

# TENDELEO'S STORY

Ian McDonald

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Here's a powerful, compassionate, and darkly lyrical story of a young girl's coming-of-age in a future Africa that is literally being eaten by an alien invader, and, after passing through that invader's alien guts, as it were, is being trans-formed into something rich and strange and totally unexpected. A sea change that extends as well to the lives of the people who find themselves in its way . . .

British author Ian McDonald is an ambitious and daring writer with a wide range and an impressive amount of talent. His first story was published in 1982, and since then he has appeared with some frequency in *Interzone*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *New Worlds*, *Zenith*, *Other Edens*, *Amazing* and elsewhere. He was nominated for the John W. Campbell Award in 1985, and in 1989 he won the Locus "Best First Novel" Award for his novel *Desolation Road*. He won the Philip K. Dick Award in 1992 for his novel *King of Morning, Queen of Day*. His other books include the novels *Out on Blue Six and Hearts*, *Hands and Voices*, *Terminal Cafe*, *Sacrifice of Fools* and the acclaimed *Evolution's Shore*, and two collections of his short fiction, *Empire Dreams* and *Speaking in Tongues*. His most recent book is a new novel, *Kirinya*, and a chapbook novella *Tendeleo's Story*, both sequels to *Evolution's Shore*. Born in Manchester, England, in 1960, McDonald has spent most of his life in Northern Ireland, and now lives and works in Belfast. He has a web site at <http://www.lysator.liu.se/unicorn/mcdonald/>.

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I SHALL START MY STORY with my name. I am Tendeleo. I was born here, in Gichichi. Does that surprise you? The village has changed so much that no one born then could recognize it now, but the name is still the same. That is why names are important. They remain.

I was born in 1995, shortly after the evening meal and before dusk. That is what Tendeleo means in my language, Kalenjin: early-evening-shortly-after-dinner. I am the oldest daughter of the pastor of St. John's Church. My younger sister was born in 1998, after my mother had two miscarriages, and my father asked the congregation to lay hands on her. We called her Little Egg. That is all there are of us, two. My father felt that a pastor should be an example to his people, and at that time the government was calling for smaller families.

My father had cure of five churches. He visited them on a red scrambler bike the

bishop at Nakuru had given him. It was good motorbike, a Yamaha. Japanese. My father loved riding it. He practised skids and jumps on the back roads because he thought a clergyman should not be seen stunt-riding. Of course, people did, but they never said to him. My father built St. John's. Before him, people sat on benches under trees. The church he made was sturdy and rendered in white concrete. The roof was red tin, trumpet vine climbed over it. In the season flowers would hang down outside the window. It was like being inside a garden. When I hear the story of Adam and Eve, that is how I think of Eden, a place among the flowers. Inside there were benches for the people, a lectern for the sermon and a high chair for when the bishop came to confirm children. Behind the altar rail was the holy table covered with a white cloth and an alcove in the wall for the cup and holy communion plate. We didn't have a font. We took people to the river and put them under. I and my mother sang in the choir. The services were long and, as I see them now, quite boring, but the music was wonderful. The women sang, the men played instruments. The best was played by a tall Luo, a teacher in the village school we called, rather blasphemously, Most High. It was a simple instrument: a piston ring from an old Peugeot engine which he hit with a heavy steel bolt. It made a great, ringing rhythm.

What was left over from the church went into the pastor's house. It had poured concrete floors and louvre windows, a separate kitchen and a good charcoal stove a parishioner who could weld had made from a diesel drum. We had electric light, two power sockets and a radio/cassette player, but no television. It was inviting the devil to dinner, my father told us. Kitchen, living room, our bedroom, my mother's bedroom, and my father's study. Five rooms. We were people of some distinction in Gichichi; for Kalenjin.

Gichichi was a thin, straggly sort of village; shops, school, post-office, matatu office, petrol station and mandazi shop up on the main road, with most of the houses set off the footpaths that followed the valley terraces. On one of them was our shamba, half a kilometre down the valley. The path to it went past the front door of the Ukerewe family. They had seven children who hated us. They threw dung or stones and called us see-what-we-thought-of-ourselves-Kalenjin and hated-of-God-Episcopalians. They were African Inland Church Kikuyu, and they had no respect for the discipline of the bishop.

If the church was my father's Eden, the shamba was my mother's. The air was cool in the valley and you could hear the river over the stones down below. We grew maize and gourds and some sugar-cane, which the local rummers bought from my father and he pretended not to know. Beans and chillis. Onions and potatoes. Two trees of finger bananas, though M'zee Kipchobe maintained that they sucked the life out of the soil. The maize grew right over my head, and I would run into the sugar-cane and pretend that two steps had taken me out of this world into another. There was always music there; the solar radio, or the women singing together when they helped each other turn the soil or hoe the weeds. I would sing with them, for I was considered good at harmonies. The shamba too had a place where the holy things were kept. Among the thick, winding tendrils of an old tree killed by

stran-gling fig the women left little wooden figures gifts of money, Indian-trader jewellery and beer.

You are wondering, what about the Chaga? You've worked out from the dates that I was nine when the first package came down on Kilimanjaro. How could such tremendous events, a thing like another world taking over our own, have made so little impression on my life? It is easy, when it is no nearer to you than another world. We were not ignorant in Gichichi. We had seen the pictures from Kilimanjaro on the television, read the articles in the Nation about the thing that is like a coral reef and a rainforest that came out of the object from the sky. We had heard the discussions on the radio about how fast it was growing—fifty metres every day, it was ingrained on our minds—and what it might be and where it might come from. Every morning the vapour trails of the big UN jets scored our sky as they brought more men and machines to study it, but it was another world. It was not our world. Our world was church, home, shamba, school. Service on Sunday, Bible Study on Monday. Singing lessons, homework club. Sewing, weeding, stirring the ugali. Shooing the goats out of the maize. Playing with Little Egg and Grace and Ruth from next door in the compound: not too loud, Father's working. Once a week, the mobile bank. Once a fortnight, the mobile library. Mad little matatus dashing down, overtaking everything they could see, people hanging off every door and window. Big dirty country buses winding up the steep road like oxen. Gikombe, the town fool, if we could have afforded one, wrapped in dung-coloured cloth sitting down in front of the country buses to stop them moving. Rains and hot seasons and cold fogs. People being born, people getting married, people running out on each other, or getting sick, or dying in accidents. Kilimanjaro, the Chaga? Another picture in a world where all pictures come from the same distance.

I was thirteen and just a woman when the Chaga came to my world and destroyed it. That night I was at Grace Muthiga's where she and I had a homework club. It was an excuse to listen to the radio. One of the great things about the United Nations taking over your country is the radio is very good. I would sing with it. They played the kind of music that wasn't approved of in our house.

We were listening to trip hop. Suddenly the record started to go all phasey, like the radio was tuning itself on and off the station. At first we thought the disc was slipping or something, then Grace got up to fiddle with the tuning button. That only made it worse. Grace's mother came in from the next room and said she couldn't get a picture on the battery television. It was full of wavy lines. Then we heard the first boom. It was far away and hollow and it rolled like thunder. Most nights up in the Highlands we get thunder. We know very well what it sounds like. This was something else. Boom! Again. Closer now. Voices outside, and lights. We took torches and went out to the voices. The road was full of people; men, women, children. There were torch beams weaving all over the place. Boom! Close now, loud enough to rattle the windows. All the people shone their torches straight up into the sky, like spears of light. Now the children were crying and I was afraid. Most High had the answer: "Sonic booms! There's something up there." As he said those

words, we saw it. It was so slow. That was the amazing thing about it. It was like a child drawing a chalk line across a board. It came in from the south east, across the hills east of Kiriani, straight as an arrow, a little to the south of us. The night was such as we often get in late May, clear after evening rains, and very full of stars. We all saw a glowing dot cut across the face of the stars. It seemed to float and dance, like illusions in the eye if you look into the sun. It left a line behind it like the trails of the big UN jets, only pure, glowing blue, drawn on the night. Double-boom now, so close and loud it hurt my ears. At that, one of the old women began wailing. The fear caught, and soon whole families were looking at the line of light in the sky with tears running down their faces, men as well as women. Many sat down and put their torches in their laps, not knowing what they should do. Some of the old people covered their heads with jackets, shawls, newspapers. Others saw what they were doing, and soon everyone was sitting on the ground with their heads covered. Not Most High. He stood looking up at the line of light as it cut his night in half. "Beautiful!" he said. "That I should see such things, with these own eyes!"

He stood watching until the object vanished in the dark of the mountains to the west. I saw its light reflected in his eyes. It took a long time to fade.

For a few moments after the thing went over, no one knew what to do. Everyone was scared, but they were relieved at the same time because, like the angel of death, it had passed over Gichichi. People were still crying, but tears of relief have a different sound. Someone got a radio from a house. Others fetched theirs, and soon we were all sitting in the middle of the road in the dark, grouped around our radios. An announcer interrupted the evening music show to bring a news flash. At twenty twenty eight a new biological package had struck in Central Province. At those words, a low keen went up from each group.

"Be quiet!" someone shouted, and there was quiet. Though the words would be terrible, they were better than the voices coming out of the dark.

The announcer said that the biological package had come down on the eastern slopes of the Nyandarua near to Tusha, a small Kikuyu village. Tusha was a name we knew. Some of us had relatives in Tusha. The country bus to Nyeri went through Tusha. From Gichichi to Tusha was twenty kilometres. There were cries. There were prayers. Most said nothing. But we all knew time had run out. In four years the Chaga had swallowed up Kilimanjaro, and Amboseli, and the border country of Namanga and was advancing up the A104 on Kajiado and Nairobi. We had ignored it and gone on with our lives, believing that when it finally came, we would know what to do. Now it had dropped out of the sky twenty kilometres north of us and said, Twenty kilometres, four hundred days: that's how long you've got to decide what you're going to do.

Then Jackson who ran the Peugeot Service Office stood up. He cocked his head to one side. He held up a finger. Everyone fell silent. He looked to the sky. "Listen!" I could hear nothing. He pointed to the south, and we all heard it: aircraft engines.

Flashing lights lifted out of the dark tree-line on the far side of the valley. Behind it came others, then others, then ten, twenty, thirty, more. Helicopters swarmed over Gichichi like locusts. The sound of their engines filled the whole world. I wrapped my school shawl around my head and put my hands over my ears and yelled over the noise but it still felt like it would shatter my skull like a clay pot. Thirty-five helicopters: they flew so low their down-wash rattled our tin roofs and sent dust swirling up around our faces. Some of the teenagers cheered and waved their torches and white school shirts to the pilots. They cheered the helicopters on, right over the ridge. They cheered until the noise of their engines was lost among the night-insects. Where the Chaga goes, the United Nations comes close behind, like a dog after a bitch.

A few hours later the trucks came through. The grinding of engines as they toiled up the winding road woke all Gichichi. "It's three o'clock in the morning!" Mrs Kuria shouted at the dusty white trucks with the blue symbol of UNECTA on the doors, but no one would sleep again. We lined the main road to watch them go through our village. I wonder what the drivers thought of all those faces and eyes suddenly appearing in their headlights as they rounded the bend. Some waved. The children waved back. They were still coming through as we went down to the shamba at dawn to milk the goats. They were a white snake coiling up and down the valley road as far as I could see. As they reached the top of the pass the low light from the east caught them and burned them to gold.

The trucks went up the road for two days. Then they stopped and the refugees started to come the other way, down the road. First the ones with the vehicles: matatus piled high with bedding and tools and animals, trucks with the family balanced in the back on top of all the things they had saved. A Toyota microbus, bursting with what looked like bolts of coloured cloth but which were women, jammed in next to each other. Ancient cars, motorbikes and mopeds vanishing beneath sagging bales of possessions. It was a race of poverty; the rich ones with machines took the lead. After motors came animals; donkey carts and ox-wagons, pedal-rickshaws. Most came in the last wave, the ones on foot. They pushed handcarts laden with pots and bedding rolls and boxes lashed with twine, or dragged trolleys on ropes or shoved frightened-faced old women in wheelbarrows. They struggled their burdens down the steep valley road. Some broke free and bounced over the edge down across the terraces, strewing clothes and tools and cooking things over the fields. Last of all came hands and heads. These people carried their possessions on their heads and backs and children's shoulders.

My father opened the church to the refugees. There they could have rest, warm chai, some ugali, some beans. I helped stir the great pots of ugali over the open fire. The village doctor set up a treatment centre. Most of the cases were for damaged feet and hands, and dehydrated children. Not everyone in Gichichi agreed with my father's charity. Some thought it would encourage the refugees to stay and take food from our mouths. The shopkeepers said he was ruining their trade by giving away what they should be selling. My father told them he was just trying to do what he

thought Jesus would have done. They could not answer that, but I know he had another reason. He wanted to hear the refugee's stories. They would be his story, soon enough.

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What about Tusha?

The package missed us by a couple of kilometres. It hit a place called Kombe; two Kikuyu farms and some shit-caked cows. There was a big bang. Some of us from Tusha took a matatu to see what had happened to Kombe. They tell us there is nothing left. There they are, go, ask them.

This nothing, my brothers, what was it like? A hole?

No, it was something, but nothing we could recognize. The photographs? They only show the thing. They do not show how it happens. The houses, the fields, the fields and the track, they run like fat in a pan. We saw the soil itself melt and new things reach out of it like drowning men's fingers.

What kind of things?

We do not have the words to describe them. Things like you see in the television programmes about the reefs on the coast, only the size of houses, and striped like zebras. Things like fists punching out of the ground, reaching up to the sky and opening like fingers. Things like fans, and springs, and balloons, and footballs.

So fast?

Oh yes. So fast that even as we watched, it took our matatu. It came up the tyres and over the bumper and across the paintwork like a lizard up a wall and the whole thing came out in thousands of tiny yellow buds.

What did you do?

What do you think we did? We ran for our lives.

The people of Kombe?

When we brought back help from Tusha, we were stopped by helicopters. Soldiers, everywhere. Everyone must leave, this is a quarantine area. You have twenty-four hours.

Twenty-four hours!

Yes, they order you to pack up a life in twenty-four hours. The Blue Berets brought in all these engineers who started building some great construction, all tracks and

engines. The night was like day with welding torches. They ploughed Kiyamba under with bulldozers to make a new airstrip. They were going to bring in jets there. And before they let us go they made everyone take medical tests. We lined up and went past these men in white coats and masks at tables.

Why?

I think they were testing to see if the Chaga-stuff had got into us.

What did they do, that you think that?

Pastor, some they would tap on the shoulder, just like this. Like Judas and the Lord, so gentle. Then a soldier would take them to the side.

What then?

I do not know, pastor. I have not seen them since. No one has.

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These stories troubled my father greatly. They troubled the people he told them to, even Most High, who had been so thrilled by the coming of the alien to our land. They especially troubled the United Nations. Two days later a team came up from Nairobi in five army hummers. The first thing they did was tell my father and the doctor to close down their aid station. The official UNHCR refugee centre was Muranga. No one could stay here in Gichichi, everyone must go.

In private they told my father that a man of his standing should not be sowing rumours and half truths in vulnerable communities. To make sure that we knew the real truth, UNECTA called a meeting in the church. Everyone packed onto the benches, even the Muslims. People stood all the way around the walls; others outside lifted out the louvres to listen in at the windows. My father sat with the doctor and our local chief at a table. With them was a government man, a white soldier and an Asian woman in civilian dress who looked scared. She was a scientist, a xenologist. She did most of the talking; the government man from Nairobi twirled his pencil between his fingers and tapped it on the table until he broke the point. The soldier, a French general with experience of humanitarian crises, sat motionless.

The xenologist told us that the Chaga was humanity's first contact with life from beyond the Earth. The nature of this contact was unclear; it did not follow any of the communication programmes we had predicted. This contact was the physical transformation of our native landscape and vegetation. But what was in the package was not seeds and spores. The things that had consumed Kombe and were now consuming Tusha were more like tiny machines, breaking down the things of this world to pieces and rebuilding them in strange new forms. The Chaga responded to stimuli and adapted to counterattacks on itself. UNECTA had tried fire, poison, radioactive dusting, genetically modified diseases. Each had been quickly routed by

the Chaga. However, it was not apparent if it was intelligent, or the tool of an as-yet unseen intelligence.

