

The  
Fifty-Nine  
Minute War

WILLIAM DAWSON



Three  
Weeks Ago



The sun sets quickly in Katamba, as if it wants to find a good hiding place before the fighting starts.

In a shack bar by the beach, two youths of the Big Bald Man's militia turn up for a drink. They're fourteen and cocky, so they bring along their rifles. 'Oh look,' somebody says. 'The teachers must be really fierce these days.'

*Bang.* Bullet to the face.

Then, because a couple of people laughed, *bang, bang, bang.* Two more dead. The boys, awed by their own impudence, run off into the slums.

Unfortunately for them, one of the dead is a qat-dealer running with the No Surrender Gang. His drinking companion recognises the killer as Cui, the brother of a turtle fisherman who lives in his tenement. He summons his mates. 'That Chui is out of control,' he says. 'He needs to be taught a lesson.' So off they go to the turtle fisherman's apartment, and there they shoot dead everybody they find: brother, wife, two kids, family friend.

Big mistake.

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The family friend is a bodyguard who works for a warlord, operating among the warehouses in the docks district. The warlord's name is Kiongozi, the Leader Who Always Eats, and he funds his entourage by impounding the aid manioc that comes into the island's port. It doesn't matter that he can't remember the bodyguard's face. This attack is an act of war. 'By dawn, I want the streets to be red with the blood of the No Surrender Gang. Let the urban hyenas feast. Leave nobody standing.' He sends his militiamen out into the dark with knives and guns and violent thoughts.

And in a crooked street behind the compound, under the sad, sagging frills of a date palm, one of the militiamen hands a rifle to his twelve-year-old brother. 'Here, Bahati,' says the militiaman. 'I can't support you anymore. It is time that you became your own man.'

Bahati has been expecting this moment since he dropped his brother's favourite antler-handled knife down a drain whilst trying to prove to everybody that he could throw and catch it. In one sense, it's a relief: an end to the waiting, a final parting of ways. But Bahati knows that no gift comes without a price, so he asks, 'What do I do with this gun?'

Kisu turns down the street, his head tucked low between his skinny shoulders. 'There's a witchdoctor who tends to the No Surrender Gang,' he says without looking back. 'The boss wants him dead.'

So that's how Bahati ends up in an alleyway behind the Weywe Ancestor Temple, checking the bolt of his rifle for the eighth time.

Kill a witchdoctor, he thinks. *Kill a witchdoctor*. It's typical Kisu. He probably thought that he was doing Bahati a

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favour, start him off with an unarmed old man, somebody easy to get rid of.

But still – a witchdoctor! That’s probably all sorts of bad luck.

Bahati takes a couple of drags on a stolen cigarette to make his voice sound deeper and more intimidating than it actually is. Then he kicks open the wicker gate.

It’s not a big Ancestor Temple, this place that serves the Weywe Clan. Not like the imposing Imperial Jumba Temple up by the palace. *This* Ancestor Temple is just two wattle Memory Towers, rising into the star-smashed sky at either end of the courtyard. Members of the Weywe Clan come here to remember their ancestors and ask for their help.

The witchdoctor is asleep on a wooden bench, under the fringe of makuti-thatch roof. Bahati strides over to him, thinking: best kill the old man before he wakes, that will keep it easy. He tries to decide what the quickest way of ending him will be. Should he aim for the head or the chest?

Actually, it turns out that Bahati does neither. He’s so busy worrying about making the right choice that he doesn’t notice the dog asleep beside the witchdoctor’s bed. One misplaced foot, a yelping bark, and Bahati’s legs are thoroughly entangled with the exasperated canine. Off goes the gun – not through the witchdoctor’s head or chest, but straight through Bahati’s foot.

Down goes Bahati, up springs the witchdoctor.

Mission failed.

Bahati feels like such an amateur. Shooting yourself in the foot. The other boys will be in hysterics when they hear. It’ll be all ‘Bahati is so useless he doesn’t know which way to point a gun,’ or worse ‘Bahati is a liability, let’s get rid of him before he gets us killed.’ He grits his teeth and refuses to cry out as warm blood pulses down his foot.

The witchdoctor recovers from his shock and peers down at him, perplexed. His shaggy white hair is a surprised

pouf around his head. 'Well that was stupid,' he says. 'I don't have anything worth stealing. Are you alright? Hang on whilst I get you some bandages.'

Bahati can only watch, humiliated, as the old witchdoctor begins to rummage in the boxes under his bench.

The dog licks his hand in sympathy.

So much for becoming a man.

Outside the temple, the fighting spreads. Armed gangsters chase each other through cellars and across moon-glossed rooftops. A militiaman is shot above the Tanners' Cistern and his body is dropped in the water. A gangmember is beaten to death with brickbats in the goat market. Then suddenly a gun battle erupts outside the metal-studded gates of the imperial palace. For ten minutes bullets crack against the white, coral-rag walls.

This is too much for the resident Emperor. He is a neurotic, terrified man, who knows that one day he will be killed for his Robes of State and his golden stool. Afraid that if he doesn't show strength tonight, his death will be sooner rather than later, he orders his guards to shell the compounds of the militias. The guards, of course, have no idea where the militias are holed up. Or possibly they do, but they're not stupid enough to actually target them. And so, as dawn begins to bleach the western horizon, a succession of mortar shells thump indiscriminately down on the tenements of the lower town, causing lazy clouds of debris to rise glitteringly into the air.

One of the mortars hits the Weywe Ancestor Temple.

It really *isn't* Bahati's day.

Bahati is laid out on a mat in one of the wicker memory towers when the shell hits.

