



# I

## Yejide

‘First thing you have to remember,’ Granny Catherine hold her granddaughter, Yejide, close on her lap, ‘is that there was a time before time.’ She press the first layer of tobacco down into her ebony pipe. The flame from her silver lighter make a small blaze in the cavern of the bowl and the pipe settle between her lips. ‘Before we come to live in this house, before the settlement in the valley, before the quarries, when the forest was so thick that no man could cross it, Morne Marie was the home only of animals. But not like animals we see now, oh no!’ Catherine open her eyes wide and the blue smoke curl out of her nostrils. ‘The ocelots was big like tigers, the deer run so fast that no man could catch them even if he dare enter the forest to hunt them, and the little green parrots that sing at dusk was as big as the blood-red ibis that live in the swamplands. The animals could talk to each other, just like I talking now, and they build a mighty city in the forest. But this city was nothing like Port Angeles. It had no buildings, no boundaries, no gates, and the animals live together without territory to guard and borders to mind.

‘But one day a warrior wander into the forest. He see that it full of animals to hunt and fruit to eat. When he look at the trees he only see the houses he could build, and when he look at the land he only see what he could take. The animals try to talk to him and tell him that there was so much more there than what he could see, but he did not know their language and so could not understand them.

‘That warrior bring more warriors and with the warriors come builders and with the builders come farmers and with the farmers come priests. With the priests come governors and with the governors come death.’

‘But the animals fight them, right?’ Yejide squirm on her granny lap. Nothing she love more than this full-cupboard feeling: the sweet smell of tobacco, the even rhythm of the rocking chair, the green hills and her granny face brimming with story. She think of the sharp teeth of the ocelots and the tight grip of the macajuel that could suffocate a man in its coils; no way any human with just two legs, very small teeth and no poison at all could ever defeat the wild animals of the forest.

Catherine look at her and puff on her pipe. ‘Who telling the story, you or me?’

Yejide grin and quiet down again.

‘The animals had always live in peace, but they know then that it was time for war. The battle rage bloody and terrible. The quarry you see there’ – Catherine point out the window to the deep, brown crater on the hillside – ‘was where the animals make a stand in a battle so fierce that it leave scars on the mountain.

‘All that killing cut the forest deep. Wounded, it went into mourning and that bring the longest dry season ever on Morne Marie. The rivers hide in the earth and the trees wilt and die away. The ocelots shrink small like house cats, the howler monkeys get timid, and the deer and manicou and lappe, who had live in peace before, start to look at each other and see food. The warriors suffer too, for no one, man nor animal, could survive when nature decide to withhold its bounty.

‘Then one day when all were weary, and it look like the war would claim not only the fighters but the whole forest, a great storm set up in the hills. Fat, grey clouds empty out into the green and the men and animals rejoice to see the rivers

rise again, and the forest drink deep of the rain. Thunder and lightning pelt down for three days and three nights. But remember I tell you, this was a time before time, when a tree could reach full-grown in a day and a boy could reach manhood in a night, so this storm was longer and fiercer than any of the animals had ever see before. The earth slide down the hillsides and crash into the valley below. Trees older than any animal could remember lose their hold on the earth and topple over. The rivers burst their banks and rush over the land. Rejoicing turn again to sorrow. It come like the whole forest turn on them and demand its share of the lives who defile its sacred places with war.

‘Now, the green parrots, the ones who cackle and sing and chatter, just like you’ – Catherine pinch Yejide lips together to stop her from giggling – ‘well, they were wiser than any of the animals give them credit for. The parrots watch the rain and watch the hills and watch the rivers and watch the dead pile high. They gather together in the branches of the last sacred silk cotton tree and hold a council. At the council’s end, the parrot battalion split and divide in two. One half fly to the east and the other half fly to the west.

‘The parrots that went west get small and become the little green birds we see today, those that sing and fly toward the setting of the sun. But those that went east toward the sunrise mute their green feathers to black and curve their beaks into sharp hooks. Their bodies get fat and their wingspan stretch so wide they darken the land below them as they fly. They release one last great song that make all the animals and men tremble, then grow grey hoods around their heads and necks that silence their throats forever.

‘You know what they turn into, Yejide?’ Catherine stare out the window, smile and puff on her pipe.