"And Gichichi?" Ismail the barber asked.

The French general spoke now.

"You will all be evacuated in plenty of time."

"But what if we do not want to be evacuated?" Most High asked. "What if we decide we want to stay here and take our chances with the Chaga?"

"You will all be evacuated," the general said again.

"This is our village, this is our country. Who are you to tell us what we must do in our own country?" Most High was indignant now. We all applauded, even my father up there with the UNECTA people. The Nairobi politician looked vexed.

"UNECTA, UNHCR and the UN East Africa Protection Force operate with the informed consent of the Kenyan government. The Chaga has been deemed a threat to human life. We're doing this for your own good."

Most High drove on. "A threat? Who 'deems' it so? UNECTA? An organization that is eighty per cent funded by the United States of America? I have heard different, that it doesn't harm people or animals. There are people living inside the Chaga; it's true, isn't it?"

The politician looked at the French general, who shrugged. The Asian scientist answered.

"Officially, we have no data."

Then my father stood up and cut her short.

"What about the people who are being taken away?"

"I don't know anything . . ." the UNECTA scientist began but my father would not be stopped.

"What about the people from Kombe? What are these tests you are carrying out?"

The woman scientist looked flustered. The French general spoke.

"I'm a soldier, not a scientist. I've served in Kosovo and Iraq and East Timor. I can only answer your questions as a soldier. On the fourteenth of June next year, it will come down that road. At about seven thirty in the evening, it will come through this church. By Tuesday night, there will be no sign that a place called Gichichi ever existed."



And that was the end of the meeting. As the UNECTA people left the church, the Christians of Gichichi crowded around my father. What should they believe? Was Jesus come again, or was it anti-Christ? These aliens, were they angels, or fallen creatures like ourselves? Did they know Jesus? What was God's plan in this? Question after question after question.

My father's voice was tired and thin and driven, like a leopard harried by beaters towards guns. Like that leopard, he turned on his hunters.

"I don't know!" he shouted. "You think I have answers to all these things? No. I have no answers. I have no authority to speak on these things. No one does. Why are you asking these silly silly questions? Do you think a country pastor has the answers that will stop the Chaga in its tracks and drive it back where it came from? No. I am making them up as I go along, like everyone else."

For a moment the whole congregation was silent. I remember feeling that I must die from embarrassment. My mother touched my father's arm. He had been shaking. He excused himself to his people. They stood back to let us out of the church. We stopped on the lintel, amazed. A rapture had indeed come. All the refugees were gone from the church compound. Their goods, their bundles, their carts and animals. Even their excrement had been swept away.

As we walked back to the house, I saw the woman scientist brush past Most High as she went to the UNECTA hummer. I heard her whisper, "About the people. It's true. But they're changed."

"How?" Most High asked but the door was closed. Two blue berets lifted mad Gikombe from in front of the hummer and it drove off slowly through the throng of people. I remembered that the UNECTA woman looked frightened.

That afternoon my father rode off on the red Yamaha and did not come back for almost a week.

I learned something about my father's faith that day. It was that it was strong in the small, local questions because it was weak in the great ones. It believed in singing and teaching the people and the disciplines of personal prayer and meditation, because you could see them in the lives of others. In the big beliefs, the ones you could not see, it fell.

That meeting was the wound through which Gichichi slowly bled to death. "This is our village, this is our country," Most High had declared, but before the end of the week the first family had tied their things onto the back of their pick-up and joined the flow of refugees down the road to the south. After that a week did not pass that someone from our village would not close their doors a last time and leave Gichichi. The abandoned homes soon went to ruin. Water got in, roofs collapsed, then rude boys set fire to them. The dead houses were like empty skulls. Dogs fell into toilet

pits and drowned. One day when we went down to the shamba there were no names and stones from the Ukerewe house. Within a month its windows were empty, smoke-stained sockets.

With no one to tend them, the shambas went to wild and weeds. Goats and cows grazed where they would, the terrace walls crumbled, the rains washed the soil down the valley in great red tears. Fields that had fed families for generations vanished in a night. No one cared for the women's tree any more, to give the images their cups of beer. Hope stopped working in Gichichi. Always in the minds of the ones who remained was the day when we would look up the road and see the spines and fans and twisted spires of the Chaga standing along the ridge-line like warriors.

I remember the morning I was woken by the sound of voices from the Muthiga house. Men's voices, speaking softly so as not to waken anyone, for it was still dark, but they woke me. I put on my things and went out into the compound. Grace and Ruth were carrying cardboard boxes from the house, their father and a couple of other men from the village were loading them onto a Nissan pick-up. They had started early, and the pick-up was well laden. The children were gathering up the last few things.

"Ah, Tendeleo," Mr Muthiga said sadly. "We had hoped to get away before anyone was around."

"Can I talk to Grace?" I asked.

I did not talk to her. I shouted at her. I would be all alone when she went. I would be abandoned. She asked me a question. She said, "You say we must not go. Tell me, Tendeleo, why must you stay?"

I did not have an answer to that. I had always presumed that it was because a pastor must stay with his people, but the bishop had made several offers to my father to relocate us to a new parish in Eldoret.

Grace and her family left as it was getting light. Their red tail lights swung into the slow stream of refugees. I heard the horn hooting to warn stragglers and animals all the way down the valley. I tried to keep the house good and safe but two weeks later a gang of rude boys from another village broke in, took what they could and burned the rest. They were a new thing in what the radio called the "sub-terminum", gangs of raiders and looters stripping the corpses of the dead towns.

"Vultures, is what they are," my mother said.

Grace's question was a dark parting gift to me. The more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that I must see this thing that had forced such decisions on us. The television and newspaper pictures were not enough. I had to see it with my own eyes. I had to look at its face and ask it its reasons. Little Egg became my lieutenant. We slipped money from the collection plate, and we gathered up secret

bundles of food. A schoolday was the best to go. We did not go straight up the road, where we would have been noticed. We caught a matatu to Kinangop in the Nyandarua valley where nobody knew us. There was still a lively traffic; the matatu was full of country people with goods to sell and chickens tied together by the feet stowed under the bench. We sat in the back and ate nuts from a paper cone folded from a page of the Bible. Everywhere were dirty white United Nations vehicles. One by one the people got out and were not replaced. By Ndunyu there was only me and Little Egg, jolting around in the back of the car.

The driver's mate turned around and said, "So, where for, girls?"

I said, "We want to look at the Chaga."

"Sure, won't the Chaga be coming to look at you soon enough?"

"Can you take us there?" I showed him Church shillings.

"It would take a lot more than that." He talked to the driver a moment. "We can drop you at Njeru. You can walk from there, it's under seven kilometres."

Njeru was what awaited Gichichi, when only the weak and poor and mad remained. I was glad to leave it. The road to the Chaga was easy to find, it was the direction no one else was going in. We set off up the red dirt road towards the mountains. We must have looked very strange, two girls walking through a ruined land with their lunches wrapped in kangas. If anyone had been there to watch.

The soldiers caught us within two kilometres of Njeru. I had heard the sound of their engine for some minutes, behind us. It was a big eight wheeled troop carrier of the South African army.

The officer was angry, but I think a little impressed. What did we think we were doing? There were vultures everywhere. Only last week an entire bus had been massacred, five kilometres from here. Not one escaped alive. Two girls alone, they would rob us and rape us, hang us up by our heels and cut our throats like pigs. All the time he was preaching, a soldier in the turret swept the countryside with a big heavy machine gun.

"So, what the hell are you doing here?"

I told him. He went to talk on the radio. When he came back, he said, "In the back."

The carrier was horribly hot and smelled of men and guns and diesel. When the door clanged shut on us I thought we were going to suffocate.

"Where are you taking us?" I asked, afraid.

"You came to see the Chaga," the commander said. We ate our lunch meekly and tried not to stare at the soldiers. They gave us water from their canteens and tried to

make us laugh. The ride was short but uncomfortable. The door clanged open. The officer helped me out and I almost fell over with shock.

I stood in a hillside clearing. Around me were tree stumps, fresh cut, sticky with sap. From behind came the noise of chain saws. The clearing was full of military vehicles and tents. People hurried every way. Most of them were white. At the centre of this activity was what I can only call a city on wheels. I had not yet been to Nairobi, but I knew it from photographs, a forest of beautiful towers rising out of a circle of townships. That was how the base seemed to me when I first saw it. Looking closer, I saw that the buildings were portable cabins stacked up on big tracked flat-beds, like the heavy log-carriers up in Eldoret. The tractors and towers were joined together with walkways and loops of cable. I saw people running along the high walkways. I would not have done that, not for a million shillings.

I tell you my first impressions, of a beautiful white city—and you may laugh because you know it was only a UNECTA mobile base—that they put together as fast and cheap as they could. But there is a truth here; seeing is magical. Looking kills. The longer I looked, the more the magic faded.

The air in the clearing smelled as badly of diesel smoke as it had in the troop carrier. Everywhere was engine-noise. A path had been slashed through the forest, as if the base had come down it. I looked at the tracks. The big cog wheels were turning. The base was moving, slowly and heavily, like the hands of a clock, creaking backwards on its tracks in pace with the advance of the Chaga. Little Egg took my hand. I think my mouth must have been open in wonder for sometime.

"Come on then," said the officer. He was smiling now. "You wanted to see the Chaga."

He gave us over to a tall American man with red hair and a red beard and blue eyes. His name was Byron and he spoke such bad Swahili that he did not understand when Little Egg said to me, "He looks like a vampire."

"I speak English," I told him and he looked relieved.

He took us through the tractors to the tower in the middle, the tallest. It was painted white, with the word UNECTA big in blue on the side, and beneath it, the name, Nyandarua Station. We got into a small metal cage. Byron closed the door and pressed a button. The cage went straight up the side of the building. I tell you this, that freight elevator was more frightening than any stories about murdering gangs of vultures. I gripped the handrail and closed my eyes. I could feel the whole base swaying below me.

"Open your eyes," Byron said. "You wouldn't want to come all this way and miss it."

As we rose over the tops of the trees the land opened before me. Nyandarua Station

was moving down the eastern slopes of the Aberdare range: the Chaga was spread before me like a wedding kanga laid out on a bed.

It was as though someone had cut a series of circles of coloured paper and let them fall on the side of the mountains. The Chaga followed the ridges and the valleys, but that was all it had to do with our geography. It was completely something else. The colours were so bright and silly I almost laughed: purples, oranges, lots of pink and deep red. Veins of bright yellow. Real things, living things were not these colours. This was a Hollywood trick, done with computers for a film. I guessed we were a kilometre from the edge. It was not a very big Chaga, not like the Kilimanjaro Chaga that had swallowed Moshi and Arusha and all the big Tanzanian towns at the foot of the mountain and was now halfway to Nairobi. Byron said this Chaga was about five kilometres across and beginning to show the classic form, a series of circles. I tried to make out the details. I thought details would make it real to me. I saw jumbles of reef-stuff the colour of wiring. I saw a wall of dark crimson trees rise straight for a tremendous height. The trunks were as straight and smooth as spears. The leaves joined together like umbrellas. Beyond them, I saw things like icebergs tilted at an angle, things like open hands, praying to the sky, things like oil refineries made out of fungus, things like brains and fans and domes and footballs. Things like other things. Nothing that seemed a thing in itself. And all this was reaching towards me. But, I realized, it would never catch me. Not while I remained here, on this building that was retreating from it down the foothills of the Aberdares, fifty metres every day.

We were close to the top of the building. The cage swayed in the wind. I felt sick and scared and grabbed the rail and that was when it became real for me. I caught the scent of the Chaga on the wind. False things have no scent. The Chaga smelled of cinnamon and sweat and soil new turned up. It smelled of rotting fruit and diesel and concrete after rain. It smelled like my mother when she had The Visit. It smelled like the milk that babies spit out of their mouths. It smelled like televisions and the stuff the Barber Under the Tree put on my father's hair and the women's holy place in the shamba. With each of these came a memory of Gichichi and my life and people. The scent stirred the things I had recently learned as a woman. The Chaga became real for me there, and I understood that it would eat my world.

While I was standing, putting all these things that were and would be into circles within circles inside my head, a white man in faded jeans and Timberland boots rushed out of a sliding door onto the elevator.

"Byron," he said, then noticed that there were two little Kenyan girls there with him. "Who're these?"

"I'm Tendeleo and this is my sister," I said. "We call her Little Egg. We've come to see the Chaga."

This answer seemed to please him.

"I'm called Shepard." He shook our hands. He also was American. "I'm a Peripatetic

Executive Director. That means I rush around the world finding solutions to the Chaga."

"And have you?"

For a moment he was taken aback, and I felt bold and rude. Then he said, "Come on, let's see."

"Shepard," Byron the vampire said. "It'll wait."

He took us in to the base. In one room were more white people than I had seen in the whole of my life. Each desk had a computer but the people—most of them were men dressed very badly in shorts, with beards—did not use them. They preferred to sit on each other's desks and talk very fast with much gesturing.

"Are African people not allowed in here?" I asked.

The man Shepard laughed. Everything I said that tour he treated as if it had come from the lips of a wise old m'zee. He took us down into the Projection Room where computers drew huge plans on circular tables: of the Chaga now, the Chaga in five years time and the Chaga when it met with its brother from the south and both of them swallowed Nairobi like two old men arguing over a stick of sugar cane.

"And after Nairobi is gone?" I asked. The maps showed the names of all the old towns and villages, under the Chaga. Of course. The names do not change. I reached out to touch the place that Gichichi would become.

"We can't project that far," he said. But I was thinking of an entire city, vanished beneath the bright colours of the Chaga like dirt trodden into carpet. All those lives and histories and stories. I realized that some names can be lost, the names of big things, like cities and nations and histories.

Next we went down several flights of steep steel stairs to the "lab levels". Here samples taken from the Chaga were stored inside sealed environments. A test tube might hold a bouquet of delicate fungi, a cylindrical jar a fistful of blue spongy fingers, a tank a square metre of Chaga, growing up the walls and across the ceiling. Some of the containers were so big people could walk around inside. They were dressed in bulky white suits that covered every part of them and were connected to the wall with pipes and tubes so that it was hard to tell where they ended and alien Chaga began. The weird striped and patterned leaves looked more natural than the UNECTA people in their white suits. The alien growing things were at least in their right world.

"Everything has to be isolated." Mr Shepard said.

"Is that because even out here, it will start to attack and grow?" I asked.

"You got it."

"But I heard it doesn't attack people or animals," I said.

"Where did you hear that?" this man Shepard asked.

"My father told me," I said mildly.

We went on down to Terrestrial Cartography, which was video-pictures the size of a wall of the world seen looking down from satellites. It is a view that is familiar to everyone of our years, though there were people of my parents' generation who laughed when they heard that the world is a ball, with no string to hold it up. I looked for a long time—it is the one thing that does not pale for looking—before I saw that the face of the world was scarred, like a Giriama woman's. Beneath the clouds, South America and South Asia and mother Africa were spotted with dots of lighter colour than the brown-green land. Some were large, some were specks, all were precise circles. One, on the eastern side of Africa, identified this disease of continents to me. Chagas. For the first time I understood that this was not a Kenyan thing, not even an African thing, but a whole world thing.

"They are all in the south," I said. "There is not one in the north."

"None of the biological packages have seeded in the northern hemisphere. This is what makes us believe that there are limits to the Chaga. That it won't cover our whole world, pole to pole. That it might confine itself only to the southern hemisphere."

"Why do you think that?"

"No reason at all."

"You just hope."

"Yeah. We hope."

"Mr Shepard," I said. "Why should the Chaga take away our lands here in the south and leave you rich people in the north untouched? It does not seem fair."

"The universe is not fair, kid. Which you probably know better than me."

We went down then to Stellar Cartography, another dark room, with walls full of stars. They formed a belt around the middle of the room, in places so dense that individual stars blurred into masses of solid white.

"This is the Silver River," I said. I had seen this on Grace's family's television, which they had taken with them.

"Silver river. It is that. Good name."