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The inside of the tower is hung with a stirring, fluttering cape of bones and feathers. A small circle of pale sky at the top of the tower stares down upon Bahati like an eye. The witchdoctor is sat cross-legged on the floor beside him, listening as Bahati talks about his parents. Bahati isn't sure how the conversation started – it's not a topic he likes to bring up. But the witchdoctor is gentle and understanding, and he says that it is only by remembering the dead that we can keep their spirits alive. So Bahati tells him about how his mother used to cook rice in coconut milk for him, and how at night she would recount stories of Katamba's imperial past. And the witchdoctor nods and listens and makes sympathetic noises, until suddenly: *wbomp*. Down comes the mortar shell and the wicker tower is blown apart. Splintered osiers snap through the air. Bones rattle to the floor. Bahati falls straight through a hole that has opened in the ground. The next thing he knows, he's in a deep cellar, pinned down by crumpled masonry, choking on dust. The kindly witchdoctor tumbles into the pit after him. He sprawls down a pile of rubble like a rubber man, his limbs and neck bending at impossible angles.

Bahati stares at the abruptly dead body, and feels a hopeless, destructive anger shudder through him. It's so unfair! The first person in years to show him kindness, and he's killed immediately.

He begins to cry.

The dead witchdoctor's head shifts a little. 'No need to start leaking water,' he says through his tooth-shattered mouth. 'I can give you the power to punish those who have hurt you. You can take your revenge!'

Bahati scrubs away his tears and looks at the witchdoctor in alarm. The worn, umber face is mashed out of shape, and there is blood trickling from both his nostrils. There is no chance that the witchdoctor is still alive.

'Rhino-balls to that,' says Bahati. He picks up a rock and smashes it down on the dead witchdoctor's face.

The corpse leaves him in peace for a bit.

Bahati takes the opportunity to look around. A thin shaft of light splinters through the hole above. By its fragmented glow, he can see that he's in some kind of underground chamber, ribbed with vaults. Katamba is an ancient city, built upon a thousand versions of itself. It makes sense that there would be an older temple under the current one.

His curiosity sated, Bahati tries to tug his legs free. He almost blacks out as a result. The rubble is heavy and immobile. Without help, he's stuck.

Will help come?

It's possible that his brother might come looking for him. After all, Kisu has been Bahati's only guardian for two years now. But Bahati doesn't want to rely on it. Kisu was too eager to impress his new militiamen friends last night. He didn't want his clumsy, awkward little brother following him around, reminding everybody that Kisu is only fifteen years old himself.

No, in all probability, help won't come. Bahati will remain stuck down here until he dies of thirst.

What a rotten way to go.

'You know, I could help,' says a wet voice. 'Sorry, I realise I came on a bit strong back then. I apologise if I caused offence. It's just that revenge is usually what boys like you are after, and – *Please don't hit me again*, it's hard enough making this mouth move without you battering it out of shape.'

Bahati lowers his rock.

'No gift is ever free,' he says. 'What do you want?'

'Ah. Yes. Well, you're right, there's always a price to pay. Fortunately, mine is very cheap. I just want to get out of here. I'm tired of being imprisoned.'

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‘You’re stuck in the witchdoctor’s body?’

‘No, no – I’m stuck in that pot over there. The one half buried under the rubble. Do you see me?’

Bahati peers into the darkness, where the chamber’s vaults are at their blackest. He spots a plain terracotta pot lying cantered amidst a shawl of broken masonry.

‘Is that you?’ he asks.

‘Yes. Well spotted. You just need to perform the Rite of Release and break the pot and then you’ll be able to do anything you want. Escape the rubble. Claim the Emperor’s stool. Eat coconut rice. It’s up to you.’

‘And in return you get to go free?’

‘Yes.’

‘One question, then. Why were you imprisoned in the first place?’

The pot doesn’t reply.

Bahati takes this to mean that it’s up to no good.

‘Still not interested,’ he says. And he uses his rock to pound the witchdoctor’s face until the mouth is a crushed, wet mess.

Some more time passes. Bahati’s throat begins to contract with thirst. He wonders what his brother is doing right now. Did Kisu survive the night of street fights and gun battles? Is he now back at the compound, laughing with his new friends about the bullets they dodged and the enemies they killed?

Once upon a time, before their parents were murdered, Kisu wanted to be a scholar.

Bahati wanted to be a flamingo. He was very young.

Their parents would be so disappointed if they could see them now.

A sucking, gurgling sound distracts him. ‘I asked you *not* to hit me again,’ says the corpse. ‘I don’t have much

strength outside my pot, and reconstituting this old man's mouth has stretched me to my limits.'

'I said I wasn't interested.'

'I know. But without my help, you'll die down here.'

'It's not as if I had much of a life up there.'

'And yet with my help you could be Emperor! Look, the rite is very nearly complete. You have spilled some of your own blood, which is good, and this dead witchdoctor can act as the sacrifice. You just need to say the sacred words and break the pot, and then you'll have all the power you can imagine.'

'But what's the catch?'

'The catch?'

'There must be a catch. Otherwise you wouldn't have been trapped in your pot in the first place.'

The corpse thinks for a moment.

'I'm not going to persuade you, am I?' it says.

'No.'

'Oh, poo. Never mind, I have until the end of time, somebody will come along eventually. Somebody more – oh what's the word?'

'Stupid?'

'No.'

'Gullible?'

'No, no, a positive attribute, somebody with great...'

'Ambition?'

'Yes, that's it! Ambition. You lack ambition. You're still just a child. At this rate you'll never become a – a –'

'Man?'

'Exactly. You need to – to – oh, *coconuts*, three thousand years underground, and I've lost the ability to think straight. You need to rise to the occasion. You need to...'

'Stand up for myself?'

'That's it! Yes, that's it! Haha! Haha! You've said the sacred words!'

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'I – what?' Bahati blinks twice in confusion. '*Ambition, man, stand up for myself* are the sacred words? Which idiot thought up that nonsense?'

'Well, actually the sacred words are *Mankind Must Triumph* but there's some leeway for tenses and word order in order to compensate for translation. You don't need to worry about that just now, however – the ritual has been completed, all you have to do is break the pot and we can get out of here together. What do you say?'

Bahati presses his lips firmly shut. He's not going to say *anything*. That way the pot can't trick him again.

