scrap of the tire rubber she used to make new soles. For Emma, this was a hot day. She looked up, put her hand to her forehead to wipe it, and saw Ti-Jeanne. Her face did something complicated, then she called out, "Girl, I'm so sorry to hear about your grandma. Jenny told us." Her customer stared curiously at Ti-Jeanne, relinquishing her other shoe out of her hand only when Emma pulled on it.

"I know," Ti-Jeanne said. "I go miss she." She missed her grandmother already. Mi-Jeanne too. It was hard to find her mother and lose her again in the same day. Ti-Jeanne wondered what Emma had heard, exactly, about the whole thing. She didn't feel like trying to explain about Rudy.

"Are you going to carry on now that she's gone?"

"Yes, are you?" Mary Hayward had joined them, wiping her hands on her apron. "Here, take this." She handed Ti-Jeanne a pot of her honey. "Oh, and Jenny's up at your farm. She said she was looking after the baby there until you got home."

A little knot of worry eased. Josée had kept her promise. "Thank you. I ain't know what I go do. I have

to think about it.”

By the time she was out of the market, she was juggling a half pound of rabbit pemmican—working one rich, meaty strip in her mouth—a bottle of cranberry jelly, a carved gourd rattle (“for the baby”), and Mary’s honey. Grief still darkened her thoughts, but the attentions of the market people had soothed her a little.

The sun was at noon. Her breasts were leaking through her shirt. Fortunately her jacket concealed that. Since Baby’s birth, she had learned that the first few months of motherhood were about fatigue and leakiness. She hoped Baby was tolerating the cow’s or goat’s milk that Jenny was probably feeding him. He’d been a colicky baby.

She barked with laughter as she was walking past the Moss Park Armoury Building. Someone had used cement to convert the cannon that stood out front into a massive penis. Plastic shutter rods made a spray of semen. The men lounging on the steps of the armoury snickered at her reaction. The heaviness of loss in her heart hadn’t eased, but there was room there for humour, too.

A few minutes later, she was finally home. She stood outside her front door, reminding herself that Mami would not be inside to greet her. Then she remembered Mi-Jeanne’s body. She hadn’t been able to take the time to bury it when the duppy had been herding her and Tony out of the house. “Oi, Papa,” she muttered, “I wonder is what Jenny think when she seethat ?” Well, Jenny was a tough old woman, had seen a lot of harsh things in her time. Ti-Jeanne opened the door and stepped inside. She called out, “Jenny?”

“Ti-Jeanne? Hush. You’ll wake them up, dear. Come on upstairs.”

Lord, who could “them” be now? She hoped that Tony hadn’t made his way back to the farm. She wasn’t quite ready to deal with him yet.

Jenny greeted her at the bedroom door with a sad smile and a big hug. “Yoy, my darling. I’m so, so sorry about your grandmother. Yoy, *Devla, che choromos*. What a hard thing! May she sleep well, my dear.”

Ti-Jeanne held on, long and hard. Finally Jenny led her into the room, one hand still around her waist. Her mother’s body was lying in the bed.

She didn’t know how she found herself kneeling by the bed. Mi-Jeanne looked weak, but her breathing was deep and regular. She was alive! Ti-Jeanne sat down hard on the bed. Mi-Jeanne stirred a little but didn’t wake.

“I found her lying in Gros-Jeanne’s room,” Jenny said, bending down to put Baby in Ti-Jeanne’s arms.

“Good thing it was me that found her. She had lost some blood, but I fixed her up.”

“Is my mother,” Ti-Jeanne whispered.

“I know, dear. She told me when she came to. She was just groaning and twitching at first, and I thought the bullet might have damaged some nerves, but I think she’ll be all right with rest.”

“The bullet ain’t kill she.”

“No, it didn’t. He was a bad shot, whoever he was. *Te xal o rako lengo gortiano!* May a cancer eat his throat.”

No wonder Mi-Jeanne hadn’t been able to attack Rudy. She remembered now that she hadn’t seen Mi-Jeanne among the ghouls who had finally confronted Rudy. “The duppy must be come back to she body when I free it.”

“I don’t understand, dear.”

“Nothing.”