"Where are we?" I asked.

Shepard went over to the wall near the door and touched a small star down near his waist. It had a red circle around it. Otherwise I do not think even he could have picked it out of all the other small white stars. I did not like it that our sun was so small and common. I asked, "And where are they from?"

The UNECTA man drew a line with his finger along the wall. He walked down one side of the room, halfway along the other, before he stopped. His finger stopped in a swirl of rainbow colours, like a flame.

"Rho Ophiuchi. It's just a name, it doesn't matter. What's important is that it's a long long way from us so far it takes light—and that's as fast as anything can go—eight hundred years to get there, and it's not a planet, or even a star. It's what we call a nebula, a huge cloud of glowing gas."

"How can people live in a cloud?" I asked. "Are they angels?"

The man laughed at that.

"Not people," he said. "Not angels either. Machines. But not like you or I think of machines. Machines more like living things, and very very much smaller. Smaller even than the smallest cell in your body. Machines the size of chains of atoms, that can move other atoms around and so build copies of themselves, or copies of anything else they want. And we think those gas clouds are trillions upon trillions of those tiny, living machines."

"Not plants and animals," I said.

"Not plants and animals, no."

"I have not heard this theory before." It was huge and thrilling, but like the sun, it hurt if you looked at it too closely. I looked again at the swirl of colour, coloured like the Chaga scars on Earth's face, and back at the little dot by the door that was my light and heat. Compared to the rest of the room, they both looked very small. "Why should things like this, from so far away, want to come to my Kenya?"

"That's indeed the question."

That was all of the science that the UNECTA man was allowed to show us, so he took us down through the areas where people lived and ate and slept, where they watched television and films and drank alcohol and coffee, the places where they exercised, which they liked to do a lot, in immodest costumes. The corridors were full of them, immature and loosely put together, like leggy puppies.

"This place stinks of wazungu," Little Egg said, not thinking that maybe this m'zungu knew more Swahili than the other one. Mr Shepard smiled.



"Mr Shepard," I said. "You still haven't answered my question."

He looked puzzled a moment, then remembered.

"Solutions. Oh yes. Well, what do you think?"

Several questions came into my head but none as good, or important to me, as the one I did ask.

"I suppose the only question that matters, really, is can people live in the Chaga?"

Shepard pushed open a door and we were on a metal platform just above one of the big track sets.

"That, my friend, is the one question we aren't even allowed to consider," Shepard said as he escorted us onto a staircase.

The tour was over. We had seen the Chaga. We had seen our world and our future and our place among the stars; things too big for country church children, but which even they must consider, for unlike most of the wazungu here, they would have to find answers.

Down on the red dirt with the diesel stink and roar of chain-saws, we thanked Dr Shepard. He seemed touched. He was clearly a person of power in this place. A word, and there was a UNECTA Landcruiser to take us home. We were so filled up with what we had seen that we did not think to tell the driver to let us off at the next village down so we could walk. Instead we went landcruising right up the main road, past Haran's shop and the Peugeot Service Station and all the Men Who Read Newspapers under the trees.

Then we faced my mother and father. It was bad. My father took me into his study. I stood. He sat. He took his Kalenjin Bible, that the Bishop gave him on his ordination so that he might always have God's word in his own tongue, and set it on the desk between himself and me. He told me that I had deceived my mother and him, that I had led Little Egg astray, that I had lied, that I had stolen, not God's money, for God had no need of money, but the money that people I saw every day, people I sang and prayed next to every Sunday, gave in their faith. He said all this in a very straightforward, very calm way, without ever raising his voice.

I wanted to tell him all the things I said seen, offer them in trade, yes, I have cheated, I have lied, I have stolen from the Christians of Gichichi, but I have learned. I have seen. I have seen our sun lost among a million other suns. I have seen this world, that God is supposed to have made most special of all worlds, so small it cannot even be seen. I have seen men, that God is supposed to have loved so much that he died for their evils, try to understand living machines, each smaller than the smallest living thing, but together, so huge it takes light years to cross their community. I

know how different things are from what we believe, I wanted to say, but I said nothing, for my father did an unbelievable thing. He stood up. Without sign or word or any display of strength, he hit me across the face. I fell to the ground, more from the unexpectedness than the hurt. Then he did another unbelievable thing. He sat down. He put his head in his hand. He began to cry. Now I was very scared, and I ran to my mother.

"He is a frightened man," she said. "Frightened men often strike out at the thing they fear."

"He has his church, he has his collar, he has his Bible, what can frighten him?"

"You," she said. This answer was as stunning as my father hitting me. My mother asked me if I remembered the time, after the argument outside the church, when my father had disappeared on the red Yamaha for a week. I said I did, yes.

"He went down south, to Nairobi, and beyond. He went to look at the thing he feared, and he saw that, with all his faith, he could not beat the Chaga."

My father stayed in his study a long time. Then he came to me and went down on his knees and asked me to forgive him. It was a Biblical principle, he said. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. But though Bible principles lived, my father died a little to me that day. This is life: a series of dyings and being born into new things and understandings.

Life by life, Gichichi died too. There were only twenty families left on the morning when the spines of the alien coral finally reached over the treetops up on the pass. Soon after dawn the UNECTA trucks arrived. They were dirty old Sudanese Army things, third hand Russian, badly painted and billowing black smoke. When we saw the black soldiers get out we were alarmed because we had heard bad things about Africans at the hands of other Africans. I did not trust their officer; he was too thin and had an odd hollow on the side of his shaved head, like a crater on the moon. We gathered in the open space in front of the church with our things piled around us. Ours came to twelve bundles wrapped up in kangas. I took the radio and a clatter of pots. My father's books were tied with string and balanced on the petrol tank of his red scrambler.

The moon-headed officer waved and the first truck backed up and let down its tail. A soldier jumped out, set up a folding beach-chair by the tail-gate and sat with a clip-board and a pencil. First went the Kurias, who had been strong in the church. They threw their children up into the truck, then passed up their bundles of belongings. The soldier in the beach-chair watched for a time, then shook his head.

"Too much, too much," he said in bad Swahili. "You must leave something."

Mr Kuria frowned, measuring all the space in the back of the truck with his eyes. He lifted off a bundle of clothes.

"No no no," the soldier said, and stood up and tapped their television with his pencil. Another soldier came and took it out of Mr Kuria's arms to a truck at the side of the road, the tithe truck.

"Now you get on," the soldier said, and made a check on his clipboard.

It was as bold as that. Wide-open crime under the blue sky. No one to see. No one to care. No one to say a word.

Our family's tax was the motorbike. My father's face had gone tight with anger and offence to God's laws, but he gave it up without a whisper. The officer wheeled it away to a group of soldiers squatting on their heels by a smudge-fire. They were very pleased with it, poking and teasing its engine with their long fingers. Every time since that I have heard a Yamaha engine I have looked to see if it is a red scrambler, and what thief is riding it.

"On, on," said the tithe-collector.

"My church," my father said and jumped off the truck. Immediately there were a dozen Kalashnikovs pointing at him. He raised his hands, then looked back at us.

"Tendeleo, you should see this."

The officer nodded. The guns were put down and I jumped to the ground. I walked with my father to the church. We proceeded up the aisle. The prayer books were on the bench seats, the woven kneelers set square in front of the pews. We went into the little vestry, where I had stolen the money from the collection. There were other dark secrets here. My father took a battered red petrol can from his robing cupboard and carried it to the communion table. He took the chalice, offered it to God, then filled it with petrol from the can. He turned to face the holy table.

"The blood of Christ keep you in eternal life," he said, raising the cup high. The he poured it out on to the white altar cloth. A gesture too fast for me to see; he struck fire. There was an explosion of yellow flame. I cried out. I thought my father had gone up in the gush of fire. He turned to me. Flames billowed behind him.

"Now do you understand?" he said.

I did. Sometimes it is better to destroy a thing you love than have it taken from you and made alien. Smoke was pouring from under the roof by the time we climbed back onto the truck. The Sudanese soldiers were only interested in that it was fire, and destruction excites soldiers. Ours was the church of an alien god.

Old Gikombe, too old and stupid to run away, did his "sitting in front of the trucks" trick. Every time the soldiers moved him, he scuttled back to his place. He did it once too often. The truck behind us had started to roll, and the driver did not see the

dirty, rag-wrapped thing dart in under his wing. With a cry, Gikombe fell under the wheels and was crushed.

A wind from off the Chaga carried the smoke from the burning church over us as we went down the valley road. The communion at Gichichi was broken.

\* \* \* \*

I think time changes everything into its opposite. Youth into age, innocence into experience, certainty into uncertainty. Life into death. Long before the end, time was changing Nairobi into the Chaga. Ten million people were crowded into the shanties that ringed the towers of downtown. Every hour of every day, more came. They came from north and south, from Rift Valley and Central Province, from Ilbisil and Naivasha, from Makindu and Gichichi.

Once Nairobi was a fine city. Now it was a refugee camp. Once it had great green parks. Now they were trampled dust between packing-case homes. The trees had all been hacked down for firewood. Villages grew up on road roundabouts, like castaways on coral islands, and in the football stadiums and sports grounds. Armed patrols daily cleared squatters from the two airport runways. The railway had been abandoned, cut south and north. Ten thousand people now lived in abandoned carriages and train sheds and between the tracks. The National Park was a dust bowl, ravaged for fuel and building material, its wildlife fled or slaughtered for food. Nairobi air was a smog of wood smoke, diesel and sewage. The slums spread for twenty kilometres on every side. It was an hour's walk to fetch water, and that was stinking and filthy. Like the Chaga, the shanties grew, hour by hour, family by family. String up a few plastic sheets here, shove together some cardboard boxes there, set up home where a matatu dies, pile some stolen bricks and sacking and tin. City and Chaga reached out to each other, and came to resemble each other.

I remember very little of those first days in Nairobi. It was too much, too fast—it numbed my sense of reality. The men who took our names, the squatting people watching us as we walked up the rows of white tents looking for our number, were things done to us that we went along with without thinking. Most of the time I had that high-pitched sound in my ear when you want to cry but cannot.

Here is an irony: we came from St. John's, we went to St. John's. It was a new camp, in the south close by the main airport. One eight three two. One number, one tent, one oil lamp, one plastic water bucket, one rice scoop. Every hundred tents there was a water pipe. Every hundred tents there was a shit pit. A river of sewage ran past our door. The stench would have stopped us sleeping, had the cold not done that first. The tent was thin and cheap and gave no protection from the night. We huddled together under blankets. No one wanted to be the first to cry, so no one did. Between the big aircraft and people crying and fighting, there was no quiet, ever. The first night, I heard shots. I had never heard them before but I knew exactly what they were.

In this St. John's we were no longer people of consequence. We were no longer anything. We were one eight three two. My father's collar earned no respect. The first day he went to the pipe for water he was beaten by young men, who stole his plastic water pail. The collar was a symbol of God's treachery. My father stopped wearing his collar; soon after, he stopped going out at all. He sat in the back room listening to the radio and looking at his books, which were still in their tied-up bundles. St. John's destroyed the rest of the things that had bound his life together. I think that if we had not been rescued, he would have gone under. In a place like St. John's, that means you die. When you went to the food truck you saw the ones on the way to death, sitting in front of their tents, holding their toes, rocking, looking at the soil.

We had been fifteen days in the camp—I kept a tally on the tent wall with a burned-out match—when we heard the vehicle pull up and the voice call out, "Jonathan Bi. Does anyone know Pastor Jonathan Bi?" I do not think my father could have looked any more surprised if Jesus had called his name. Our saviour was the Pastor Stephen Elezeke, who ran the Church Army Centre on Jogoo Road. He and my father had been in theological college together; they had been great footballing friends. My father was godfather to Pastor Elezeke's children; Pastor Elezeke, it seemed, was my godfather. He piled us all in the back of a white Nissan minibus with Praise Him on the Trumpet written on one side and Praise Him with the Psalter and Harp, rather squashed up, on the other. He drove off hooting at the crowds of young men, who looked angrily at church men in a church van. He explained that he had found us through the net. The big churches were flagging certain clergy names. Bi was one of them.

So we came to Jogoo Road. Church Army had once been an old, pre-Independence teaching centre with a modern, two-level accommodation block. These had overflowed long ago; now every open space was crowded with tents and wooden shanties. We had two rooms beside the metal working shop. They were comfortable but cramped, and when the metal workers started, noisy. There was no privacy.

The heart of Church Army was a little white chapel, shaped like a drum, with a thatched roof. The tents and lean-tos crowded close to the chapel but left a respectful distance. It was sacred. Many went there to pray. Many went to cry away from others, where it would not infect them like dirty water. I often saw my father go into the chapel. I thought about listening at the door to hear if he was praying or crying, but I did not. Whatever he looked for there, it did not seem to make him a whole man again.

My mother tried to make Jogoo Road Gichichi. Behind the accommodation block was a field of dry grass with an open drain running down the far side. Beyond the drain was a fence and a road, then the Jogoo Road market with its name painted on its rusting tin roof, then the shanties began again. But this field was untouched and open. My mother joined a group of women who wanted to turn the field into

shambas. Pastor Elezeke agreed and they made mattocks in the workshops from bits of old car, broke up the soil and planted maize and cane. That summer we watched the crops grow as the shanties crowded in around the Jogoo Road market, and stifled it, and took it apart for roofs and walls. But they never touched the shambas. It was as if they were protected. The women hoed and sang to the radio and laughed and talked women-talk, and Little Egg and the Chole girls chased enormous sewer rats with sticks. One day I saw little cups of beer and dishes of maize and salt in a corner of the field and understood how it was protected.

My mother pretended it was Gichichi but I could see it was not. In Gichichi, the men did not stand by the fence wire and stare so nakedly. In Gichichi the helicopter gunships did not wheel overhead like vultures. In Gichichi the brightly painted matatus that roared up and down did not have heavy machine guns bolted to the roof and boys in sports fashion in the back looking at everything as if they owned it. They were a new thing in Nairobi, these gun-gangs; the Tacticals. Men, usually young, organized into gangs, with vehicles and guns, dressed in anything they could make a uniform. Some were as young as twelve. They gave themselves names like the Black Simbas and the Black Rhinos and the Ebonettes and the United Christian Front and the Black Taliban. They liked the word black. They thought it sounded threatening. These Tacticals had as many philosophies and beliefs as names, but they all owned territory, patrolled their streets and told their people they were the law. They enforced their law with kneecappings and burning car tyres, they defended their streets with AK47s. We all knew that when the Chaga came, they would fight like hyenas over the corpse of Nairobi. The Soca Boys was our local army. They wore sports fashion and knee-length Manager's coats and had football team logos painted in the sides of their picknis, as the armed matatus were called. On their banners they had a black-and-white patterned ball on a green field. Despite their name, it was not a football. It was a buckyball, a carbon fullerene molecule, the half-living, half-machine building-brick of the Chaga. Their leader, a rat-faced boy in a Manchester United coat and shades that kept sliding down his nose, did not like Christians, so on Sundays he would send his picknis up and down Jogoo Road, roaring their engines and shooting into the air, but because they could.

The Church Army had its own plans for the coming time of changes. A few nights later, as I went to the choo, I overheard Pastor Elezeke and my father talking in the Pastor's study. I put my torch out and listened at the louvres.

"We need people like you, Jonathan," Elezeke was saying. "It is a work of God, I think. We have a chance to build a true Christian society."

"You cannot be certain."

"There are Tacticals ..."

"They are filth. They are vultures."

"Hear me out, Jonathan. Some of them go into the Chaga. They bring things out —

for all their quarantine, there are things the Americans want very much from the Chaga. It is different from what we are told is in there. Very very different. Plants that are like machines, that generate electricity, clean water, fabric, shelter, medicines. Knowledge. There are devices, the size of this thumb, that transmit information directly into the brain. And more; there are people living in there, not like primitives, not, forgive me, like refugees. It shapes itself to them, they have learned to make it work for them. There are whole towns—towns, I tell you—down there under Kilimanjaro. A great society is rising."

"It shapes itself to them," my father said. "And it shapes them to itself."

There was a pause.

"Yes. That is true. Different ways of being human."

"I cannot help you with this, my brother."