The corpse waits expectantly for a few moments, and then when it becomes clear that Bahati isn't going to reply, it says, 'Please don't sulk, it's been so long since I've had company, I couldn't bear it if we fell out. Perhaps I've been a bit pushy. We should find some common ground – build up a bond. And then, once we're best friends, you can think again about breaking the pot. What do you do to entertain yourself? Do you know any good songs?'

Bahati knows many good songs. His father used to sing them as he brought in the coconut harvest. The memory stings Bahati's eyes. But he takes comfort from the fact that he will soon rejoin his parents in the sky cities of the spirit realm. As long as Kisu lives, there'll be somebody to remember them and keep them from unravelling. He could have as many as five or six years with his parents before the End finally comes.

It is time to prepare himself for death.

With a shaking finger, he traces the sacred whorls and spirals on his chest and face. He has no white paint to work with, but spit and dust do just fine. There are large parts of the ritual that he cannot complete on himself. He cannot dance the Dance of the Mourners in order to lighten his feet for the ascent into the sky. He cannot boil his body down to bones and then mash those bones up in a sacred grinder for burial. But he hopes that he can do enough to

give his spirit a fighting chance of reaching the City of the Afterlife.

Indeed, Bahati gets so involved in the ritual, dramatically calling upon his dead parents to send a gentle wind to lift his soul through the hot azure sky, that he doesn't hear the clatter of a person moving above him until a voice calls through the hole, 'I don't think it's wind you need so much as a rope.'

Bahati jumps. For a moment, he thinks that it's his mother, come to usher his soul out of his body. But then the shadow shifts above him, and the voice says, 'Hang on. There's a lot of junk up here. I should be able to find something suitable.'

A chest thuds open. Objects rattle as they're tossed aside. Somebody kicks their way through a pile of bones. These are *human* noises, Bahati realises. It's not his mother, then. Whoever is up there is a solid, living person, not some cloud-bodied spirit.

'Who are you?' he calls.

'Well today I am your saviour, apparently. My name is Swala, and you're lucky I stopped by. My boss sent me to check up on our witchdoctor after last night's fracas. Have you seen him? Is he alright?'

Bahati looks at the corpse, splayed upside-down on its slope of rubble, and he replies, 'That's actually quite a difficult question to answer.'

The corpse has, at last, fallen silent, and Bahati could almost believe that he had imagined their whole conversation – a hallucination brought on by trauma, perhaps. But he's not that naïve.

Still, he thinks, maybe the corpse was a better companion than this Swala. She said *our witchdoctor* and *my boss*. Which means that she runs with the No Surrender Gang.

Which means that she is the enemy.

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One day, Swala will be Empress of Katamba.

She hasn't worked out how she's going to achieve this yet. It's not an established career path for a street thief. But she's only fourteen, so she has plenty of time. If she gets to twenty and she's still not sat on the Golden Stool, then she'll start to worry.

The trick, she reckons, is to always be looking for an edge. She saw one this morning when the shell came down on the Weywe Ancestor Temple. Swala isn't from Katamba, and she doesn't think much of the local religion. But the No Surrender Gang is full of superstitious men. If Swala can pick up a few charms and fetishes from the temple ruins, then maybe – just maybe – she can manipulate those superstitions to her advantage.

Saving the boy's life might help her too. He could be somebody important. Or failing that, somebody useful.

She drops a rope into the hole and shimmies down.

Her bare feet land on the witchdoctor's chest. He doesn't stir, which isn't surprising given that his face has been turned inside out. That's good, she decides, there's an advantage in that. The gang will be angry and afraid when they hear that their witchdoctor is dead. She can work on their fears, perhaps take the witchdoctor's place. It'll get her a step closer to becoming Empress.

The boy, in contrast, is a disappointment. His legs are crushed beneath a slew of coral rag, so he's probably crippled now, and his bare chest and fat-glistening hair suggest that he's just a street kid. Not much use to be got out of a street kid. Still, now she's here, she might as well help him out.

'Stay still,' she orders. 'I'll see if I can shift some of these stones.'

Swala braces her feet against the rubble, and heaves on one of the coral blocks. Debris shifts further up the cascade. The boy cries out in pain.

And a dim red light flicks on in the underground darkness of the chamber.

Swala lets go of the coral block. 'What's *that?*' she asks.

'It's nothing,' says the boy. 'It's just an old pot.'

'An old pot that glows. That's hardly nothing.' She scrambles over the rubble to take a closer look. The pot is made from terracotta, and it has a single symbol etched into its surface: a teardrop with a man curled up inside it.

The symbol is burning redly.

Now, Swala may not be from Katamba, but Katamba once ruled all the mainland coast from the bone deserts of Kush to the mangrove swamps of the Hippopotamus Eaters, and many of their stories have seeped into their former imperial possessions. One of those stories was about a pot that glowed, just like this one. Swala heard it when she was still a little girl, living in the pirate infested lagoons of Yarenu.

The story goes like this. These days, there is no magic in the world. But once upon a time there was. Twenty-four High Magics, and three hundred and fifty-three Low Magics. The magics were given to mankind by the animals of the world. The wise elephant gave the magic of wisdom, the elegant giraffe gave the magic of elegance, the impatient gazelle gave the quick magic that finds shortcuts in problems, the implacable lion gave the magic of the warrior's courage. And the lesser animals gave their magic as well. The hardworking dung-beetle, the clumsy sausage fly, and the vindictive mosquito each bestowed their essence upon mankind. And mankind accepted these gifts on the understanding that they would maintain the balance between the species, and act as judge in disputes. But of course, man being man, it wasn't long before he abused that trust, and twisted the magics for his own pleasure and

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ambition. He turned upon the animals, and he turned upon his fellow men, and before long the world was shattered by conflict and death. To stop the destruction, the warthog, who had no magic, summoned his magic-less followers. They met at the Place Where Stories End, and they used their magiclessness to perform the opposite of a spell. They gathered together the twenty-four High Magics and the three hundred and fifty-three Low Magics, and they folded them down to the size of a coconut. They then stored the coconut of magic in a pot, which they branded with their sacred symbol and hid beneath the earth.