Baby stirred awake, yawned, opened his eyes, and gave her a big, gummy smile. Ti-Jeanne noticed how his whole body seemed to smile at the sight of her. She smiled back, nuzzled his cheek. He was already rooting hungrily at her breast. Ti-Jeanne unbuttoned her jacket, yanked up her shirt, and gave him the nipple.

Jenny patted his head. “He’s beautiful, your baby.”

“Help me up, Jenny?” A mother found, lost, then found again. This final shock was too much. Ti-Jeanne went into her grandmother’s room. Jenny settled her on her side in the bed, so she could feed Baby as she slept.

“You look half-dead, dear. I’ll watch over you and the little one.”



Dreams took her immediately. They were meaningless pictures only, floating through her head. No visions.

••••

Dr. Wright was keying in the hospital code almost before her half-awake mind registered the beeping earbug. Emergency.

“Ottawa General, Cardiac,” the operator’s voice said. His words deactivated the urgent piping that only Margaret could hear.

“Dr. Wright. You paged me?”

“Ah, yes. Sorry to wake you, Doctor, but you have to get to the hospital right away. It’s the Premier. Looks like she’s rejecting the transplant.”

“Fuck!” Beside her in the bed, Mira groaned and sat up, woken by the sound of Margaret’s voice. She was used to these late night calls. She waited.

“Ambulance is on its way to get you, Doctor.” In fact, Margaret could already hear the siren screaming through the Ottawa streets.

“Yeah, here it is now.” Margaret clicked off, got up, and began dressing.

“You gotta go?” Mira asked.

“Yes, love. Sorry.” She leaned over and gave her partner a quick kiss.

The ambulance arrived with a screeching of wheels. Someone was already leaning on the doorbell.

Margaret headed for the stairs. She yelled back over her shoulder, “Looks like the Premier’s fucking cacking out on me!”

She grabbed her coat, was out the door while she was still putting it on, mumbling a greeting to the ambulance attendant. She clambered into the back of the van. As the ambulance pulled away, Margaret looked up to the bedroom window of the house she and Mira owned. Mira was standing there, waving. Margaret buckled in, keyed on a monitor, and called Don Fang. The screen showed him in Uttley’s room, face still crumpled with sleep.

“What’s doing, Don? She in rejection?”

“Well, the heart’s rejecting her, actually. Take a look at this.” He pressed some keys. Margaret’s screen split into two. Half of it was Don’s face, the other half a constantly refreshed readout from the CareVue that was monitoring Uttley’s progress. Lungs failing. Kidneys failing. Severe skin lesions. “Yeah,” said Uttley, “that’s GVHD all right.” Graft Versus Host Disease. Cells from the donor organs were attacking Uttley’s immune system. “Damn!”

“Thought so. Worst case of it I’ve ever seen,” Fang said worriedly.

“Get her on an immunosuppressant drip, fast. OKT5 should do it.” That was like detonating a bomb to kill a fly, but it looked as though they had no choice.

Fang gave the order, then said, “The reaction’s so extreme. It’s like that heart can’t wait to get out of there.”

When Uttley awoke two weeks later, she would have only vague recollections of an extended nightmare. While Margaret Wright and Don Fang were fighting to establish a symbiosis between their patient’s body and its new heart, Catherine Uttley’s unconscious mind had been conducting a battle of its own. At some level in her dreams, she’d been aware that the lifesaving organ had been placed in her body, had felt relief and a sense of welcome toward the donated heart.

*But then the dream had changed. She had realised that she was being invaded in some way, taken over. The heart’s rhythm felt wrong, not her own. It had leapt and battered against her chest as though it were determined to break out. Uttley had been stern at first. “Stop that. You’re here to help me. Just settle down and do your job.” The heart’s frenzied buffeting had slowed to a more regular pace, but then Uttley began to feel a numbness spreading out from her chest with each beat of the heart: down her arms, through her trunk and legs. Bit by bit, she was losing the ability to control her own body. The heart was taking it over. Uttley became alarmed, had tried talking to the alien organ. “Please,” she said. “This is my body. You can’t take it away from me.” But the creeping numbness spread up her neck. She was now completely paralyzed. All she could do was wait for it to reach her brain. She had known that when that happened, she would no longer be*