"Will you tell me why?"

"I will," my father said, so softly I had to press close to the window to hear.

"Because I am afraid, Stephen. The Chaga has taken everything from me, but that is still not enough for it. It will only be satisfied when it has taken me, and changed me, and made me alien to myself."

"Your faith, Jonathan. What about your faith?"

"It took that first of all."

"Ah," Pastor Elezeke sighed. Then, after a time, "You understand you are always welcome here?"

"Yes, I do. Thank you, but I cannot help you."

That same night I went to the white chapel—my first and last time—to force issues with God. It was a very beautiful building, with a curving inner wall that made you walk halfway around the inside before you could enter. I suppose you could say it was spiritual, but the cross above the table angered me. It was straight and true and did not care for anyone or anything. I sat glaring at it some time before I found the courage to say, "You say you are the answer."

I am the answer, said the cross.

"My father is destroyed by fear. Fear of the Chaga, fear of the future, fear of death, fear of living. What is your answer?"

I am the answer.

"We are refugees, we live on wazungu's charity, my mother hoes corn, my sister

roasts it at the roadside; tell me your answer."

I am the answer.

"An alien life has taken everything we ever owned. Even now, it wants more, and nothing can stop it. Tell me, what is your answer?"

I am the answer.

"You tell me you are the answer to every human need and question, but what does that mean? What is the answer to your answer?"

I am the answer, the silent, hanging cross said.

"That is no answer!" I screamed at the cross. "You do not even understand the questions, how can you be the answer? What power do you have? None. You can do nothing! They need me, not you. I am going to do what you can't."

I did not run from the chapel. You do not run from gods you no longer believe in. I walked, and took no notice of the people who stared at me.

The next morning, I went into Nairobi to get a job. To save money I went on foot. There were men everywhere, walking with friends, sitting by the roadside selling sheet metal charcoal burners or battery lamps, or making things from scrap metal and old tyres, squatting together outside their huts with their hands draped over their knees. There must have been women, but they kept themselves hidden. I did not like the way the men worked me over with their eyes. They had shanty-town eyes, that see only what they can use in a thing. I must have appeared too poor to rob and too hungry to sexually harass, but I did not feel safe until the downtown towers rose around me and the vehicles on the streets were diesel-stained green and yellow buses and quick white UN cars.

I went first to the back door of one of the big tourist hotels.

"I can peel and clean and serve people," I said to an under cook in dirty whites. "I work hard and I am honest. My father is a pastor."

"You and ten million others," the cook said. "Get out of here."

Then I went to the CNN building. It was a big, bold idea. I slipped in behind a motorbike courier and went up to a good-looking Luo on the desk.

"I'm looking for work," I said. "Any work, I can do anything. I can make chai, I can photocopy, I can do basic accounts. I speak good English and a little French. I'm a fast learner."

"No work here today," the Luo on the desk said. "Or any other day. Learn that, fast."



I went to the Asian shops along Moi Avenue.

"Work?" the shopkeepers said. "We can't even sell enough to keep ourselves, let alone some up-country refugee."

I went to the wholesalers on Kimathi Street and the City Market and the stall traders and I got the same answer from each of them: no economy, no market, no work. I tried the street hawkers, selling liquidated stock from tarpaulins on the pavement, but their bad mouths and lewdness sickened me. I walked the five kilometres along Uhuru Highway to the UN East Africa Headquarters on Chiromo Road. The soldier on the gate would not even look at me. Cars and hummers he could see. His own people, he could not. After an hour I went away.

I took a wrong turn on the way back and ended up in a district I did not know, of dirty-looking two-storey buildings that once held shops, now burned out or shuttered with heavy steel. Cables dipped across the street, loop upon loop upon loop, sagging and heavy. I could hear voices but see no one around. The voices came from an alley behind a row of shops. An entire district was crammed into this alley. Not even in St. John's camp have I seen so many people in one place. The alley was solid with bodies, jammed together, moving like one thing, like a rain cloud. The noise was incredible. At the end of the alley I glimpsed a big black foreign car, very shiny, and a man standing on the roof. He was surrounded by reaching hands, as if they were worshipping him.

"What's going on?" I shouted to whoever would hear. The crowd surged. I stood firm.

"Hiring," a shaven-headed boy as thin as famine shouted back. He saw I was puzzled. "Watekni. Day jobs in data processing. The UN treats us like shit in our own country, but we're good enough to do their tax returns."

"Good money?"

"Money." The crowd surged again, and made me part of it. A new car arrived behind me. The crowd turned like a flock of birds on the wing and pushed me towards the open doors. Big men with dark glasses got out and made a space around the watekni broker. He was a small Luhya in a long white jellaba and the uniform shades. He had a mean mouth. He fanned a fistful of paper slips. My hand went out by instinct and I found a slip in it. A single word was printed on it: Nimepata.

"Password of the day," my thin friend said. "Gets you into the system."

"Over there, over there," one of the big men said, pointing to an old bus at the end of the alley. I ran to the bus. I could feel a hundred people on my heels. There was another big man at the bus door.

"What're your languages?" the big man demanded.

"English and a bit of French," I told him.

"You waste my fucking time, kid," the man shouted. He tore the password slip from my hand, pushed me so hard, with two hands, I fell. I saw feet, crushing feet, and I rolled underneath the bus and out the other side. I did not stop running until I was out of the district of the watekni and into streets with people on them. I did not see if the famine-boy got a slip. I hope he did.

Singers wanted, said the sign by the flight of street stairs to an upper floor. So, my skills had no value in the information technology market. There were other markets. I climbed the stairs. They led to a room so dark I could not at first make out its dimensions. It smelled of beer, cigarettes and poppers. I sensed a number of men.

"Your sign says you want singers," I called into the dark.

"Come in then." The man's voice was low and dark, smoky, like an old hut. I ventured in. As my eyes grew used to the dark, I saw tables, chairs upturned on them, a bar, a raised stage area. I saw a number of dark figures at a table, and the glow of cigarettes.

"Let's have you."

"Where?"

"There."

I got up on the stage. A light stabbed out and blinded me.

"Take your top off."

I hesitated, then unbuttoned my blouse. I slipped it off, stood with my arms loosely folded over my breasts. I could not see the men, but I felt the shanty-eyes.

"You stand like a Christian child," smoky voice said. "Let's see the goods."

I unfolded my arms. I stood in the silver light for what seemed like hours.

"Don't you want to hear me sing?"

"Girl, you could sing like an angel, but if you don't have the architecture ..."

I picked up my blouse and rebuttoned it. It was much more shaming putting it on than taking it off. I climbed down off the stage. The men began to talk and laugh. As I reached the door, the dark voice called me.

"Can you do a message?"

"What do you want?"

"Run this down the street for me right quick."

I saw fingers hold up a small glass vial. It glittered in the light from the open door.

"Down the street."

"To the American Embassy."

"I can find that."

"That's good. You give it to a man."

"What man?"

"You tell the guard on the gate. He'll know."

"How will he know me?"

"Say you're from Brother Dust."

"And how much will Brother Dust pay me?"

The men laughed.

"Enough."

"In my hand?"

"Only way to do business."

"We have a deal."

"Good girl. Hey."

"What?"

"Don't you want to know what it is?"

"Do you want to tell me?"

"They're fullerenes. They're from the Chaga. Do you understand that? They are alien spores. The Americans want them. They can use them to build things, from nothing up. Do you understand any of this?"

"A little."

"So be it. One last thing."

"What?"

"You don't carry it in your hand. You don't carry it anywhere on you. You get my meaning?"

"I think I do."

"There are changing rooms for the girls back of the stage. You can use one of them."

"OK. Can I ask a question?"

"You can ask anything you like."

"These fullerenes. These Chaga things. What if they go off, inside?"

"You trust the stories that they never touch human flesh. Here. You may need this." An object flipped through the air towards me. I caught it—a tube of KY jelly. "A little lubrication."

I had one more question before I went backstage area.

"Can I ask, why me?"

"For a Christian child, you've a decent amount of dark," the voice said. "So, you've a name?"

"Tendeleo."

Ten minutes later I was walking across town, past all the UN check-points and security points, with a vial of Chaga fullerenes slid into my vagina. I walked up to the gate of the American Embassy. There were two guards with white helmets and white gaiters. I picked the big black one with the very good teeth.

"I'm from Brother Dust," I said.

"One moment please," the marine said. He made a call on his PDU. One minute later the gates swung open and a small white man with sticking-up hair came out.

"Come with me," he said, and took me to the guard unit toilets, where I extracted the consignment. In exchange he gave me a playing card with a portrait of a President of the United States on the back. The President was Nixon.

"You ever go back without one of these, you die," he told me. I gave the Nixon card to the man who called himself Brother Dust. He gave me a roll of shillings and told

me to come back on Tuesday.

I gave two thirds of the roll to my mother.

"Where did you get this?" she asked, holding the notes in her hands like blessings.

"I have a job," I said, challenging her to ask. She never did ask. She bought clothes for Little Egg and fruit from the market. On the Tuesday, I went back to the upstairs club that smelled of beer and smoke and come and took another load inside me to the spikey-haired man at the Embassy.

So I became a runner. I became a link in a chain that ran from legendary cities under the clouds of Kilimanjaro across terminum, past the UN Interdiction Force, to an upstairs club in Nairobi, into my body, to the US Embassy. No, I do not have that right. I was a link in a chain that started eight hundred years ago, as light flies, in a gas cloud called Rho Ophiuchi, that ran from US Embassy to US Government, and on to a man whose face was on the back on one of my safe-conduct cards and from him into a future no one could guess.

"It scares them, that's why they want it," Brother Dust told me. "Americans are always drawn to things that terrify them. They think these fullerenes will give the edge to their industries, make the economy indestructible. Truth is, they'll destroy their industries, wreck their economy. With these, anyone can make anything they want. Their free market can't stand up to that."

I did not stay a runner long. Brother Dust liked my refusal to be impressed by what the world said should impress me. I became his personal assistant. I made appointments, kept records. I accompanied him when he called on brother Sheriffs. The Chaga was coming closer, the Tacticals were on the streets; old enemies were needed as allies now.

One such day, Brother Dust gave me a present wrapped in a piece of silk. I unwrapped it, inside was a gun. My first reaction was fear; that a sixteen-year-old girl should have the gift of life or death in her hand. Would I, could I, ever use it on living flesh? Then a sense of power crept through me. For the first time in my life, I had authority.

"Don't love it too much," Brother Dust warned. "Guns don't make you safe. Nowhere in this world is safe, not for you, not for anyone."

It felt like a sin, like a burn on my body as I carried it next to my skin back to Jogoo Road. It was impossible to keep it in our rooms, but Simeon in the metal shop had been stashing my roll for some time now and he was happy to hide the gun behind the loose block. He wanted to handle it. I would not let him, though I think he did when I was not around. Every morning I took it out, some cash for lunch and bribes, and went to work.

With a gun and money in my pocket, Brother Dust's warning seemed old and full of fear. I was young and fast and clever. I could make the world as safe or as dangerous as I liked. Two days after my seventeenth birthday, the truth of what he said arrived at my door.

It was late, it was dark and I was coming off the matatu outside Church Army. It was a sign of how far things had gone with my mother and father that they no longer asked where I was until so late, or how the money kept coming. At once I could tell something was wrong; a sense you develop when you work on the street. People were milling around in the compound, needing to do something, not knowing what they could do. Elsewhere, women's voices were shouting. I found Simeon.

"What's happening, where is my mother?"

"The shambas. They have broken through into the shambas."

I pushed my way through the silly, mobbing Christians. The season was late, the corn over my head, the cane dark and whispering. I strayed off the shamba paths in moments. The moon ghosted behind clouds, the air-glow of the city surrounded me but cast no light. The voices steered me until I saw lights gleaming through the stalks: torches and yellow naphtha flares. The voices were loud now, close. There were now men, loud men. Loud men have always frightened me. Not caring for the crop, I charged through the maize, felling rich, ripe heads.

The women of Church Army stood at the edge of the crushed crop. Maize, potatoes, cane, beans had been trodden down, ripped out, torn up. Facing them was a mob of shanty-town people. The men had torches and cutting tools. The women's kangas bulged with stolen food. The children's baskets and sacks were stuffed with bean pods and maize cobs. They faced us shamelessly. Beyond the flattened wire fence, a larger crowd was waiting in front of the market; the hyenas, who if the mob won, would go with them, and if it lost, would sneak back to their homes. They outnumbered the women twenty to one. But I was bold. I had the authority of a gun.

"Get out of here," I shouted at them. "This is not your land."

"And neither is it yours," their leader said, a man thin as a skeleton, barefoot, dressed in cut-off jeans and a rag of a fertilizer company T-shirt. He held a tin-can oil-lamp in his left hand, in his right a machete. "It is all borrowed from the Chaga. It will take it away, and none of us will have it. We want what we can take, before it is lost to all of us."

"Go to the United Nations," I shouted.

The leader shook his head. The men stepped forward. The women murmured, gripped their mattocks and hoes firmly.

"The United Nations? Have you not heard? They are scaling down the relief effort.

We are to be left to the mercy of the Chaga."

"This is our food. We grew it, we need it. Get off our land!"

"Who are you?" The leader laughed. The men hefted their pangas and stepped forward. The laughter lit the dark inside me that Brother Dust had recognized, that made me a warrior. Light-headed with rage and power, I pulled out my gun. I held it over my head. One, two, three shots cracked the night. The silence after was more shocking than the shots.

"So. The child has a gun," the hungry man said.

"The child can use it too. And you will be first to die."

"Perhaps," the leader said. "But you have three bullets. We have three hundred hands."

My mother pulled me to one side as the shanty men came through. Their pangas caught the yellow light as they cut their way through our maize and cane. After them came the women and the children, picking, sifting, gleaning. The three hundred hands stripped our fields like locusts. The gun pulled my arm down like an iron weight. I remember I cried with frustration and shame. There were too many of them. My power, my resolve, my weapon, were nothing. False bravery. Boasting. Show.

By morning the field was a trampled mess of stalks, stems and shredded leaves. Not a grain worth eating remained. By morning I was waiting on the Jogoo Road, my thumb held out for a matatu, my possessions in a sports bag on my back. A refugee again. The fight had been brief and muted.

"What is this thing?" My mother could not touch the gun. She pointed at it on the bed. My father could not even look. He sat hunched up in a deep, old armchair, staring at his knees. "Where did you get such a thing?"

The dark thing was still strong in me. It had failed against the mob, but it was more than enough for my parents.

"From a Sheriff," I said. "You know what a Sheriff is? He is a big man. For him I stick Chaga-spores up my crack. I give them to Americans, Europeans, Chinese, anyone who will pay."

"Do not speak to us like that!"

"Why shouldn't I? What have you done, but sit here and wait for something to happen? I'll tell the only thing that is going to happen. The Chaga is going to come and destroy everything. At least I have taken some responsibility for this family, at least I have kept us out of the sewer! At least we have not had to steal other people's

food!"

"Filth money! Dirt money, sin money!"

"You took that money readily enough."

"If we had known . . ."

"Did you ever ask?"

"You should have told us."

"You were afraid to know."

My mother could not answer that. She pointed at the gun again, as if it were the proof of all depravity.

"Have you ever used it?"

"No," I said, challenging her to call me a liar.

"Would you have used it, tonight?"

"Yes," I said. "I would, if I thought it would have worked."

"What has happened to you?" my mother said. "What have we done?"

"You have done nothing," I said. "That's what's wrong with you. You give up. You sit there, like him." My father had not yet said a word. "You sit there, and you do nothing. God will not help you. If God could, would he have sent the Chaga? God has made you beggars."

Now my father got up out of his deep chair.

"Leave this house," he said in a very quiet voice. I stared. "Take your things. Go on. Go now. You are no longer of this family. You will not come here again."