But what is hidden, can be found.

And what is trapped, can be released.

Swala's head crowds with a thousand skittering thoughts. Is the story true? Is this the pot that contains all the magic of the world? *Magic*. That is a power she has never considered before. With magic she could become an Empress for certain – not just of Katamba, but of Yarenu too, and everything between and beyond.

All she has to do is break the pot.

She looks around for a suitable stone: a hefty one, large enough to shatter terracotta but small enough to lift. A likely candidate sits by the boy's flopped hand. It's covered in blood and bits of brain, but Swala isn't squeamish. She steps forward to grab it – and another person drops into the chamber. His chest is broad, his muscles are thick, and his face is anvil hard. Ridged tattoos line his brow and trace the curve of his eyes. They mark his allegiance to the No Surrender Gang.

Swala doesn't fear many people, but she fears this man.

His name is Panga. And he is a killer.

Panga doesn't want to be here. He would much rather be at home, playing with his newborn daughter. Asa is three days

old, and so perfect that everything else looks shabby and pointless beside her. She has already convinced Panga to become a better man. He wants to be at her side right now, tracing in awe her tiny fingernails and the soft fuzz of her hair. But instead he has to keep an eye on Swala – boss' orders.

Because nobody trusts Swala.

It doesn't matter that she's only fourteen, and an off-islander to boot. They've learnt the hard way that she is as sly as a cobra. It's her Yare heritage, Panga reckons. The Yare celebrate trickster heroes and worship jackals, and although their skin is midnight black, their hearts are white with evil.

Right now, Swala is stood over a terracotta pot, holding a stone above her head. Panga is fairly confident that her motives for smashing open the pot are not good. So he says, 'Put the stone down, girl, and I won't cut your throat.'

*I won't cut your throat.* Just listen to him! What sort of monster threatens to kill a fourteen-year-old kid?

His daughter must never see this side of him.

Swala hesitates. She is trying to decide if she can reach the pot quicker than he can reach her. That makes him doubly suspicious, so he throws himself forwards and tackles her to the floor. Swala yelps and makes a lunge at the pot with her rock, but he is too quick and too heavy. He pins her down against the dirt.

'Be still,' he says, impatiently.

For a wonder, Swala goes still; but it's probably only because she's plotting her next move. He fishes some wire out of the leather pouch at his belt and binds her wrists behind her back.

'What are you doing?' Swala protests.

'Taking sensible precautions,' Panga replies. He tilts his head up at the hole and shouts, 'Hey – Dedu! Mahindi! Get down here and give me a hand.'

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Two more men drop into the chamber. They are not as big or as intimidating as Panga, but still, you wouldn't want to face them in a fight. Dedu has a scar running in a jagged arc across his mangled left eye. Mahindi has lost his two front teeth. They are best friends – and possibly more – and they both like palm wine, and dancing, and firing guns at the city's population of scavenger monkeys.

Dedu uses his one remaining eye to survey the dead witchdoctor.

'This is bad,' he says.

Panga agrees – it is very bad indeed. The death of their witchdoctor will sever their connection to the spirit world and plunge them all into misfortune. But since it's a problem that only the boss can solve, he pushes it to the back of his mind. Instead he studies the injured boy, lying beneath a wedge of rubble. Panga recognises the kid's face, even if he doesn't know his name. A member of Kiongozi's militia, he thinks – or at least, one of the hangers-on who trail after Kiongozi's militia. The old Panga – the Panga of four days ago – would have left him here to die. But he knows that his daughter would be disappointed if he did; not today of course, or tomorrow, but at some point in her life. So, when Mahindi looks at him for orders, he gives an impatient nod in the kid's direction. Mahindi understands and sets about heaving stones aside. The boy's legs are badly smashed, and he probably won't walk again. Poor sod, thinks Panga. Perhaps it would be kinder to let him die. But there's money to be made from begging on the streets. It'll be a safer life than the militia. He orders Dedu to tie the rope into a sling under the boy's armpits, and then he gets Mahindi to pull the kid to the surface.

Swala, meanwhile, slouches moodily in his grip, waiting for her turn. The pot she was trying to smash sits off to one side – and, wait – is it *glowing*?

Great. Just what Panga needs right now.

A glowing pot.

Up in the city, the morning heat begins to bloat, flattening the humidity down upon the alleyways. Furtive heads peer into the street, checking for armed men. Hunched figures dash from doorway to doorway. It's always risky to leave the home after a night of fighting. But there are clothes to wash and food to barter, and if you want to survive another day, you have to go scavenging for supplies. It's been several years since Katamba functioned as a proper state, so everything is make-and-mend right now. People look after their own. It's why so many youths join the gangs. At least then you have somebody to watch your back and to return fire if you're attacked. Better to be the killer than be killed.

Panga, of course, would rather be neither.

The No Surrender Gang own a fortified house, up against the acropolis on which the imperial palace is built. It's not much to look at from the outside – just a patchily plastered compound boxed around a central courtyard. But underneath, the gang have dug into the ancient cellars of Old Katamba. Panga leads his party down a flight of steps, into a labyrinth of narrow holes and oddly jutting walls which dive through the strata of stone and brick to a domed chamber, deep underground.

The boss is sat on a golden stool at the far end of the chamber, with bodyguards either side of him. A leopard pelt hangs from the wall behind.

He sighs when he sees Swala.

'What nuisance do I have to untangle today?' he asks.

'For once, Swala isn't the worse of it,' says Panga. He sets the glowing pot down at his boss' feet and steps back. The other gangmembers sit up in their rag beds and pause in their gambling games to peer at it.

A troubled frown creases the boss' brow. 'I hope that's not what I think it is,' he says.