‘Corbeaux!’ Yejide cry out. She love getting the right answer. No matter how many times she hear the story, knowing the answer always make her feel grown up and very important.

Catherine nod and pull deep from the pipe. ‘When the change was complete, they feel their bellies get hungry for flesh. They spread their wings wide and circle the land slow, searching out the dead. And with their new long, curved beaks and talons sharp like caiman teeth, they tear into the flesh of the animals who was once their friends and the men who was once their enemies. When they done, they take to the silk cotton tree again, leaving nothing but bone.

‘The living look on in horror to see the devouring of the dead. They don’t understand how the birds they once knew could do something so terrible. But the chattering parrots they knew were gone. They turn into something else entirely now. When they shed their green and change their form, they take on a sacred duty – to stand at the border between the living and the dead. So they wait for the dying and watch over the carcasses and consume the flesh. And no one but the corbeaux know that inside their bodies the souls of the dead transform and release.’

Catherine lift Yejide off her lap and put her to stand on the wooden floor in her white patent-leather church shoes. ‘Right. Story done. Now make sure and put those shoes away. And your nice dress. Hang it on the back of the chair in my room. Don’t let me come and find that you just leave it anyhow.’

But Yejide know the ritual well. ‘Story not done, Granny. What happen next?’

Catherine look down at her granddaughter. Just now she would be too tall for little-girl dresses, too grown to sit on her lap. But not yet – she reach her hand out and Yejide run back into her arms. Not yet.

‘Well, when the sun rise on the fourth morning of the great storm, when all the corbeaux stomach full and everyone weary with pain and grief, the rain stop. No more flood. Balance come back to the forest. But after they get saved, nobody like to think of who rescue them. In this way people and animals are the same. Everyone begin to fear the corbeaux. So, they fly away to live at the edges of the forest of Morne Marie. They alone know the world changing and it would have work for them in the cities of men to come. And so, like in all the stories that change the world, over time everyone forget that the ending of the storm happen at the same time the corbeaux born. Everyone, of course, except the corbeaux—’ She bend close to whisper in Yejide ear. ‘*We* remember.’



OATHBREAKER

*Port Angeles, Trinidad. Today*





## Darwin

The beat-up white Bedford slow down and pull off the road, orange indicator flashing. Darwin nod at the driver, an old man with a newsboy cap low on his forehead. The girl in the passenger seat don't even look up, her eyes down in her cell phone.

'Port Angeles?'

The old man nod to the cargo tray in the back. Darwin scramble up before the man change his mind, and tap the metal panel to let him know that he inside. They head down the highway, the fields brown from the dry spell and bush fires passing in a blur.

He push a big crocus bag full of what feel like potato or dasheen or some kinda provision to one side, a heavy curl-up rope to the other, and settle himself in between two ridges on the floor of the cargo tray so he don't tip over when the truck hit a pothole. Then he lean back on the tailgate and look up at the sky. That hour the day was usually still clean and pink, but Sahara dust was bad this rounds. Make the pink hazy and the clouds look like bundle-up dirty clothes.

Sky like this make him feel a way. Easy to feel hopeful when the sky clear, the air have some leftover rain in it and the hills green and lush. Make a man feel like he know where he going, and what he about. Like things would work out even if he not sure what coming next. But this kinda dirty-clothes sky make him feel like the place could blow up any minute.

Breathing in dust and ash and smoke like is a war zone you living in.

But even in a dusty time, sometimes a man does catch some luck. Like a drop into town from an old man in a pickup. People don't stop for nobody at this hour just so, sun not up good yet. When he was young, was easy to hitch a ride anywhere. Always somebody heading down to the coast or into the city. Easy to join a group of boys from up Dalia Street going anywhere, no shoes, no shirt, laughing. Don't even have to be friends. But these days different. And he is not no little boy again.

He shift so his back rest in the middle of the tailgate and the old man could see him clear in the rear-view mirror. He can't blame him, the way things going these days, but when he feel the driver eyes on him he stare right back, hard. It feel good when the man look away first. What he think Darwin going to do? Jump out, hang on to the moving truck, scramble through the window and cut his throat? He might be plenty things, but he eh no bandit and he eh no killer.