So I walked out with my things in my bag and my gun in my pants and my roll in my shoe and I felt the eyes in every room and lean-to and shack and I learned Christians can have shanty-eyes too. Brother Dust found me a room in the back of the club. I think he hoped it would give him a chance to have sex with me. It smelled and it was noisy at night and I often had to quit it to let the prostitutes do their business, but it was mine, and I believed I was free and happy. But his words were a curse on me. Like Evil Eye, I knew no peace. You do nothing, I had accused my parents but what had I done? What was my plan for when the Chaga came? As the months passed and the terminum was now at Muranga, now at Ghania Falls, now at Thika, Brother Dust's curse accused me. I watched the Government pull out for Mombasa in a convoy of trucks and cars that took an hour and a half to go past the Haile Selassie



Avenue cafe where I bought my runners morning coffee. I saw the gangs of picknis race through the avenues, loosing off tracer like firecrackers, until the big UN troop carriers drove them before them like beggars. I crouched in roadside ditches from terrible firefights over hijacked oil tankers. I went up to the observation deck of the Moi Telecom Tower and saw the smoke from battles out in the suburbs, and beyond, on the edge of the heat-haze, to south and north, beyond the mottled duns and dusts of the squatter towns, the patterned colours of the Chaga. I saw the newspapers announce that on 18 July 2013, the walls of the Chaga would meet and Nairobi cease to exist. Where is safe? Brother Dust said in my spirit. What are you going to do?

\* \* \* \*

A man dies, and it is easy to say when the dying ends. The breath goes out and does not come in again. The heart stills. The blood cools and congeals. The last thought fades from the brain. It is not so easy to say when a dying begins. Is it, for example, when the body goes into the terminal decline? When the first cell turns black and cancerous? When we pass our DNA to a new human generation, and become genetically redundant? When we are born? A civil servant once told me that when they make out your birth certificate, they also prepare your death certificate.

It was the same for the big death of Nairobi. The world saw the end of the end from spy satellites and camera-blimps. When the end for a city begins is less clear. Some say it was when the United Nations pulled out and left Nairobi open. Others, when the power plants at Embakasi went down and the fuel and telephone lines to the coast were cut. Some trace it to the first Hatching Tower appearing over the avenues of Westlands; some to the pictures on the television news of the hexagon pattern of Chaga-moss slowly obliterating a "Welcome to Nairobi" road sign. For me it was when I slept with Brother Dust in the back room of the upstairs club.

I told him I was a virgin.

"I always pegged you for a Christian child," he said, and though my virginity excited him, he did not try and take it from me forcefully or disrespectfully. I was fumbling and dry and did not know what to do and pretended to enjoy it more than I did. The truth was that I did not see what all the fuss was about. Why did I do it? It was the seal that I had become a fine young criminal, and tied my life to my city.

Though he was kind and gentle, we did not sleep together again.

They were bad times, those last months in Nairobi. Sometimes, I think, are so bad that we can only deal them with by remembering what is good, or bright. I will try and look at the end days straight and honestly. I was now eighteen, it was over a year since I left Jogoo Road and I had not seen my parents or Little Egg since. I was proud and angry and afraid. But a day had not passed that I had not thought about them and the duty I owed them. The Chaga was advancing on two fronts, marching

up from the south and sweeping down from the north through the once-wealthy suburbs of Westlands and Garden Grove. The Kenyan Army was up there, firing mortars into the cliff of vegetation called the Great Wall, taking out the Hatching Towers with artillery. As futile as shelling the sea. In the south the United Nations was holding the international airport open at every cost. Between them, the Tacticals tore at each other like street dogs. Alliances formed and were broken in the same day. Neighbour turned on neighbour, brother killed brother. The boulevards of down-town Nairobi were littered with bullet casings and burned out picknics. There was not one pane of glass whole on all of Moi Avenue, nor one shop that was not looted. Between them were twelve million civilians, and the posses.

We too made and dissolved our alliances. We had an arrangement with Mombi, who had just bloodily ended an agreement with Haran, one of the big sheriffs, to make a secret deal with the Black Simbas, who intended to be a power in the new order after the Chaga. The silly, vain Soca Boys had been swept away in one night by the Simbas East Starehe Division. Custom matatus and football managers' coats were no match for Russian APCs and light-scatter combat-suits. Brother Dust's associations were precarious: the posses had wealth and influence but no power. Despite our AK47s and street cool uniforms—in the last days, everyone had a uniform — even the Soca Boys could have taken us out. We were criminals, not warriors.

Limuru, Tigani, Kiambu, in the north. Athi River, Matathia, Embakasi to the south. The Chaga advanced a house here, a school there, half a church, a quarter of a street. Fifty metres every day. Never slower, never faster. When the Supreme Commander East African Protection Force announced terminum at Ngara, I made my move. In my Dust Girl uniform of street-length, zebra-stripe PVC coat over short-shorts, I took a taxi to the Embassy of the United States of America. The driver detoured through Riverside.

"Glider come down on Limuru Road," the driver explained. The gliders scared me, hanging like great plastic bats from the hatching towers, waiting to drop, spread their wings and sail across the city sowing Chaga spores. To me they were dark death on wings. I have too many Old Testament images still in me. The army took out many on the towers, the helicopters the ones in the air, but some always made it down. Nairobi was being eaten away from within.

Riverside had been rich once. I saw a tank up-ended in a swimming pool, a tennis court strewn with swollen bodies in purple combats. Chaga camouflage. Beyond the trees I saw fans of lilac land-coral.

I told the driver to wait outside the Embassy. The grounds were jammed with trucks. Chains of soldiers and staff were loading them with crates and machinery. The black marine knew me by now.

"You're going?" I asked.

"Certainly are, ma'am," the marine said. I handed him my gun. He nodded me

through. People pushed through the corridors under piles of paper and boxes marked Property of the United States Government. Everywhere I heard shredders. I found the right office. The spikey-haired man, whose name was Knutson, was piling cardboard boxes on his desk.

"We're not open for business."

"I'm not here to trade," I said. I told him what I was here for. He looked at me as if I had said that the world was made of wool, or the Chaga had reversed direction. So I cleared a space on his desk and laid out the photographs I had brought.

"Please tell me, because I don't understand this attraction," I said. "Is it that, when they are that young, you cannot tell the boys from the girls? Or is it the tightness?"

"Fuck you. You'll never get these public."

"They already are. If the Diplomatic Corps Personnel Section does not receive a password every week, the file will download."

If there had been a weapon to hand, I think Knutson would have killed me where I stood.

"I shouldn't have expected any more from a woman who sells her cunt to aliens."

"We are all prostitutes, Mr Knutson. So?"

"Wait there. To get out you need to be chipped." In the few moments he was out of the room I studied the face of the President on the wall. I was familiar with Presidential features; is it something in the nature of the office, I wondered, that gives them all the same look? Knutson returned with a metal and plastic device like a large hypodermic. "Name, address, Social Security Number." I gave them to him. He tapped tiny keys on the side of the device, then he seized my wrist, pressed the nozzle against forearm. There was click, I felt a sharp pain but I did not cry out.

"Congratulations, you're an employee of US Military Intelligence. I hope that fucking hurt."

"Yes it did." Blood oozed down my wrist. "I need three more. These are the names."

Beside the grainy snaps of Knutson on the bed with the naked children, I laid out my family. Knutson thrust the chip gun at me.

"Here. Take it. Take the fucking thing. They'll never miss it, not in all this. It's easy to use, just dial it in there. And those."

I scooped up the photographs and slid them with the chip gun into my inside pocket. The freedom chip throbbed under my skin as I walked through the corridors

full of people and paper into the light.

Back at the club I paid the driver in gold. It and cocaine were the only universally acceptable street currencies. I had been converting my roll to Kruger rands for some months now. The rate was not good. I jogged up the stairs to the club, and into slaughter.

Bullets had been poured into the dark room. The bar was shattered glass, stinking of alcohol. The tables were spilled and splintered. The chairs were overturned, smashed. Bodies lay among them, the club men, sprawled inelegantly. The carpet was sticky with blood. Flies buzzed over the dead. I saw the Dust Girls, my sisters, scattered across the floor, hair and bare skin and animal prints drenched with blood. I moved among them. I thought of zebras on the high plains, hunted down by lions, limbs and muscle and skin torn apart. The stench of blood is an awful thing. You never get it out of you. I saw Brother Dust on his back against the stage. Someone had emptied a clip of automatic fire into his face.

Our alliances were ended.

A noise; I turned. I drew my gun. I saw it in my hand, and the dead lying with their guns in their hands. I ran from the club. I ran down the stairs onto the street. I was a mad thing, screaming at the people in the street, my gun in hand, my coat flying out behind me. I ran as fast as I could. I ran for home, I ran for Jogoo Road. I ran for the people I had left there. Nothing could stop me. Nothing dared, with my gun in my hand. I would go home and I would take them away from this insanity. The last thing the United Nations will ever do for us is fly us out of here, I would tell them. We will fly somewhere we do not need guns or camps or charity, where we will again be what we were. In my coat and stupid boots, I ran, past the plastic city at the old country bus terminal, around the metal barricades on Landhies Road, across the waste ground past the Lusaka Road roundabout where two buses were burning. I ran out into Jogoo Road.

There were people right across the road. Many many people, with vehicles, white UN vehicles. And soldiers, a lot of soldiers. I could not see Church Army. I slammed into the back of the crowd, I threw people out of my way, hammered at them with the side of my gun.

"Get out of my way, I have to get to my family!"

Hands seized me, spun me around. A Kenyan Army soldier held me by the shoulders.

"You cannot get through."

"My family lives here. The Church Army Centre, I need to see them."

"No one goes through. There is no Church Army."

"What do you mean? What are you saying?"

"A glider came down."

I tore away from him, fought my way through the crowd until I came to the cordon of soldiers. A hundred metres down the road was a line of hummers and APCs. A hundred yards beyond them, the alien infection. The glider had crashed into the accommodation block. I could still make out the vile bat-shape among the crust of fungus and sponge spreading across the white plaster. Ribs of Chaga-coral had burst the tin roof of the teaching hall, the shacks were a stew of dissolving plastic and translucent bubbles that burst in a cloud of brown dust. Where the dust touched, fresh bubbles grew. The chapel had vanished under a web of red veins. Even Jogoo Road was blistered by yellow flowers and blue barrel-like objects. Fingers of the hexagonal Chaga moss were reaching towards the road block. As I watched, one of the thorn trees outside the centre collapsed into the sewer and sent up a cloud of buzzing silver mites.

"Where are the people?" I asked a soldier.

"Decontamination," he said.

"My family was in there!" I screamed at him. He looked away. I shouted at the crowd. I shouted my father's name, my mother's name, Little Egg's, my own name. I pushed through the people, trying to look at the faces. Too many people, too many faces. The soldiers were looking at me. They were talking on radios, I was disturbing them. At any moment they might arrest me. More likely, they would take me to a quiet place and put a bullet in the back of my skull. Too many people, too many faces. I put the gun away, ducked down, slipped between the legs to the back of the crowd. Decontamination. A UN word, that. Headquarters would have records of the contaminated. Chiromo Road. I would need transport. I came out of the crowd and started to run again. I ran up Jogoo Road, past the sports stadium, around the roundabout onto Landhies Road. There were still a few civilian cars on the street. I ran up the middle of the road, pointing my gun at every car that came towards me.

"Take me to Chiromo Road!" I shouted. The drivers would veer away, or hoot and swear. Some even aimed at me. I sidestepped them, I was too fast for them.

"Chiromo Road, or I will kill you!" Tacticals laughed and yelled as they swept past in their picknis. Not one stopped. Everyone had seen too many guns.

There was a Kenyan Army convoy on Pumwani Road, so I cut up through the cardboard cities into Kariokor. As long as I kept the Nairobi River, a swamp of refuse and sewage, to my left, I would eventually come out onto Ngara Road. The shanty people fled from the striped demon with the big gun.

"Get out of my way!" I shouted. And then, all at once, the alley people disobeyed me. They stood stock still. They looked up.

I felt it before I saw it. Its shadow was cold on my skin. I stopped running. I too looked up and it swooped down on me. That is what I thought, how I felt—this thing had been sent from the heart of the Chaga to me alone. The glider was bigger than I had imagined, and much much darker. It swept over me. I was paralyzed with dread, then I remembered what I held in my hand. I lifted my gun and fired at the dark bat-thing. I fired and fired and fired until all I heard was a stiff click. I stood, shaking, as the glider vanished behind the plastic shanty roofs. I stood, staring at my hand holding the gun. Then the tiniest yellow buds appeared around the edge of the cylinder. The buds unfolded into crystals, and the crystals spread across the black, oiled metal like scale. More buds came out of the muzzle and grew back down the barrel. Crystals swelled up and choked the cocked hammer.

I dropped the gun like a snake. I tore at my hair, my clothes, I scrubbed at my skin. My clothes were already beginning to change. My zebra-striped coat was blistering. I pulled out the chip injector. It was a mess of yellow crystals and flowers. I could not hope to save them now. I threw it away from me. The photographs of Knutson with the children fell to the earth. They bubbled up and went to dust. I tore at my coat; it came apart in my fingers into tatters of plastic and spores. I ran. The heel of one knee-boot gave way. I fell, rolled, recovered, and stripped the foolish things off me. All around me, the people of Kariokor were running, ripping at their skin and their clothes with their fingers. I ran with them, crying with fear. I let them lead me. My finery came apart around me. I ran naked, I did not care. I had nothing now. Everything had been taken from me, everything but the chip in my arm. On every side the plastic and wood shanties sent up shoots and stalks of Chaga.

We crashed up against the UN emergency cordon at Kariokor Market. Wicker shields pushed us back; rungu clubs went up, came down. People fell, clutching smashed skulls. I threw myself at the army line.

"Let me through!"

I thrust my arm between the riot shields.

"I'm chipped! I'm chipped!"

Rungus rose before my face.

"UN pass! I'm chipped!"

The rungu came down, and something whirled them away. A white man's voice shouted.

"Jesus fuck, she is! Get her out of there! Quick!"

The shield wall parted, hands seized me, pulled me through.

"Get something on her!"

A combat jacket fell on my shoulders. I was taken away very fast through the lines of soldiers to a white hummer with a red cross on the side. A white man with a red cross vest sat me on the back step and ran a scanner over my forearm. The wound was livid now, throbbing.

"Tendeleo Bi. US Embassy Intelligence Liaison. OK Tendeleo Bi, I've no idea what you were doing in there, but it's decontam for you."

A second soldier—an officer, I guessed—had come back to the hummer.

"No time. Civs have to be out by twenty three hundred."

The medic puffed his cheeks.

"This is not procedure .. ."

"Procedure?" the officer said. "With a whole fucking city coming apart around us? But I guarantee you this, the Americans will go fucking ballistic if we fuck with one of their spooks. A surface scrub'll do ..."

They took me over to a big boxy truck with a biohazard symbol on the side. It was parked well away from the other vehicles. I was shivering from shock. I made no complaint as they shaved all hair from my body. Someone gently took away the army jacket and showed me where to stand. Three men unrolled high-pressure hoses from the side of the truck and worked me from top to bottom. The water was cold, and hard enough to be painful. My skin burned. I twisted and turned to try to keep it away from my nipples and the tender parts of my body. On the third scrub, I realized what they were doing, and remembered.

"Take me to decontam!" I shouted. "I want to go to decontam! My family's there, don't you realize?" The men would not listen to me. I do not think they even knew it was a young woman's body they were hosing down. No one listened to me. I was dried with hot air guns, given some loose fatigues to wear, then put in the back of a diplomatic hummer that drove very fast through the streets to the airport. We did not go to the terminal building. There, I might have broken and run. We went through the wire gates, and straight to the open back of a big Russian transport plane. A line of people was going up the ramp into the cavern of its belly. Most of them were white, many had children, and all were laden with bags and goods. All were refugees, too ... like me.

"My family is back there, I have to get them," I told the man with the security scanner at the foot of the ramp.

"We'll find them," he said as he checked off my Judas chip against the official database. "That's you. Good luck." I went up the metal ramp into the plane. A

Russian woman in uniform found me a seat in the middle block, far from any window. Once I was belted in I sat trembling until I heard the ramp close and the engines start up. Then I knew I could do nothing, and the shaking stopped. I felt the plane bounce over the concrete and turn onto the runway. I hoped a terrible hope: that something would go wrong and the plane would crash and I would die. Because I needed to die. I had destroyed the thing I meant to save and saved the thing that was worthless. Then the engines powered up and we made our run and though I could see only the backs of seats and the grey metal curve of the big cabin, I knew when we left the ground because I felt my bond with Kenya break and my home fall away beneath me as the plane took me into exile.