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‘Mahindi told me the story on the way here,’ says Panga. ‘I’m not sure whether I believe it myself, but if it’s true, then this pot contains Twenty-Four High Magics, Three-Hundred and Fifty-Three Low Magics, and all the power in the world. What do you want us to do with it?’

The boss is an old man – nearly fifty. But his body is still taunt with muscle, and his mind is wily. His name is Jiwe, but the people who called him that are all dead and these days the only name he answers to is the Great Weywe.

He taps his knee in thought.

‘If the story is correct,’ he says, ‘then once the pot is broken, all the magics will be released – and they will tumble out of the pot in an ever-widening circle. Do you see the problem with that, Panga? Say we break the pot and try to do magic – well, five minutes later, Kiongozi’s militiamen will be able to do the same, and the Fist to the Face Gang, and the Emperor’s guards. And they might understand how magic works better than we do. We could find ourselves obliterated before we can get a proper handle on our new powers. No, the pot is too dangerous to use. We should hide it where nobody can find it.’

Panga is relieved. He is a straightforward man who likes things that he can touch and see – and, if necessary, beat to death. Magic sounds too unpredictable. ‘That’s good,’ he says. ‘I will see that it’s done. There is, however, another matter. We found a boy among the rubble by the pot. Mahindi dug him out. His legs are crushed and I was going to leave with the beggars. But then... well, you’d better see for yourself.’

He waves Mahindi forwards. Mahindi has carried the boy up from the Ancestor Temple, and he now sets the kid down in front of the boss’ stool. A faint red glow is pulsating from a symbol on the kid’s chest. It appeared as they were lifting the kid out of the underground chamber: a man trapped inside a teardrop.

‘The kid and the pot are clearly linked,’ says Panga. ‘Should we hide him as well?’

The boss doesn’t hesitate. ‘Yes. Let nobody see him as long as the sacred symbol burns on his chest.’

‘And Swala? I caught her trying to smash the pot.’

A smile reorganises the wrinkles on the boss’ face. He has a soft spot for Swala – even looks upon her as a daughter, which Panga thinks is a dangerous idea.

‘Keep her tied up until the pot is hidden,’ says the boss. ‘Then you can let her go. I’ll keep an eye on her. Now summon my elders. If our witchdoctor is dead, we have much to discuss.’

The elders sit down, cross-legged, in front of the boss’ stool. They pass a calabash of palm wine between themselves and begin to talk.

Panga takes the opportunity to slip away. He tells Mahindi and Dedu that he is going to visit his brother, which is the excuse he uses whenever he wants to see his daughter. Panga, you see, hasn’t told anybody in the gang about Asa. She is small and defenceless and Panga intends to keep everybody who *isn’t* small and defenceless as far away from her as possible. He doesn’t want a rival threatening Asa to get to him.

But today, it’s not Asa that he’s going to see.

Instead, Panga climbs the zigzag stair behind the compound, up the gnarled cliff face of the acropolis. He knows that as long as he’s a member of the Great Weywe’s circle, it will only be a matter of time before somebody discovers his secret daughter. If he wants to be a good father to Asa, if he wants to protect her, then he must leave the No Surrender Gang. But leaving the gang is dangerous. The boss does not like deserters. He might send men to kill Panga – and even if he doesn’t, Panga has many enemies. Outside the protection of the gang he’ll be exposed.

So the time has come to make new friends.

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His plan is a despicable one – a betrayal of everything that he believes in. But he'll do it for Asa, because Asa is more important than his conscience.

He reaches the top of the stair, where the trade winds bend the palm trees over a dusty road. On the other side of the street is the metal studded gate of the imperial palace.

Panga walks over and tugs at the rope of the petitioners' bell. A door within the gate opens, and an elderly retainer in a gold brocade shawl leans into view. 'Public audiences are on the first and fifth day of every week,' he says, by rote. 'Come back tomorrow, and I'll let you into the First Courtyard. If you're lucky the Emperor will pick you. I would recommend getting here early if you want a good seat.'

He starts to push the door closed.

Panga jabs his foot into the narrowing gap. 'Not so fast,' he says. 'Tell the Emperor that I have important news for him. Tell him that the Pot of Three Hundred and Seventy-Seven Magics has been found.'

Rafiki has one job at the Imperial palace.

The Emperor owns a dog called Mpanda – a little white cottonhead of terror, who is supposed to sit on Emperor's lap during audiences, but who prefers to wander around the chamber and piss on people's sandals. Rafiki's job is to stand at the edge of Audience Room with a satin cloth, and wipe clean any foot that Mpanda defiles.

That is his life.

He hates it.

He hates himself as well, albeit not quite so venomously. He's built all wrong, you see. He watches the Emperor's wives glide up and down the long, narrow room, with their red and gold kitenges winking in the sunlight of the high windows, and he feels an impotent envy. He would love to

be elegant and feminine and gentle; but instead here he is, the lowest of the low, rubbing dog piss off people's feet.

Still, there are perks to his job. Today's guest, for example, is easy on the eye. He marches up the tiled floor with brisk confidence, his muscles rolling in all the right places. At a gesture from the Emperor, the man kneels on a reed mat in front of the Imperial stool, and waits patiently as the Emperor's youngest wife, Tamaa, washes his hands and face.

The Emperor fidgets impatiently, scratching at his elbow.

'Enough,' he says at last. 'Stop fussing over him, woman. You may stand, Panga of the Weywe. Tell me about this magic pot.'

The man – Panga – stands, and Mpanda the Terror-Dog immediately spots a new target. Before Panga has a chance to speak, the dog pads over to him and cocks its leg. Panga's face twitches with fury as it begins to piss, but he knows better than to complain. Everybody else pretends not to notice.

Everybody, that is, except Rafiki. Rafiki is ready with his cloth.

The moment that Mpanda is finished, Rafiki scurries forward, head down, to clean Panga's feet. He takes his time, marvelling at the hard curve of the man's calf muscles.