*herself. Unable to move, unable to save herself, she had felt her brain cells being given up one by one. Then blackness. Nothing.*

*And then she was aware again. Her dream body and brain were hers once more, but with a difference. The heart—her heart—was dancing joyfully between her ribs. When she looked down at herself, she could see the blood moving through her body to its beat. In every artery, every vein, every capillary: two distinct streams, intertwined. She had worried for nothing. She was healed, a new woman now. “Stupidness,” she said, chiding herself for her unnecessary fears.*

By the time they let her have visitors, most of tubes were out of her body and she could sit up in bed for long stretches of time without getting fatigued. She felt *wonderful*. She was champing at the bit, impatient to get back to work on her election campaign. She spent most of her waking moments tapping notes into her palmbook.

“Good news, Premier,” said her policy advisor, breezing into her room and immediately yanking his palmbook out of his briefcase. “You just tipped the polls at fifty-two percent support. Without any campaigning yet, even.”

“Yeah,” Uttley replied distractedly. “Listen, Constantine, I’m going to change my tactics a little.”

“What? But I’ve got the press statements already written, the news spot lined up—”

“Shouldn’t be a problem. It’s just occurred to me; this volunteer organ donation thing will never work. Human beings will never be eager to deed away bits of themselves, even after they’re dead.”

“But . . .” Constantine spluttered.

He was usually the one providing the social analysis. Uttley knew that it hadn’t been her strong point, trying to figure out why people acted the way they did. But lying on her ass in that bed for so long had given her time to think.

“No, it’s easy. We still come down hard on the pig farming thing. That’ll keep the animal rights people on our side. But we’ve got to provide people with an alternative that’s just as successful. Can’t have the organ shortages of the eighties and nineties.”

“What’s your plan, Premier?” Constantine was looking at her warily. Probably already figuring out how he was going to convince her back to her original position. Oh, but she admired the man’s craftiness!

“We’ll do what they used to do in Switzerland. I’m going to propose a new bill, one to create a presumed consent statute for all Ontario residents. It’ll state that anyone who dies is a potential organ donor, unless they’ve signed an opt-out card. See,” she said, sitting up eagerly to explain it, “no one will be forced to be a potential donor. Anyone can sign the opt-out card, and their bodies will never be touched. But most people won’t bother. Constantine, one donor cadaver can benefit fifty people! In the old days, twenty or thirty people would die each year in Ontario while they waited for transplants.”

Constantine frowned at her. “Excuse my bluntness, Premier, but when did you develop a social conscience?”

That took her aback for a second. Had she become so different since her operation? Was she losing her edge? No, couldn’t be. “Don’t get your panties in a twist, man. Stupidness.”

“Huh?”

“It’s called ‘enlightened self-interest,’ right? Solves the Virus Epsilon problem, and makes me look good, too.”

“Yeah, makes sense.” Constantine was already tapping figures into his palmbook, figuring the odds, plotting their course.

Uttley laughed. “You’re not a policy advisor; you’re a goddamned bookie.”

He looked up with a predatory grin. “And your bookie says the odds look good. We can do it, Premier.”

“I know we can.” She settled contentedly back into the pillows. “There’s another thing, too. We’re going to rejuvenate Toronto.”

“Premier, you know that project has always been death to politicians. No one’s been able to do it yet.”

“Yeah, ’cause they’ve tried it by providing incentives for big business to move back in and take over.

We’re going to offer interest-free loans to small enterprises that are already there, give them perks if they fix up the real estate they’re squatting on.”

“What small enterprises? The place is a rat hole, complete with rats.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Something tells me we’ll discover that there are quite a few resourceful people left in Muddy York.”

#### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*There is a brown girl in the ring, tra-la-la-la-la,  
A brown girl in the ring, tra-la-la-la-la,  
A brown girl in the ring, tra-la-la-la-la,  
And she look like a little sugar plum (plum, plum).*

—Traditional song

You put small-leaf thyme in the peas and rice?” “Yes, Mi—yes, Mummy.”

Sitting at the kitchen table, blind Mi-Jeanne dandled Baby as she spoke to Ti-Jeanne, who was working over three huge pots at the hot stove. Baby kicked and chortled happily. For some reason he seemed a much more contented child now.