I pause now in my story now, for where it goes now is best told by another voice.

\* \* \* \*

My name is Sean. It's an Irish name. I'm not Irish. No bit of Irish in me, as you can probably see. My mum liked the name. Irish stuff was fashionable, thirty years ago. My telling probably won't do justice to Tendeleo's story; I apologize. My gift's numbers. Allegedly. I'm a reluctant accountant. I do what I do well, I just don't have a gut feel for it. That's why my company gave me all the odd jobs. One of them was this African-Caribbean-World restaurant just off Canal Street. It was called I-Nation—the menu changed every week, the ambience was great and the music was mighty. The first time I wore a suit there, Wynton the owner took the piss so much I never dressed up for them again. I'd sit at a table and poke at his VAT returns and find myself nodding to the drum and bass. Wynton would try out new grooves on me and I'd give them thumbs up or thumbs down. Then he'd fix me coffee with this liqueur he imported from Jamaica and that was the afternoon gone. It seemed a shame to invoice him.

One day Wynton said to me, "You should come to our evening sessions. Good music. Not this fucking bang bang bang. Not fucking deejays. Real music. Live music."

However, my mates liked fucking deejays and bang bang bang so I went to I-Nation on my own. There was a queue but the door staff nodded me right in. I got a seat at the bar and a Special Coffee, compliments of the house. The set had already begun, the floor was heaving. That band knew how to get a place moving. After the dance set ended, the lead guitarist gestured offstage. A girl got up behind the mic. I recognized her—she waitressed in the afternoons. She was a small, quiet girl, kind of unnoticeable, apart from her hair which stuck out in spikes like it was growing back after a Number Nought cut with the razor.

She got up behind that mic and smiled apologetically. Then she began to sing, and I wondered how I had never thought her unnoticeable. It was a slow, quiet song. I couldn't understand the language. I didn't need to, her voice said it all: loss and hurt and lost love. Bass and rhythm felt out the depth and damage in every syllable. She



was five foot nothing and looked like she would break in half if you blew on her, but her voice had a stone edge that said, I've been where I'm singing about. Time stopped, she held a note then gently let it go. I-Nation was silent for a moment. Then it exploded. The girl bobbed shyly and went down through the cheering and whistling. Two minutes later she was back at work, clearing glasses. I could not take my eyes off her. You can fall in love in five minutes. It's not hard at all.

When she came to take my glass, all I could say was, "That was . . . great."

"Thank you."

And that was it. How I met Ten, said three shit words to her, and fell in love.

I never could pronounce her name. On the afternoons when the bar was quiet and we talked over my table she would shake her head at my mangling the vowel sounds.

"Eh-yo."

"Ay-oh?"

The soft spikes of hair would shake again. Then, she never could pronounce my name either. Shan, she would say.

"No, Shawn."

"Shone."

So I called her Ten, which for me meant Il Primo, Top of the Heap, King of the Hill, A-Number-One. And she called me Shone. Like the sun. One afternoon when she was off shift, I asked Boss Wynton what kind of name Tendeleo was.

"I mean, I know it's African, I can tell by the accent, but it's a big continent."

"It is that. She not told you?"

"Not yet."

"She will when she's ready. And Mr Accountant, you fucking respect her."

Two weeks later she came to my table and laid a series of forms before me like tarot cards. They were Social Security applications, Income Support, Housing Benefit.

"They say you're good with numbers."

"This isn't really my thing, but I'll take a look." I flipped through the forms. "You're working too many hours . . . they're trying to cut your benefits. It's the classic welfare trap. It doesn't pay you to work."

"I need to work," Ten said.

Last in line was a Home Office Asylum Seeker's form. She watched me pick it up and open it. She must have seen my eyes widen.

"Gichichi, in Kenya."

"Yes."

I read more.

"God. You got out of Nairobi."

"I got out of Nairobi, yes."

I hesitated before asking, "Was it bad?"

"Yes," she said. "I was very bad."

"I?" I said.

"What?"

"You said I. I was very bad."

"I meant it, it was very bad."

The silence could have been uncomfortable, fatal even. The thing I had wanted to say for weeks rushed into the vacuum.

"Can I take you somewhere? Now? Today? When you finish? Would you like to eat?"

"I'd like that very much," she said.

Wynton sent her off early. I took her to a great restaurant in Chinatown where the waiters ask you before you go in how much you'd like to spend.

"I don't know what this is," she said as the first of the courses arrived.

"Eat it. You'll like it."

She toyed with her wontons and chopsticks.

"Is something wrong with it?"

"I will tell you about Nairobi now," she said. The food was expensive and lavish and exquisitely presented and we hardly touched it. Course after course went back to the kitchen barely picked over as Ten told me the story of her life, the church in

Gichichi, the camps in Nairobi, the career as a posse girl, and of the Chaga that destroyed her family, her career, her hopes, her home, and almost her life. I had seen the coming of the Chaga on the television. Like most people, I had tuned it down to background muzak in my life; oh, wow, there's an alien life-form taking over the southern hemisphere. Well, it's bad for the safari holidays and carnival in Rio is fucked and you won't be getting the Brazilians in the next World Cup, but the Cooperage account's due next week and we're pitching for the Maine Road job and interest rates have gone up again. Aliens schmalien. Another humanitarian crisis. I had followed the fall of Nairobi, the first of the really big cities to go, trying to make myself believe that this was not Hollywood, this was not Bruce Willis versus the CGI. This was twelve million people being swallowed by the dark. Unlike most of my friends and work mates. I had felt something move painfully inside me when I saw the walls of the Chaga close on the towers of downtown Nairobi. It was like a kick in my heart. For a moment I had gone behind the pictures that are all we are allowed to know of our world, to the true lives. And now the dark had spat one of these true lives up onto the streets of Manchester. We were on the last candle at the last table by the time Ten got around to telling me how she had been dumped out with the other Kenyans at Charles de Gaulle and shuffled for months through EU refugee quotas until she arrived, jet-lagged, culture-shocked and poor as shit, in the grey and damp of an English summer.

Afterwards, I was quiet for some time. Nothing I could have said was adequate to what I had heard. Then I said, "Would you like to come home with me for a drink, or a coffee, or something?"

"Yes," she said. Her voice was husky from much talking, and low, and unbearably attractive. "I would, very much."

I left the staff a big tip for above-and-beyondness.

Ten loved my house. The space astonished her. I left her curled up on my sofa savouring the space as I went to open wine.

"This is nice," she said. "Warm. Big. Nice. Yours."

"Yes," I said and leaned forward and kissed her. Then, before I could think about what I had done, I took her arm and kissed the round red blemish of her chip. Ten slept with me that night, but we did not make love. She lay, curled and chaste, in the hollow of my belly until morning. She cried out in her sleep often. Her skin smelled of Africa.

The bastards cut her housing benefit. Ten was distraught. Home was everything to her. Her life had been one long search for a place of her own; safe, secure, stable.

"You have two options," I said. "One, give up working here."

"Never," she said. "I work. I like to work." I saw Wynton smile, polishing the

glasses behind the bar.

"Option two, then."

"What's that?"

"Move in with me."

It took her a week to decide. I understood her hesitation. It was a place, safe, secure, stable, but not her own. On the Saturday I got a phone call from her. Could I help her move? I went around to her flat in Salford. The rooms were tatty and cold, the furniture charity-shop fare, and the decor ugly. The place stank of dope. The television blared, unwatched; three different boomboxes competed with each other. While Ten fetched her stuff, her flatmates stared at me as if I were something come out of the Chaga. She had two bags—one of clothes, one of music and books. They went in the back of the car and she came home with me.

Life with Ten. She put her books on a shelf and her clothes in a drawer. She improvised harmonies to my music. She would light candles on any excuse. She spent hours in the bathroom and used toilet paper by the roll. She was meticulously tidy. She took great care of her little money. She would not borrow from me. She kept working at I-Nation, she sang every Friday. She still killed me every time she got up on that stage.

She said little, but it told. She was dark and intensely beautiful to me. She didn't smile much. When she did it was a knife through the heart of me. It was a sharp joy. Sex was a sharpness of a different kind—it always seemed difficult for her. She didn't lose herself in sex. I think she took a great pleasure from it, but it was controlled ... it was owned, it was hers. She never let herself make any sound. She was a little afraid of the animal inside. She seemed much older than she was; on the times we went dancing, that same energy that lit her up in singing and sex burned out of her. It was then that she surprised me by being a bright, energetic, sociable eighteen-year-old. She loved me. I loved her so hard it felt like sickness. I would watch her unaware I was doing it watch the way she moved her hands when she talked on the phone, how she curled her legs under her when she watched television, how she brushed her teeth in the morning. I would wake up in the night just to watch her sleep. I would check she was still breathing. I dreaded something insane, something out of nowhere, taking her away.

She stuck a satellite photograph of Africa on the fridge. She showed me how to trace the circles of the Chaga through the clouds. Every week she updated it. Week by week, the circles merging. That was how I measured our life together, by the circles, merging. Week by week, her home was taken away. Her parents and sister were down there, under those blue and white bars of cloud; week by week the circles were running them out of choices.

She never let herself forget she had failed them. She never let herself forget she was a

refugee. That was what made her older, in ways, than me. That was what all her tidiness and orderliness around the house were about. She was only here for a little time. It could all be lifted at a moment's notice.

She liked to cook for me on Sundays, though the kitchen smelled of it for a week afterwards. I never told her her cooking gave me the shits. She was chopping something she had got from the Caribbean stores and singing to herself. I was watching from the hall, as I loved to watch her without being watched. I saw her bring the knife down, heard a Kalenjin curse, saw her lift her hand to her mouth. I was in like a shot.

"Shit shit shit shit," she swore. It was a deep cut, and blood ran freely down her forefinger. I rushed her to the tap, stuck it under the cold, then went for the medical bag. I returned with gauze, plasters and a heal-the-world attitude.

"It's OK," she said, holding the finger up. "It's better."

The cut had vanished. No blood, no scab. All that remained was a slightly raised red weal. As I watched, even that faded.

"How?"

"I don't know," Ten said. "But it's better."

I didn't ask. I didn't want to ask. I didn't want there to be anything more difficult or complex in Ten's life. I wanted what she had from her past to be enough, to be all. I knew this was something alien; no one healed like that. I thought that if I let it go, it would never trouble us again. I had not calculated on the bomb.

Some fucking Nazis or other had been blast-bombing gay bars. London, Edinburgh, Dublin so far, always a Friday afternoon, work over, weekend starting. Manchester was on the alert. So were the bombers. Tuesday, lunch time, half a kilo of semtex with nails and razor blades packed around it went off under a table outside a Canal Street bar. No one died, but a woman at the next table lost both legs from the knees down and there were over fifty casualties. Ten had been going in for the afternoon shift. She was twenty metres away when the bomb went off. I got the call from the hospital same time as the news broke on the radio.

"Get the fuck over there," Willy the boss ordered. I didn't need ordering. Manchester Royal Infirmary casualty was bedlam. I saw the doctors going around in a slow rush and the people looking up at everyone who came in, very very afraid and the police taking statements and the trolleys in the aisles and I thought: It must have been something like this in Nairobi, at the end. The receptionist showed me to a room where I was to wait for a doctor. I met her in the corridor, a small, harassed-looking Chinese girl.

"Ah, Mr Giddens. You're with Ms Bi, that's right?"

"That's right, how is she?"

"Well, she was brought in with multiple lacerations, upper body, left side of face, left upper arm and shoulder .. ."

"Oh Jesus God. And now?"

"See for yourself."

Ten walked down the corridor. If she had not been wearing a hospital robe, I would have sworn she was unchanged from how I had left her that morning.

"Shone."

The weals were already fading from her face and hands. A terrible prescience came over me, so strong and cold I almost threw up.

"We want to keep her in for further tests, Mr Giddens," the doctor said. "As you can imagine, we've never seen anything quite like this before."

"Shone, I'm fine, I want to go home."

"Just to be sure, Mr Giddens."

When I brought Ten back a bag of stuff, the receptionist directed me to Intensive Care. I ran the six flights of stairs to ICU, burning with dread. Ten was in a sealed room full of white equipment. When she saw me, she ran from her bed to the window, pressed her hands against it.

"Shone!" Her words came through a speaker grille. "They won't let me out!"

Another doctor led me to a side room. There were two policemen there, and a man in a suit.

"What the hell is this?"

"Mr Giddens. Ms Bi, she is a Kenyan refugee?"

"You fucking know that."

"Easy, Mr Giddens. We've been running some tests on Ms Bi, and we've discovered the presence in her bloodstream of fullerene nanoproducts."

"Nano what?"

"What are commonly known as Chaga spores."

Ten, Dust Girl, firing and firing and firing at the glider, the gun blossoming in her hand, the shanty town melting behind her as her clothes fell apart, her arm sticking through the shield wall as she shouted, I'm chipped, I'm chipped! The soldiers shaving her head, hosing her down. Those things she had carried inside her. All those runs for the Americans.

"Oh my God."

There was a window in the little room. Through it I saw Ten sitting on a plastic chair by the bed, hands on her thighs, head bowed.

"Mr Giddens." The man in the suit flashed a little plastic wallet. "Robert McGlennon, Home Office Immigration. Your, ah . . ." He nodded at the window.

"Partner."

"Partner. Mr Giddens, I have to tell you, we cannot be certain that Ms Bi's continued presence is not a public health risk. Her refugee status is dependent on a number of conditions, one of which is that..."

"You're fucking deporting her"

The two policemen stirred. I realized then that they were not there for Ten. They were there for me.

"It's a public health issue, Mr Giddens. She should never have been allowed in in the first place. We have no idea of the possible environmental impact. You, of all people, should be aware what these things can do. Have done. Are still doing. I have to think of public safety."

"Public safety, fuck!"

"Mr Giddens ..."

I went to the window. I beat my fists on the wired glass.

"Ten! Ten! They're trying to deport you! They want to send you back!"

The policemen prised me away from the window. On the far side, Ten yelled silently.

"Look, I don't like having to do this," the man in the suit said.

"When?"

"Mr Giddens."

"When? Tell me, how long has she got?"

"Usually there'd be a detention period, with limited rights of appeal. But as this is a public health issue ..."

"You're going to do it right now."

"The order is effective immediately, Mr Giddens. I'm sorry. These officers will go with you back to your home. If you could gather up the rest of her things"

"At least let me say goodbye, Jesus, you owe me that!"

"I can't allow that, Mr Giddens. There's a contamination risk."

"Contamination? I've only been fucking her for the past six months."

As the cops marched me out, the doctor came up for a word.

"Mr Giddens, these nanoproducts in her bloodstream ..."

"That are fucking getting her thrown out of the country."

"The fullerenes..."

"She heals quick. I saw it."

"They do much more than that, Mr Giddens. She'll probably never get sick again. And there's some evidence that they prevent telomere depletion in cell division."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, she ages very much more slowly than we do. Her life expectancy may be, I don't know, two, three hundred years."

I stared. The policemen stared.

"There's more. We observed unfamiliar structures in her brain; the best I can describe them is, the nanoproducts seem to be re-engineering dead neurons into a complementary neural network."

"A spare brain?"

"An auxiliary brain."

"What would you do with that?"

"What wouldn't you do with that, Mr Giddens." He wiped his hand across his mouth. "This bit is pure speculation, but..."

"But."



"But in some way, she's in control of it all. I think—this is just a theory—that through this auxiliary brain she's able to interact with the nanoproductors. She might be able to make them do what she wants. Programme them."

"Thank you for telling me that," I said bitterly. "That makes it all so much easier."

I took the policemen back to my house. I told them to make themselves tea. I took Ten's neatly arranged books and CDs off my shelves and her neatly folded clothes out of my drawers and her toilet things out of my bathroom and put them back in the two bags in which she had brought them. I gave the bags to the policemen, they took them away in their car. I never got to say goodbye. I never learned what flight she was on, where she flew from, when she left this country. A face behind glass. That was my last memory. The thing I feared—insane, out of nowhere—had taken her away.