Above him, Panga tells the Emperor about the pot that the No Surrender Gang have unearthed. The Emperor stops scratching his elbows and starts to bite his nails. When Panga is finished, he says, 'Yes, thank you for this intelligence, Panga of the Weywe. It is very troubling, but still a welcome gift. What gift can I give you in return?'

Panga gets back down on his knees. Rafiki, reluctantly, stops polishing his feet.

'I want a better life, O Emperor,' says Panga. 'I am tired of fighting and killing for the No Surrender Gang. Let me

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come and work inside the Imperial compound. That is the gift I request.'

Rafiki edges back to his station by the wall. He thinks that life at the palace would be a little more bearable if a man of Panga's stature had a bed in the servants' dormitory. But a crafty look has appeared on the Emperor's face. He's spotted an advantage. 'That is a very great gift to ask for, Panga of the Weywe,' says the Emperor. 'Palace jobs are rare and highly sought after. If you want to live here, you must do a little more to earn it. But don't worry, I have an idea. Go back to the No Surrender Gang and pretend that this meeting never happened. Drink maize beer with your friends, and eat sorghum cakes, and learn what you can about your boss' plans. Then report what you have learnt to my Minister of Intelligence. Do that for a time, and I'm sure that we can find you a position here.'

Panga bows his head. 'And how long must I be your agent among my friends?' he asks.

The Emperor waves a vague hand in a gesture that could mean *not long* or *twenty to thirty years*. 'Just until a suitable opening comes free.'

Rafiki knows what that means. *Never*. The Emperor doesn't want a former gangmember wandering about the palace, starting fights and getting in to trouble. A helpful man might warn Panga that he is wasting his time – perhaps over a drink of palm wine and a bowl of coconut rice.

Panga, however, doesn't realise that he is being led on. He gives a relieved nod. 'Thank you, O Emperor,' he says.

The Emperor rubs his big toe and waits for Panga to exit through the smallest of three doors at the far end of the room. Then he turns to his Ministers.

'Follow this Panga back to the headquarters of the No Surrender Gang, and arrest everybody there,' he orders. 'We must seize the pot before they break it. Mobilise the Guard.'

The Ministers glance at each other. They know how well armed the No Surrender Gang are, and how badly trained

the palace guard is. A confrontation would not go well. Fortunately, the Minister of Ceremonies is scholar, well-versed in the legends of Old Katamba, and he says, 'Why go to all the trouble of attacking the No Surrender Gang, O Great One? Let them have their magic pot. If they are foolish enough to break it, then the magic will spill outwards in all directions, and we'll gain as much advantage from it as them. *More* advantage, I'd think, because some of us have studied the magics of the ancient world, and we have an idea how to bend their powers to Your Excellency's advantage. No, O Emperor, the pot is not important. But what might be useful to Your Munificent Self is the Warthog's Secret. Think about the story. The true power is not the ability to wield one or two of the Twenty-Four High Magics, or a handful of the Low Magics. It's being able to control and corral *all* the magic, like the warthog and his followers did when they sought to render the world magicless. If we could crack the Warthog's Secret, we'll be supreme.'

The Emperor picks his tooth, then fiddles with the tip of his nose, then decides that he likes this idea.

'Yes, yes,' he says. 'That sounds like a sensible plan. Kitabu, I order you to crack the Warthog's Secret. Commandeer all the books you can. Interrogate the witchdoctors and the elders. Find out everything there is to know about the magicless. But do it quietly. We don't want the whole world to learn about this pot.'

Rafiki, standing against the wall, tries not to snort in disbelief. He reckons that the chances of keeping the pot a secret are about as slim as the Emperor's youngest wife. The palace is full of gossipers and rumourmongers. Somebody will talk. And he hopes they do, because the more people who know about the pot, the more likely it is to get broken; and if the pot is broken, Rafiki can see an opportunity. His grandmother used to talk about the Twenty-Four High Magics as she pounded the family's

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maize with her long wooden pestle. She would wish for the strong magic of the rhinoceros, or the short-cut magic of the gazelle, to help her with her work.

But the magic that always enchanted Rafiki was the High Magic of the chameleon: the magic of change.

Because with the chameleon's magic he could change his body and his gender.

He could become the person he was always meant to be.

Rafiki's right, people talk. The doorman talks to the gardener. The gardener talks to the Keeper of the Emperor's Lions. The Keeper talks to his wife. His wife talks to her cousins. Her cousins talk to their husbands and their wives and their children and their friends. And the story of the magic pot dribbles out of the palace and along the capillary streets of Katamba. It laps against the doorway of the Fist to the Face Gang, and against the fortified gates of the Sod You Militia, and it puts the members of both gangs on edge. They summon their witchdoctors and demand to be taught how to perform magic, just in case the No Surrender Gang decide to break the pot. But magic has been gone from the world for three thousand years, so nobody really knows how it is done.

The story, meanwhile, seeps onwards like damp, contaminating everything it touches. It reaches the fishermen and merchants on the waterfront, who board their dhows and carry it up the mainland coast to Yarenu and down the mainland coast to Zwambe. It spreads along the great river Ogu, climbing cataract after cataract until it reaches the inland cattle-kingdoms of the Interlacustrine States. It follows the rickety railways that are built, owned and run by the nomadic Drego people, right to the edge of the sahel and across the continental watershed to the rainforests of the west. And, of course, it travels along the

ocean trade-routes, from entrepot to entrepot, until it reaches the greatest city of them all, Ukara-on-the-Delta.

Ukara is famed for its ancient tells of masonry and pottery that rise out of the delta floodplains like pincushions studded with buildings. On one of the tells – the tell furthest from the coast, the tell deepest within the paddy fields – Khosa stands at a classroom blackboard, telling her pupils about their pastoralist ancestors. ‘...and as the drought entered its third year, Shuka ordered the surviving cattle to be killed; and then he led his people south, out of the savannah and down into the villages of the delta...’

The school is brightly painted with murals, and its roofs are made from corrugated tin. The children are well-fed and confident. The teachers are good at their jobs. It is a school for the elite.