“And you sure it have enough rabbit stew and curry goat?”

“Yes, man!”

Ti-Jeanne was finding it awkward, having her mother back. There was a lot between them that Ti-Jeanne would have preferred be left unspoken, but after twelve years of silence, Mi-Jeanne was eager to unburden herself. In the nine days since the spirits had helped her to breach the CN Tower, Ti-Jeanne had learned more about her mother, grandmother, and even Rudy than she had ever known. The knowledge was uncomfortable. She would rather not have known about the passionate, violent love her grandmother had had for an insecure bully who had finally hit her once too often. And why did she need to hear about soft-spoken, dignified Dunston, the man who had been one of Mami’s flock and had become her lover?

But the most difficult to listen to was Mi-Jeanne’s tearful admission of how much she had resented the daughter she had brought into the world. “When Daddy find out I was making baby,” Mi-Jeanne had told her, “is like he cut me dead. I used to be he doux-doux darling, he little girl, but not after that. And after you born, you eat up my whole life. It was ‘baby need this, baby need that.’ I couldn’t take it. I sorry to admit it to you, Ti-Jeanne, but I couldn’t take it.”

Shame made Ti-Jeanne’s face hot. It bit too close to the bone. She knew what her mother had been feeling.

Ti-Jeanne felt as though she and Mi-Jeanne were doing a cautious dance around each other, negotiating terms. Between that and preparing for Mami’s nine-night, she had barely had time to acknowledge the grief she felt at Mami’s loss.

It was Jenny who had insisted on the nine-night, a wake for the recently dead that would calm the dead spirit and point out its way to Guinea Land, sent off with the love of the living it must leave behind. “This is how your granny would have wanted it,” Jenny told them. “A shasto, a party, to send her soul off with joy. This is her way.”

Thank God for Mami’s flock, eager to teach Ti-Jeanne their rituals. They would hold the ceremony in the palais and, afterward, a feast for anyone who cared to come. Ti-Jeanne had made sure to send word to Josée. The street rats that had helped Ti-Jeanne nine nights ago would eat well. Though it couldn’t ever make up for Chu.

Roopsingh had donated some of his precious store of curry and the use of three institutional-size cooking pots to the undertaking. “Me and Gros-Jeanne ain’t always walk good, you hear? But is she save my leg when I get blood poisoning that time.”

In fact, the gifts that were pouring in from Mami’s past patients meant that Ti-Jeanne had not had to use too much of her winter stores. There had been rabbits from Paula and Pavel; wild rice from Frank Greyeyes; and, priceless beyond words, a jug of deep red sorrel drink from old man Butler, he who depended on Mami’s foot-itch paste every winter. Caribbean sorrel bush wouldn’t grow in Canada’s climate. Old man Butler had made the drink from some of his pre-Riot hoard of the dried fruit. As he presented Ti-Jeanne with the jug, he’d said, “Me only had ’nuff for you and your family, seen? Nobody else to get. You, and Mi-Jeanne, and the baby. But mix the baby own with little water, you hear me? It

too acid for he belly.”

Someone pounded at the door. “I going to see who it is,” Ti-Jeanne told her mother. It was Bob Kelly, with three of his cabbages. And a bad cold. Ti-Jeanne showed him into the examination room and gave him some of Mami’s horehound cough syrup. She’d have to make more soon. Hard on his heels came a woman with a dislocated shoulder.

“Let me see to she,” said Mi-Jeanne. Her sensitive hands clicked the joint back into place almost painlessly. Then came a man bearing his little son, screaming from the pain of an earache. And a young man with food poisoning from eating something he’d scavenged from the dump outside the market. The day went by quickly as Ti-Jeanne and her mother dispensed medicine and tried to keep an eye on the cooking and on Baby. Ti-Jeanne heard herself mutter a “Thank you” to her dead grandmother for insisting that she learn how to treat the sick.