After Ten went, I was sick for a long time. There was no sunshine, no rain, no wind. No days or time, just a constant, high-pitched, quiet whine in my head. People at work played out a slightly amplified normality for my benefit. Alone, they would ask, very gently, How do you feel?

"How do I feel?" I told them. "Like I've been shot with a single, high velocity round, and I'm dead, and I don't know it."

I asked for someone else to take over the I-Nation account. Wynton called me but I could not speak with him. He sent around a bottle of thai good Jamaican import liqueur, and a note, "Come and see us, any time." Willy arranged me a career break and a therapist.

His name was Greg, he was a client-centred therapist, which meant I could talk for as long as I liked about whatever I liked and he had to listen. I talked very little, those first few sessions. Partly I felt stupid, partly I didn't want to talk, even to a stranger. But it worked, little by little, without my knowing. I think I only began to be aware of that the day I realized that Ten was gone, but not dead. Her last photo of Africa was still on the fridge and I looked at it and saw something new: down there, in there, somewhere, was Ten. The realization was vast and subtle at the same time. I think of it like a man who finds himself in darkness. He imagines he's in a room, no doors, no windows, and that he'll never find the way out. But then he hears noises, feels a touch on his face, smells a subtle smell, and he realizes that he is not in a room at all — he is outside: the touch on his face is the wind, the noises are night birds, the smell is from night-blooming flowers, and above him, somewhere, are stars.

Greg said nothing when I told him this—they never do, these client-centred boys, but after that session I went to the net and started the hunt for Tendeleo Bi. The Freedom of Information Act got me into the Immigration Service's databases. Ten had been flown out on a secure military transport to Mombasa. UNHCR in Mombasa had assigned her to Likoni Twelve, a new camp to the south of the city. She was transferred out on November Twelfth. It took two days searching to pick

up a Tendeleo Bi logged into a place called Samburu North three months later. Medical records said she was suffering from exhaustion and dehydration, but responding to sugar and salt treatment. She was alive.

On the first Monday of winter, I went back to work. I had lost a whole season. On the first Friday, Willy gave me print-out from an on-line recruitment agency.

"I think you need a change of scene," he said. "These people are looking for a stock accountant."

These people were Medecins Sans Frontiers. Where they needed a stock accountant was their East African theatre.

Eight months after the night the two policemen took away Ten's things, I stepped off the plane in Mombasa. I think hell must be like Mombasa in its final days as capital of the Republic of Kenya, infra-structure unravelling, economy disintegrating, the harbour a solid mass of boat people and a million more in the camps in Likoni and Shimba Hills, Islam and Christianity fighting a new Crusade for control of this chaos and the Chaga advancing from the west and now the south, after the new impact at Tanga. And in the middle of it all, Sean Giddens, accounting for stock. It was good, hard, solid work in MSF Sector Headquarters, buying drugs where, when and how we could; haggling down truck drivers and Sibirsk jet-jockeys; negotiating service contracts as spare parts for the Landcruisers gradually ran out, every day juggling budgets always too small against needs too big. I loved it more than any work I've ever done. I was so busy I sometimes forgot why I was there. Then I would go in the safe bus back to the compound and see the smoke going up from the other side of the harbour, hear the gunfire echo off the old Arab houses, and the memory of her behind that green wired glass would gut me.

My boss was a big bastard Frenchman, Jean-Paul Gastineau. He had survived wars and disasters on every continent except Antarctica. He liked Cuban cigars and wine from the valley where he was born and opera, and made sure he had them, never mind distance or expense. He took absolutely no shit. I liked him immensely. I was a fucking thin-blooded number-pushing black *rosbif*, but he enjoyed my creative accounting. He was wasted in Mombasa. He was a true front-line medic. He was itching for action.

One lunchtime, as he was opening his red wine, I asked him how easy it would be to find someone in the camps. He looked at me shrewdly, then asked, "Who is she?"

He poured two glasses, his invitation to me. I told him my history and her history over the bottle. It was very good.

"So, how do I find her?"

"You'll never get anything through channels," Jean-Paul said. "Easiest thing to do is go there yourself. You have leave due."

"No I don't."

"Yes you do. About three weeks of it. Ah. Yes." He poked about in his desk drawers. He threw me a black plastic object like a large cell-phone.

"What is it?"

"US ID chips have a GPS transponder. They like to know where their people are. Take it. If she is chipped, this will find her."

"Thanks."

He shrugged.

"I come from a nation of romantics. Also, you're the only one in this fucking place appreciates a good Beaune."

I flew up north on a Sibirsk charter. Through the window I could see the edge of the Chaga. It was too huge to be a feature of the landscape, or even a geographical entity. It was like a dark sea. It looked like what it was—another world, that had pushed up against our own. Like it, some ideas are too huge to fit into our everyday worlds. They push up through it, they take it over, and they change it beyond recognition. If what the doctor at Manchester Royal Infirmary had said about the things in Ten's blood were true, then this was not just a new world. This was a new humanity. This was every rule about how we make our livings, how we deal with each other, how we lead our lives, all overturned.

The camps, also, are too big to take in. There is too much there for the world we've made for ourselves. They change everything you believe. Mombasa was no preparation. It was like the end of the world up there on the front line.

"So, you're looking for someone," Heino Rautavana said. He had worked with Jean-Paul through the fall of Nairobi; I could trust him, Jay-Pee said, but I think he thought I was a fool or, all at best, a romantic. "No shortage of people here."

Jean-Paul had warned the records wouldn't be accurate. But you hope. I went to Samburu North, where my search in England had last recorded Ten. No trace of her. The UNHCR warden, a grim little American woman, took me up and down the rows of tents. I looked at the faces and my tracker sat silent on my hip. I saw those faces that night in the ceiling, and for many nights after.

"You expect to hit the prize first time?" Heino said as we bounced along the dirt track in an MSF Landcruiser to Don Dul.

I had better luck in Don Dul, if you can call it that. Ten had definitely been here two months ago. But she had left eight days later. I saw the log in, the log out, but there

was no record of where she had gone.

"No shortage of camps either," Heino said. He was a dour bastard. He couldn't take me any further but he squared me an authorization to travel on Red Cross/Crescent convoys, who did a five-hundred-mile run through the camps along the northern terminum. In two weeks I saw more misery than I ever thought humanity could take. I saw the faces and the hands and the bundles of scavenged things and I thought, why hold them here? What are they saving them from? Is it so bad in the Chaga? What is so terrible about people living long lives, being immune from sickness, growing extra layers in their brains? What is so frightening about people being able to go into that alien place, and take control of it, and make it into what they want?

I couldn't see the Chaga, it lay just below the southern horizon, but I was constantly aware of its presence, like they say people who have plates in their skulls always feel a slight pressure. Sometimes, when the faces let me sleep, I would be woken instead by a strange smell, not strong, but distinct; musky and fruity and sweaty, sexy, warm. It was the smell of the Chaga, down there, blowing up from the south.

Tent to truck to camp to tent. My three weeks were running out and I had to arrange a lift back along the front line to Samburu and the flight to Mombasa. With three days left, I arrived in Eldoret, UNECTA's Lake Victoria regional centre. It gave an impression of bustle, the shops and hotels and cafes were busy, but the white faces and American accents and dress sense said Eldoret was a company town. The Rift Valley Hotel looked like heaven after eighteen days on the front line. I spent an hour in the pool trying to beam myself into the sky. A sudden rain-storm drove everyone from the water but me. I floated there, luxuriating in the raindrops splashing around me. At sunset I went down to the camps. They lay to the south of the town, like a line of cannon-fodder against the Chaga. I checked the records, a matter of form. No Tendeleo Bi. I went in anyway. And it was another camp, and after a time, anyone can become insulated to suffering. You have to. You have to book into the big hotel and swim in the pool and eat a good dinner when you get back; in the camps you have to look at the faces just as faces and refuse to make any connection with the stories behind them. The hardest people I know work in the compassion business. So I went up and down the faces and somewhere halfway down some row I remembered this toy Jean-Paul had given me. I took it out. The display was flashing green. There was a single word: lock.

I almost dropped it.

I thought my heart had stopped. I felt shot between the eyes. I forgot to breathe. The world reeled sideways. My fucking stupid fingers couldn't get a precise reading. I ran down the row of tents, watching the figures. The digits told me how many metres I was to north and east. Wrong way. I doubled back, ducked right at the next opening and headed east. Both sets of figures were decreasing. I overshot, the cast reading went up. Back again. This row. This row. I peered through the twilight. At the far end was a group of people talking outside a tent lit by a yellow petrol lamp. I

started to run, one eye on the tracker. I stumbled over guy-ropes, kicked cans, hurdled children, apologized to old women. The numbers clicked down, thirty-five, thirty, twenty-five metres. I could see this one figure in the group, back to me, dressed in purple combat gear. East zero, North twenty, eighteen . . . Short, female, twelve, ten. Wore its hair in great soft spikes. Eight, six. I couldn't make it past four. I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. I was shaking.

Sensing me, the figure turned. The yellow light caught her.

"Ten," I said. I saw fifty emotions on that face. Then she ran at me and I dropped the scanner and I lifted her and held her to me and no words of mine, or anyone else's, I think, can say how I felt then.

\* \* \* \*

Now our lives and stories and places come together, and my tale moves to its conclusion.

I believe that people and their feelings write themselves on space and time. That is the only way I can explain how I knew, even before I turned and saw him there in that camp, that it was Sean, that he had searched for me, and found me. I tell you, that is something to know that another person has done for you. I saw him, and it was like the world had set laws about how it was to work for me, and then suddenly it said, no. I break them now, for you, Tendeleo, because it pleases me. He was impossible, he changed everything I knew, he was there.

Too much joy weeps. Too much sorrow laughs.

He took me back to his hotel. The staff looked hard at me as he picked up his keycard from the lobby. They knew what I was. They did not dare say anything. The white men in the bar also turned to stare. They too knew the meaning of the colours I wore.

He took me to his room. We sat on the verandah with beer. There was a storm that night—there is a storm most nights, up in the high country—but it kept itself in the west among the Nandi Hills. Lightning crawled between the clouds, the distant thunder rattled our beer bottles on the iron table. I told Sean where I had been, what I had done, how I had lived. It was a story long in the telling. The sky had cleared, a new day was breaking by the time I finished it. We have always told each other stories, and each other's stories.

He kept his questions until the end. He had many, many of them.

"Yes, I suppose, it is like the old slave underground railroads," I answered one.

"I still don't understand why they try to stop people going in."

"Because we scare them. We can build a society in there that needs nothing from them. We challenge everything they believe. This is the first century we have gone into where we have no ideas, no philosophies, no beliefs. Buy stuff, look at stuff. That's it. We are supposed to build a thousand years on that? Well, now we do. I tell you, I've been reading, learning stuff, ideas, politics. Philosophy. It's all in there. There are information storage banks the size of skyscrapers, Sean. And not just our history. Other people, other races. You can go into them, you can become them, live their lives, see things through their senses. We are not the first. We are part of a long, long chain, and we are not the end of it. The world will belong to us; we will control physical reality as easily as computers control information."

"Hell, never mind the UN . . . you scare me, Ten!"

I always loved it when he called me Ten. Il Primo, Top of the Heap, King of the Hill, A-Number-One.

Then he said, "And your family?"

"Little Egg is in a place called Kilandui. It's full of weavers, she's a weaver. She makes beautiful brocades. I see her quite often."

"And your mother and father?"

"I'll find them."

But to most of his questions, there was only one answer: "Come, and I will show you." I left it to last. It rocked him as if he had been struck.

"You are serious."

"Why not? You took me to your home once. Let me take you to mine. But first, it's a year ... And so so much ..."

He picked me up.

"I like you in this combat stuff," he said.

We laughed a lot and remembered old things we had forgotten. We slowly shook off the rust and the dust, and it was good, and I remember the room maid opening the door and letting out a little shriek and going off giggling.

Sean once told me that one of his nation's greatest ages was built on those words, why not? For a thousand years Christianity had ruled England with the question: "Why?" Build a cathedral, invent a science, write a play, discover a new land, start a business: "Why?" Then came the Elizabethans with the answer:

"Why not?"

I knew the old Elizabethan was thinking, why not? There are only numbers to go back to, and benefit traps, and an old, grey city, and an old, grey dying world, a safe world with few promises. Here there's a world to be made. Here there's a future of a million years to be shaped. Here there are a thousand different ways of living together to be designed, and if they don't work, roll them up like clay and start again.

I did not hurry Sean for his answer. He knew as well as I that it was not a clean decision. It was lose a world, or lose each other. These are not choices you make in a day. So, I enjoyed the hotel. One day I was having a long bath. The hotel had a great bathroom and there was a lot of free stuff you could play with, so I abused it. I heard Sean pick up the phone. I could not make out what he was saying, but he was talking for some time. When I came out he was sitting on the edge of the bed with the telephone beside him. He sat very straight and formal.

"I called Jean-Paul," he said. "I gave him my resignation."

Two days later, we set out for the Chaga. We went by matatu. It was a school holiday, the Peugeot Services were busy with children on their way back to their families. They made a lot of noise and energy. They looked out of the corners of their eyes at us and bent together to whisper. Sean noticed this.

"They're talking about you," Sean said.

"They know what I am, what I do."

One of the schoolgirls, in a black and white uniform, understood our English. She fixed Sean a look. "She is a warrior," she told him. "She is giving us our nation back."

We left most of the children in Kapsabet to change onto other matatus; ours drove on into the heart of the Nandi Hills. It was a high, green rolling country, in some ways like Sean's England. I asked the driver to stop just past a metal cross that marked some old road death.

"What now?" Sean said. He sat on the small pack I had told him was all he could take.

"Now, we wait. They won't be long."

Twenty cars went up the muddy red road, two trucks, a country bus and medical convoy went down. Then they came out of the darkness between the trees on the other side of the road like dreams out of sleep: Meji, Naomi and Hamid. They beckoned; behind them came men, women, children, entire families, from babes in arms to old men; twenty citizens, appearing one by one out of the dark, looking nervously up and down the straight red road, then crossing to the other side.

I fived with Meji, he looked Sean up and down.

"This is the one?"

"This is Sean."

"I had expected something, um ..."

"Whiter?"

He laughed. He shook hands with Sean and introduced himself. Then Meji took a tube out of his pocket and covered Sean in spray. Sean jumped back, choking.

"Stay there, unless you want your clothes to fall off you when you get inside," I said.

Naomi translated this for the others. They found it very funny. When he had immunized Sean's clothes, Meji sprayed his bag.

"Now, we walk," I told Sean.

We spent the night in the Chief's house in the village of Senghalo. He was the last station on our railroad. I know from my Dust Girl days you need as good people on the outside as the inside. Folk came from all around to see the black Englishman. Although he found being looked at intimidating, Sean managed to tell his story. I translated. At the end the crowd outside the Chief's house burst into spontaneous applause and finger-clicks.

"Aye, Tendeleo, how can I compete?" Meji half-joked with me.

I slept fitfully that night, troubled by the sound of aircraft moving under the edge of the storm.

"Is it me?" Sean said.

"No, not you. Go back to sleep."

Sunlight through the bamboo wall woke us. While Sean washed outside in the bright, cold morning, watched by children curious to see if the black went all the way down, Chief and I tuned his shortwave to the UN frequencies. There was a lot of chatter in Klingon. You Americans think we don't understand Star Trek?

"They've been tipped off," Chief said. We fetched the equipment from his souterrain. Sean watched Hamid, Naomi, Meji and I put on the communicators. He said nothing as the black-green knob of cha-plastic grew around the back of my head, into my ear, and sent a tendril to my lips. He picked up my staff.

"Can I?"

"It won't bite you."



He looked closely at the fist-sized ball of amber at its head, and the skeleton outline of a sphere embedded in it.

"It's a buckyball," I said. "The symbol of our power."