Khosa is one of the elite herself: a Kikyeme, long-limbed and black-skinned, a good head taller than the umber-faced natives of Ukara. She wears a turquoise scarf around her head, and her neck and wrists jangle with bead jewellery. Here, in her own little fief, she’s happy.

It doesn’t take much to make her *unhappy*, however. Just the arrival of a petrol-driven hurry-cart in the quadrangle outside.

The hurry-cart is a grotesque contraption, half metal, half wood, with rubber tyres and a rattling, smelly engine. It carries a dozen Wakikyeme soldiers in its wooden passenger-box. They are dressed in red and blue kitenges, and they carry spears instead of guns – which at least means that they’re here to perform a ceremonial rather than a military function. But even so, the sight of them beyond the wire-mesh windows of her classroom makes Khosa feel sick. Her lesson tails off in mid-sentence: ‘...by establishing outposts in the delta-land manner, Shuka –’

And she forgets her place.

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Instead, she stares resentfully at the leader of the soldiers as she marches across the yellow grass to the classroom door. The children stir curiously on their mats. They sense her tension, even if they don't understand its cause.

Khosa pushes down on a lifetime's worth of jealousy.

'Waka,' she says to her older sister. 'This is unexpected. I will come and speak to you after class has finished.'

Waka ignores the not-so-subtle hint. 'No time,' she says, grabbing Khosa by the arm. 'Come with me.'

It's their childhood all over again, Waka treating Khosa like an inanimate object to be pushed around and arranged as she sees fit. The worst part is, Khosa can't fight her off. Waka is strong and athletic; Khosa is not – and she has the class to think about too: her authority over the children would shatter if they saw her wrestling with her sister. All Khosa can do is set her jaw and let Waka drag her out into white sunlight of the quadrangle like an unruly kid off to kneel before the elders. It's humiliating.

They reach the hurry-cart and Waka tries to push Khosa into the passenger-box. But they are far enough away from the classroom now for Khosa to dig her heels into the dirt. 'Stop it, Waka. You can't just march into school and kidnap me. I have classes to teach and meetings to attend.'

Waka gives her another push. 'I don't have time for an argument, Khosa,' she says. 'There's an emergency underway, and you are being summoned by the Jumbe.'

Khosa is so surprised by this news that she stops fighting and lets Waka bundle her into the hurry-cart. She has never been *summoned by the Jumbe* before. She's just a schoolteacher, after all, and the Jumbe is only interested in soldiers and fighters. It is one of the reasons that Khosa resents her sister. Waka is always being rewarded for her bravery and her skill. She leads hunting parties against the elephants that plunder their crops, and raiding parties against the Jumbe's enemies further up the delta, and as a

result she has won many titles, like the Warrior Who Faces Down Lions, and the One Who Wrestles With Her Feet. Khosa, by contrast, has no titles. The Wakikyme don't respect teachers. They think that anybody who hides inside and talks all day is suspect.

It wouldn't matter so much if Waka and Khosa were in different age-sets. Then they could have gone about their separate lives in peace and avoided contact with each other. But the two years between them is a small enough gap for the sisters to have ended up in the same generation group: the Moon Leopards. They attend the same rites and eat at the same feasts and celebrate the same award ceremonies. Khosa thus cannot help measuring her failure against Waka's success.

It is very demoralising.

She turns her back on her sister and leans against the tail-gate of the passenger-box as the hurry-cart lurches off in a smog of black smoke. They bounce through the school gates, and down the steep street to the causeway. Fishermen step back to the edge of the gutters. A basket-maker holds onto her wicker baskets as they rattle past. And then they are out on the plain, flying along the straight, raised causeways that stretch across the paddy fields, joining one tell to another. The other tells rise off in the distance, blue with haze and higgledy-piggledy with buildings: the Silent Tell, where the Ukare bury their dead; the Tell of Many Smokes, where the metallurgists work; the Tell That Welcomes All Visitors, where the merchants gather to buy and sell. But their destination is none of those places. No, their destination is the Great Tell that stands on the edge of the main channel: a monstrous pile of ancient masonry that dwarfs everything around it. The hurry-cart leaves the causeway at the tell's rubble base, and noses into a steep, winding street. Here, the crowds are so thick that two soldiers have to get down from the passenger box and clear a path for them. They climb slowly between the

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hodgepodge of mudbrick buildings to a red-stone palace that juts out on a prow of old masonry.

The palace used to be a university, but the Jumbe has stripped away the scrolls and the books and replaced them with elephant tusks and leopard skins. Khosa is escorted to the Audience Chamber, which sits on the edge of the prow, its great stone arches open to the patchwork of millet fields on the plain below.

The Jumbe sits on a golden stool, surrounded by spear-armed warriors.

Khosa kneels before him. Up close, the Jumbe is a bit of a disappointment. She was expecting a paragon of warrior physique, somebody who encapsulated everything that the Wakikyme celebrate: strength, and prowess, and courage. Instead the Jumbe is a middle-aged man with cabbage breath, sagging a little in the cheek and stomach. If *that* is a warrior, then what is all the fuss about?

‘So you are Waka’s sister,’ says the Jumbe.

*Waka’s sister*, as if she doesn’t have an identity of her own.

‘I am.’

‘And you have studied the ancient languages of the Coast peoples?’

This surprises her. Most Wakikyme have little time for the culture of others. They are a conquering race with no interest in the excuses of losers. So, why is the Jumbe suddenly showing an interest in their enemies now?

‘I have,’ says Khosa.

‘Then you know about the Twenty-Four High Magics and the Three-hundred and Fifty-Three Low Magics?’

‘I do. But if you are hoping to make use of those powers in battle, I am afraid that it is impossible. There has been no magic in the world for three thousand years.’

‘I am aware of this,’ replies the Jumbe. ‘But my spies tell me that the world may not remain magicless for long. The Pot of Three Hundred and Seventy-Seven Magics has been

found in Katamba – and that changes everything. Magic, I am told, is a weapon more potent than any gun or spear, and there will be a temptation in Katamba to break the pot and use it to re-establish their Empire.’