At one point, pot spoon in one hand and medicine dropper in another, Ti-Jeanne walked wearily out to the front porch and sat on the railing. The cold air cleared her thoughts. In the surrounding park, the large, bare trees blew in a slight breeze. Ti-Jeanne relished the few minutes of peace. Harold the goat was tugging at the last few clumps of grass of the season. His grazing brought him close to the porch. Suddenly he looked up at Ti-Jeanne and sneezed, “Eshu!” Briefly Ti-Jeanne could see his bones through his flesh. Another vision, a joke from her spirit father. She laughed. “Legbara, is you sending me all these sick people to treat, ain’t?”

No answer.

“Well, Papa, look my answer here. I go do this for a little while, but I ain’t Mami. I ain’t know what I want to do with myself yet, but I can’t be she.”

The goat gnawed at an itch on one hind hoof and walked on.

No one else came to the door until dusk, when it was time for the ceremony. Maybe Legbara was satisfied with her answer.

Now the flock had taken over the palais, and the drumming had started, Mami’s send-off party. The bulk of Paula and Pavel was taking up fully half of one of the short pews. Paula cradled a sweet, round-faced newborn girl to her breast. Delivering that baby without Mami’s guidance had almost been more terrifying for Ti-Jeanne than facing her grandfather in the tower.

Bruk-Foot Sam was leading the chanting, a call-and-response that the flock seemed to know well.

Mi-Jeanne sat tall and proud in one of the pews, hands folded in her lap, tears running down her cheeks.

*It look like she tear ducts get leave behind when she jook out she eyes,* Ti-Jeanne thought. She shuddered at the image of her mother desperately mutilating herself.

Eshu’s stone head glistened with white rum. Frank Greyeyes stood up and presented his pipe to the four directions, redolent with burning tobacco. Eshu would like that. Holding Baby, Ti-Jeanne crept out through the open doorway. She still didn’t feel a part of these ways that had been so much a part of her grandmother’s life.

Jenny was coming up the path, leading Tony by the hand. His arm had been bandaged against his body, leaving one sleeve of his jacket empty. He looked sorrowful, apprehensive. Silently Ti-Jeanne went to meet them. Tony said her name softly, then stopped. It was Jenny who spoke up for him. “He’s sorry, darling. He wants to do penance.” Ti-Jeanne scowled. “It won’t bring your granny back,” Jenny said, “but her soul’s at peace now. It’s his that needs the healing.” Then she went into the palais, leaving the two of them to stare at each other.

Jenny was the only one outside the family who knew the truth of what had happened. How could she talk so casually of Tony needing healing? What about the rest of them? He had *killed* Mami!

“Ti-Jeanne,” Tony said, “I can’t ask you to forgive me. Nobody could.”

She just stared at him stonily.

“If you saw what I saw, what Rudy could do . . .”

“I did.”

He sighed, almost a sob, and looked at the ground. “Yes, you did. And you faced up to it, despite the odds, despite being frightened.” He looked at her again. “I don’t think I could have done that. I don’t know how a person learns to be so strong.”

In the palais, the drumming reached a new intensity. Ti-Jeanne turned to look. Bruk-Foot Sam was dancing Damballah, his twisted leg carrying him as ably as the well one.

“Since I felt that drug in my body, the full bufo drug, I mean, I can’t slash any more. I can’t put that stuff in my veins. Ti-Jeanne, I’m so sorry that I did this to you and your family.”

His face was a mask of grief. Ti-Jeanne looked into his eyes, feeling none of the desperate obsession she used to have for Tony, none of the longing for him to make her life right, either. And, to her surprise, no hatred, not really. Just pity. Her heart was free. She couldn’t forgive him yet, but maybe one day . . .

She took a deep breath. “Go on inside and say good-bye to she.”

A little of the pain lifted from his features. He reached out and patted Baby on the head. Baby blinked but only seemed a little startled. Ti-Jeanne waited for her child to object to his father’s touch, but it didn’t happen. Tony looked at her, sadly, once, and hesitantly entered the palais.

Ti-Jeanne still wasn’t ready to rejoin the service. She sat on the stone steps of the crematorium and began playing peek-a-boo with Baby. He chortled at her, his fat cheeks bulging. The sight filled her with glee. She grinned back, then gently pulled his tam down to protect his ears from the cold. She smiled at him. “So, bolom baby,” she said, “what we going to name you?”

Wire bend, story end!