He passed it to me without comment. We unwrapped our guns, cleaned them, checked them and set off. We walked east that day along the ridges of the Nandi Hills, through ruined fields and abandoned villages. Helicopter engines were our constant companions. Sometimes we glimpsed them through the leaf cover, tiny in the sky like black mosquitoes. The old people and the mothers looked afraid. I did not want them to see how nervous they were making me. I called my colleagues apart.

"They're getting closer."

Hamid nodded. He was a quiet, thin twenty-two-year-old Ethiopian skin, goatee, a political science graduate from the university of Nairobi.

"We choose a different path every time," he said. "They can't know this."

"Someone's selling us," Meji said.

"Wouldn't matter. We pick one at random."

"Unless they're covering them all."

In the afternoon we began to dip down towards the Rift Valley and terminum. As we wound our way down the old hunters' paths, muddy and slippery from recent rain, the helicopter came swooping in across the hillside. We scrambled for cover. It turned and made another pass, so low I could see the light glint from the pilot's heads-up visor.

"They're playing with us," Hamid said. "They can blow us right off this hill any time they want."

"How?" Naomi asked. She said only what was necessary, and when.

"I think I know," Sean said. He had been listening a little away. He slithered down to join us as the helicopter beat over the hillside again, flailing the leaves, showering us with dirt and twigs. "This." He tapped my forearm. "If I could find you, they can find you."

I pulled up my sleeve. The Judas chip seemed to throb under my skin, like poison.

"Hold my wrist," I said to Sean. "Whatever happens, don't let it slip."

Before he could say a word, I pulled my knife. These things must be done fast. If

you once stop to think, you will never do it. Make sure you have it straight. You won't get another go. A stab down with the tip, a short pull, a twist, and the traitor thing was on the ground, greasy with my blood. It hurt. It hurt very much, but the blood had staunched, the wound was already closing.

"I'll just have to make sure not to lose you again," Sean said.

Very quietly, very silently, we formed up the team and one by one slipped down the hillside, out from under the eyes of the helicopter. For all I know, the stupid thing is up there still, keeping vigil over a dead chip. We slept under the sky that night, close together for warmth and on the third day we came to Tinderet and the edge of the Chaga.

\* \* \* \*

Ten had been leading us a cracking pace, as if she were impatient to put Kenya behind us. Since mid-morning, we had been making our way up a long, slow hill. I'd done some hill-walking, I was fit for it, but the young ones and the women with babies found it tough going. When I called for a halt, I saw a moment of anger cross Ten's face. As soon as she could, we upped packs and moved on. I tried to catch up with her, but Ten moved steadily ahead of me until, just below the summit, she was almost running.

"Shone!" she shouted back. "Come with me!"

She ran up through the thinning trees to the summit. I followed, went bounding down a slight dip, and suddenly, the trees opened and I was on the edge.

The ground fell away at my feet into the Rift Valley, green on green on green, sweeping to the valley floor where the patterns of the abandoned fields could still be made out in the patchwork of yellows and buffs and earth tones. Perspective blurred the colours—I could see at least fifty miles—until, suddenly, breathtakingly, they changed. Browns and dry-land beiges blended into burgundies and rust reds, were shot through with veins of purple and white, then exploded into chaos, like a bed of flowers of every conceivable colour, a jumble of shapes and colours like a mad coral reef, like a box of kiddie's plastic toys spilled out on a Chinese rug. It strained the eyes, it hurt the brain. I followed it back, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. A sheer wall, deep red, rose abruptly out of the chaotic landscape, straight up, almost as high as the escarpment I was standing on. It was not a solid wall, it looked to me to be made up of pillars or, I thought, tree trunks. They must have been of titanic size to be visible from this distance. They opened into an unbroken, flat crimson canopy. In the further distance, the flat roof became a jumble of dark greens, broken by what I can only describe as small mesas, like the Devil's Tower in Wyoming or the old volcanoes in Puy de Dome. But these glittered in the sun like glass. Beyond them, the landscape was striped like a tiger, yellow and dark brown, and formations like capsizing icebergs, pure white, lifted out of it. And beyond that,

I lost the detail, but the colours went on and on, all the way to the horizon.

I don't know how long I stood, looking at the Chaga. I lost all sense of time. I became aware at some point that Ten was standing beside me. She did not try to move me on, or speak. She knew that the Chaga was one of these things that must just be experienced before it can be interpreted. One by one the others joined us. We stood in a row along the bluffs, looking at our new home.

Then we started down the path to the valley below.

Half an hour down the escarpment, Meji up front called a halt.

"What is it?" I asked Ten. She touched her fingers to her communicator, a half-eggshell of living plastic unfolded from the headset and pressed itself to her right eye.

"This is not good," she said. "Smoke, from Menengai."

"Menengai?"

"Where we're going. Meji is trying to raise them on the radio."

I looked over Ten's head to Meji, one hand held to his ear, looking around him. He looked worried.

"And?"

"Nothing."

"And what do we do?"

"We go on."

We descended through microclimates. The valley floor was fifteen degrees hotter than the cool, damp Nandi Hills. We toiled across brush and overgrown scrub, along abandoned roads, through deserted villages. The warriors held their weapons at the slope. Ten regularly scanned the sky with her all-seeing eye. Now even I could see the smoke, blowing towards us on a wind from the east, and smell it. It smelled like burned spices. I could make out Meji trying to call up Menengai. Radio silence.

In the early afternoon, we crossed terminum. You can see these things clearly from a distance. At ground level, they creep up on you. I was walking through tough valley grasses and thorn scrub when I noticed lines of blue moss between the roots. Oddly regular lines of moss, that bent and forked at exactly one hundred and twenty degrees, and joined up into hexagons. I froze. Twenty metres ahead of me, Ten stood in one world ... I stood in another.

"Even if you do nothing, it will still come to you," she said. I looked down. The blue

lines were inching towards my toes. "Come on." Ten reached out her hand. I took it, and she led me across. Within two minutes walk, the scrub and grass had given way entirely to Chaga vegetation. For the rest of the afternoon we moved through the destroying zone. Trees crashed around us, shrubs were devoured from the roots down, grasses fell apart and dissolved; fungus fingers and coral fans pushed up on either side, bubbles blew around my head. I walked through it untouched like a man in a furnace.

Meji called a halt under an arch of Chaga-growth like a vault in a medieval cathedral. He had a report on his earjack.

"Menengai has been attacked."

Everyone started talking, asking questions, jabbering. Meji held up his hand.

"They were Africans. Someone had provided them with Chaga-proof equipment, and weapons. They had badges on their uniforms: KLA."

"Kenyan Liberation Army," the quiet one, Naomi, said.

"We have enemies," the clever one, Hamid, said. "The Kenyan Government still claims jurisdiction over the Chaga. Every so often, they remind us who's in charge. They want to keep us on the run, stop us getting established. They're nothing but contras with western money and guns and advisers."

"And Menengai?" I asked. Meji shook his head.

"Most High is bringing the survivors to Ol Punyata."

I looked at Ten.

"Most High?"

She nodded.

We met up with Most High under the dark canopy of the Great Wall. It was an appropriately sombre place for the meeting: the smooth soaring trunks of the trees; the canopy of leaves, held out like hands, a kilometre over our heads; the splashes of light that fell through the gaps to the forest floor; survivors and travellers, dwarfed by it all. Medieval peasants must have felt like this, awestruck in their own cathedrals.

It's an odd experience, meeting someone you've heard of in a story. You want to say, I've heard about you, you haven't heard about me, you're nothing like I imagined. You check them out to make sure they're playing true to their character. His story was simple and grim.

A village, waking, going about its normal business, people meeting and greeting, walking and talking, gossiping and idling, talking the news, taking coffee. Then,

voices; strange voices, and shots, and people looking up wondering, What is going on here? and while they are caught wondering, strangers running at them, running through, strangers with guns, shooting at anything in front of them, not asking questions, not looking or listening, shooting and running on. Shooting, and burning. Bodies left where they lay, homes like blossoming flowers going up in gobs of flame. Through, back, and out. Gone. As fast, as off-hand as that. Ten minutes, and Menengai was a morgue. Most High told it as casually as it had been committed, but I saw his knuckles whiten as he gripped his staff.

To people like me, who come from a peaceful, ordered society, violence like that is unimaginable.

I've seen fights and they scared me, but I've never experienced the kind of violence Most High was describing, where people's pure intent is to kill other people. I could see the survivors—dirty, tired, scared, very quiet—but I couldn't see what had been done to them. So I couldn't really believe it. And though I'd hidden up there on the hill from the helicopter, I couldn't believe it would have opened up those big gatlings on me, and I couldn't believe now that the people who attacked Menengai, this Kenyan Liberation Army, whose only purpose was to kill Chaga-folk and destroy their lives, were out there somewhere, probably being resupplied by airdrop, reloading, and going in search of new targets. It seemed wrong in a place as silent and holy as this ... like a snake in the garden.

Meji and Ten believed it. As soon as we could, they moved us on and out.

"Where now?" I asked Ten.

She looked uncertain.

"East. The Black Simbas have a number of settlements on Kirinyaga. They'll defend them."

"How far?"

"Three days?"

"That woman back there, Hope. She won't be able to go on very much longer." I had been speaking to her, she was heavily pregnant. Eight months, I reckoned. She had no English, and I had Aid-Agency Swahili, but she appreciated my company, and I found her big belly a confirmation that life was strong, life went on.

"I know," Ten said. She might wear the gear and carry the staff and have a gun at her hip, but she was facing decisions that told her, forcefully, You're still in your teens, little warrior.

We wound between the colossal buttressed roots of the roof-trees. The globes on the tops of the staffs gave off a soft yellow light—bioluminescence, Ten told me.

We followed the bobbing lights through the dark, dripping wall-forest. The land rose, slowly and steadily. I fell back to walk with Hope. We talked. It passed the time. The Great Wall gave way abruptly to an ecosystem of fungi. Red toadstools towered over my head, puff-balls dusted me with yellow spores, trumpet-like chanterelles dripped water from their cups, clusters of pin-head mushrooms glowed white like corpses. I saw monkeys, watching from the canopy.

We were high now, climbing up ridges like the fingers of a splayed-out hand. Hope told me how her husband had been killed in the raid on Menengai. I did not know what to say. Then she asked me my story. I told it in my bad Swahili. The staffs led us higher.

"Ten."

We were taking an evening meal break. That was one thing about the Chaga, you could never go hungry. Reach out, and anything you touched would be edible. Ten had taught me that if you buried your shit, a good-tasting tuber would have grown in the morning. I hadn't had the courage yet to try it. For an alien invasion, the Chaga seemed remarkably considerate of human needs.

"I think Hope's a lot further on than we thought."

Ten shook her head.

"Ten, if she starts, will you stop?"

She hesitated a moment.

"OK. We will stop."

She struggled for two days, down into a valley, through terribly tough terrain of great spheres of giraffe-patterned moss, then up, into higher country than any we had attempted before.

"Ten, where are we?" I asked. The Chaga had changed our geography, made all our maps obsolete. We navigated by compass and major, geophysical landmarks.

"We've passed through the Nyandarua Valley, now we're going up the east side of the Aberdares."

The line of survivors became strung out. Naomi and I struggled at the rear with the old and the women with children, and Hope. We fought our way up that hillside, but Hope was flagging, failing.

"I think ... I feel..." she said, hand on her belly.

"Call Ten on that thing," I ordered Naomi. She spoke into her mouthpiece.

"No reply."

"She what?"

"There is no reply."

I ran. Hands, knees, belly, whatever way I could, I made it up that ridge, as fast as I could. Over the summit the terrain changed, as suddenly as Chaga landscapes do, from the moss maze to a plantation of regularly spaced trees shaped like enormous ears of wheat.

Ten was a hundred metres downslope. She stood like a statue among the wheat-trees. Her staff was planted firmly on the ground. She did not acknowledge me when I called her name. I ran down through the trees to her.

"Ten, Hope can't go on. We have to stop."

"No!" Ten shouted. She did not look at me, she stared down through the rows of trees.

"Ten!" I seized her, spun her round. Her face was frantic, terrified, tearful, joyful, as if in this grove of alien plants was something familiar and absolutely agonizing. "Ten! You promised!"

"Shone! Shone! I know where I am! I know where this is! That is the pass, and that is where the road went, this is the valley, that is the river, and down there, is Gichichi!" She looked back up to the pass, called to the figures on the tree-line. "Most High! Gichichi! This is Gichichi! We are home!"

She took off. She held her staff in her hand like a hunter's spear, she leaped rocks and fallen trunks, she hurdled streams and run-offs; bounding down through the trees. I was after her like a shot but I couldn't hope to keep up. I found Ten standing in an open space where a falling wheat-tree had brought others down like dominoes. Her staff was thrust deep into the earth. I didn't interrupt. I didn't say a word. I knew I was witnessing something holy.

She went down on her knees. She closed her eyes. She pressed her hands to the soil. And I saw dark lines, like slow, black lightning, go out from her fingertips across the Chaga-cover. The lines arced and intersected, sparked out fresh paths.

The carpet of moss began to resemble a crackle-glazed Japanese bowl. But they all focused on Ten. She was the source of the pattern. And the Chaga-cover began to flow towards the lines of force. Shapes appeared under the moving moss, like ribs under skin. They formed grids and squares, slowly pushing up the Chaga-cover. I understood what I was seeing. The lines of buried walls and buildings were being exhumed. Molecule by molecule, centimetre by centimetre, Gichichi was being

drawn out of the soil.

By the time the others had made it down from the ridge, the walls stood waist-high and service units were rising out of the earth, electricity generators, water pumps, heat-exchangers, nanofabricating cells. Refugees and warriors walked in amazement among the slowly rising porcelain walls.

Then Ten chose to recognize me.

She looked up. Her teeth were clenched, her hair was matted, sweat dripped from her chin and cheekbones. Her face was gaunt, she was burning her own body-mass, ramming it through that mind/Chaga interface in her brain to programme nanoprocessors on a massive scale.

"We control it, Shone," she whispered. "We can make the world any shape we want it to be. We can make a home for ourselves."

Most High laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Enough, child. Enough. It can make itself now."

Ten nodded. She broke the spell. Ten rolled onto her side, gasping, shivering.

"It's finished," she whispered. "Shone . . ."

She still could not say my name right. I went to her, I took her in my arms while around us Gichichi rose, unfolded roofs like petals, grew gardens and tiny, tangled lanes. No words. No need for words. She had done all her saying, but close at hand, I heard the delighted, apprehensive cry of a woman entering labour.

\* \* \* \*

We begin with a village, and we end with a village. Different villages, a different world, but the name remains the same. Did I not tell you that names are important? Ojok, Hope's child, is our first citizen. He is now two, but every day people come over the pass or up from the valley, to stay, to make their homes here. Gichichi is now two thousand souls strong. Five hundred houses straggle up and down the valley side, each with its own garden-shamba and nanofactory, where we can make whatever we require. Gichichi is famous for its nanoprocessor programmers. We earn much credit hiring them to the towns and villages that are growing up like mushrooms down in the valley of Nyeri and along the foothills of Mt Kenya. A great city is growing there, I have heard, and a mighty culture developing; but that is for the far future. Here in Gichichi, we are wealthy in our own way; we have a community centre, three bars, a mandazi shop, even a small theatre. There is no church, yet. If Christians come, they may build one. If they do, I hope they call it St. John's. The vine-flowers will grow down over the roof again.



Life is not safe. The KLA have been joined by other contra groups, and we have heard through the net that the West is tightening its quarantine of the Chaga zones. There are attacks all along the northern edge. I do not imagine Gichichi is immune. We must scare their powerful ones very much, now. But the packages keep coming down, and the world keeps changing. And life is never safe. Brother Dust's lesson is the truest I ever learned, and I have been taught it better than many. But I trust in the future. Soon there will be a new name among the citizens of Gichichi, this fine, fertile town in the valleys of the Aberdares. Of course, Sean and I cannot agree what it should be. He wants to call her after the time of day she is born, I want something Irish.

"But you won't be able to pronounce it!" he says. We will think of something. That is the way we do things here. Whatever her name, she will have a story to tell, I am sure, but that is not for me to say. My story ends here, and our lives go on. I take up mine again, as you lift yours. We have a long road before us.

\* \* \* \*