‘Let them try!’ says Waka.

The other warriors bang their spear butts against the floor in agreement.

‘Let them try indeed,’ the Jumbe echoes. ‘But still, we should take precautions. My experts reckon that it will take three quarters of an hour for the widening circle of magic to reach us in Ukara. *Three quarters of an hour*. The Emperor of Katamba could wipe us out in three quarters of an hour. So, I am going to send two gunboats and one transport ship to monitor the situation in Katamba. I want you to go with the soldiers on the transport ship, Sister of Waka, and train them in the art of magic so that they will be ready if the pot is broken.’

Khosa can barely believe what she is hearing. It’s not the re-discovery of the pot that surprises her – that’s basic archaeology: what is hidden can be found. No, what she can’t believe is that she’s been given an opportunity to win herself prestige. Even though she is just a schoolteacher! She might even get a title out of this. The One Who Wields Magic, perhaps?

She prostrates herself in front of the Jumbe.

‘I am at your service,’ she says.

‘Good,’ says the Jumbe. ‘You will report to Waka immediately. She will be commanding the expeditionary force.’

Khosa’s delight curdles.

She’ll be under *Waka’s* command?

This won’t end well.

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The soldiers mobilise, the boats are launched. And three days later, Khosa stands on the metal deck of an oil-burning steamship as it cleaves its way across the ocean. Above her, smoke streaks from the three great chimneys, whilst white sails snap taut in the wind. Low gunboats slink along like crocodiles to either side, guarding them from enemy attack. On the aft deck, Khosa faces a platoon of Waka's soldiers, showing them the body movements, hand gestures and wordless articulations of the aggressive High Magics. The strong magic of the rhinoceros, the courageous magic of the lion, and endurance magic of the buffalo are all related, and require loud cries and heavy stamping.

The warriors love it.

Khosa is less enamoured by the process – but that's mainly because Waka insists on standings behind her, telling her what she's doing wrong. 'Your voice isn't carrying, Khosa: this is a ship not a classroom,' – 'Don't talk down to my warriors, they have earned great respect,' – 'Why are you taking a break now, we still have an hour to go until the sun gets too hot.'

Khosa imagines using one of the magics – the High Magic of the Rhinoceros, perhaps – to punch Waka in the face.

It's not just the Wakikyme who are making their way to Katamba. The great southern cities of Zwambe and Shua-Xira have also dispatched ships in the direction of the pot, whilst to the north the mosquito fleets of the Yare set their sails and begin to zigzag down the coast. The cattle kings of the Interlacustrine States, meanwhile, sit down with their elders and plot how they will use the magic should it reach their tent cities, whilst in the great industrial states along the edge of the al-Akir desert, the governments brace themselves for the catastrophic social upheaval that they fear magic will bring.

The world slowly teeters towards the precipice of something new. It *could* be an age of hope and miracles.

But man being man, most likely it won't.

And then one morning Khosa wakes in her bunk, aware that something has changed. The engines are no longer humming, the ship has gone still.

They have arrived.

She wraps a kitenge around her body and makes her way up the gangway to the deck. It is nearly dawn, and the stars are beginning to sink into the lightening sky. She finds Waka stood at the gunwale, looking across the water towards Katamba. The island is still a black silhouette against the eastern horizon, but its contours are easily determined by the winking lights that burn across its humped back. A metal juggernaut from Zwambe sits at anchor off to their right, close enough for Khosa to hear the men stomping about the deck. Six frigates from Shua-Xira rest sleekly beyond it, two angled towards them, the rest poised towards the city. Further out, the Yare sailors have lashed their dhows and outriggers together into a huge bobbing raft to prevent themselves from drifting apart. There may be other ships out there too, but it is too dark to see.

The only vessel in the Katambe navy, meanwhile, is a ramshackled paddle-wheeler that looks like it would sink the moment it hits its first wave. It is moored again the main dock like an abandoned dog.

A breeze stirs the edges of their kitenges. Khosa isn't expecting Waka to acknowledge her presence, so it's a surprise when her sister asks, 'How will we know if the pot has been broken?'

Khosa's gaze turns inwards, and with hushed reverence she imagines what it would be like if magic was released. 'They say that you can feel the magic beneath your skin – a hum, like a vibrating engine, attuned to whichever magic

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you are best suited for. But if you want a visible sign, Waka, look to the sky. The pressure of the expanding magic should push the moisture in the air ahead of it, creating an expanding bubble of haze.'

Waka nods. 'That is good to know.'

For a moment the two of them stand in silence, listening to the cries of the first terns. It is an oddly comfortable moment, reminiscent of a time when they were both young enough to be friends. And perhaps Waka is lulled by nostalgia, because she turns to Khosa, and says, 'This is a mess, my sister. If we start a war here, we'll be fighting on all fronts against half a dozen enemies. I don't know if I have the skill to lead us to victory.'

It's the most honest thing that Waka has said to Khosa in years. Khosa's heartbeat jumps. Perhaps this is a new dawn in more sense than one. Perhaps Waka has finally begun to respect her for who she is, rather than judging her for who she is not. Perhaps she and Waka can behave like adults for once, discussing strategy, working together against their enemies, winning glory for them both. It could be like the fantasies Khosa had as a child – before Waka made it clear that she wasn't interested in her company.

But then Waka ruins the moment by saying, 'When battle starts, Khosa, you must obey my commands without hesitation. We won't have time for your sulks and your retorts.'

Khosa's joy congeals. She clutches onto the gunwale, her knuckles paling with suppressed indignation. Waka knows nothing about magic. Without Khosa, she'll be dead within five minutes of the pot's breaking. If Waka wants to survive the coming battle, she'll have to learn how to obey *Khosa's* commands.

But that is a fight for later. For now, Khosa bows her head.

'As you say, sister,' she replies.