Smoke rise from the brown fields in the distance. He try to remember when last it rain. The hot-sun pause in the rainy season usually welcome, give the earth a chance to dry out little bit, but Petit Carême come early this year and that, plus the bush fires, turn the heat up like a furnace. He study the provision in the crocus bag, and wonder if the old man is a farmer, carrying produce to the market. Must be have it extra hard this year. He would have like to ask him, maybe chat on the way, talk about the city that he going for the first time. Up ahead abandoned cranes come up from the land like fingers, and an overpass stop in mid-air like a road to nowhere in the sky. Since the big construction companies close up shop and the government stop work on the highway project halfway

between Mount Perish and the lowlands to the south, wasn't much work anywhere anymore except the city.

Last week, when he had reach the front of the line in the government employment office in Wharton, he couldn't believe his good fortune. He know bout men who wait for hours and before the line move even halfway the boss lady inside say everything they have for the day done give out, come back tomorrow. So, when the clerk hand him a form from the pile on her desk for him to sign his name, he say a prayer of thanks because Jah know.

MRS JAMESON – SENIOR CLERK. She had make her own cardboard name card for her desk. She was the only one really working too. Some other men was in a corner, dress shirtsleeves roll up, knocking a game of All Fours on two desks push together. One of the men was shuffling the cards like an expert, a wicked grin on his face like he just know he going to win everybody money. A lady next to them was arguing with somebody on her cell phone.

'What kinda work it is, Mrs Jameson?' Darwin look at the form she hand him.

'When you hungry and somebody give you food, you does ask what kind?' She push her glasses up on her face and keep sorting her files.

'I mean, what Fidelis is, exactly?'

'You don't know Fidelis? Is the big cemetery in Port Angeles. On St Brigitte Avenue.'

'A cemetery? With dead people?'

'You know another kinda cemetery?'

'What kinda work it have to do in a cemetery?'

'They need another gravedigger.'

Darwin swear every hair on his body had raise up same time. 'You don't have anything else?'

‘Look, give me back my paper and go.’ She reach out her hand for the form. ‘When you desperate enough you go find yourself here again.’

Like if it had anywhere else to go. By the time people reach that office looking for work, any work, it mean they done stand up in every other line, sign every other list, and this was the last stop. The second he leave, there would be somebody else just like him, or a woman with a baby, a lady with handbag that had see better days, a man with good shoes who only just fall on hard times, out there in the hot sun to take his place. The line was already long all the way down the street and around the corner.

‘Emmanuel Darwin?’ She read out his name.

‘Yes. But just Darwin, ma’am.’

She push her glasses up again and look at him properly for the first time – his full beard, the tam covering his locks, down to his battered boots. Her eyes soften a bit. ‘Listen, Darwin, if it had something else I would give you, but this is what I have right now. You could come back but . . .’ She look behind him at the line.

So, he sign the form. Six weeks’ work to start, and if he get on okay, they might keep him. Feel like signing his life away. But this world had a way of doing you things like that. And maybe this is what it mean to be a man. Doing the things you never think you would have to do, making a hard choice when the only thing in front you is hard choices.

He feel eyes on him in the rear-view mirror again. But this time it was the girl. He didn’t get to look at her good when he get in the truck but in the better light he could see she wasn’t no girl at all; maybe his age or a year or two younger. She keep looking from her phone to the old man and then to Darwin in the mirror, half-smiling at him with her eyes like she don’t want the old man to see.

He wonder if, like him, she was just getting a ride into the city. Maybe the old man was her father, her uncle. Look too old to be her man but you never really know with how the times was hard. Maybe if they get off the same time he could talk to her. He try to see whether she was in office clothes, just something to gauge what kinda girl she was. Then he think about Marcia and the last time he see her, the whole new life she must be have now. He watch the lipstick on the girl mouth, the long hair that look expensive, and then he think about the next to nothing he have in his pockets. He look away. Too much trouble. Probably just like the idea of dealing with a Rastaman to piss off Daddy.

It hit him like a cuff all over again that the man Mrs Jame-son see a few days ago and the man the girl see in the rear-view mirror today wasn't the same. He not sure what anybody see when they look at him now. What a way life could change in a week. Like bush fire.

He run his hands over his shorn hair, his head feeling like it belong to somebody else. Six in the morning was still six in the morning even in dry season; he not used to the cool air on his almost bare head, the back of his neck, his ears. At least his mother had make sure he leave her house with a whole coconut bake, still warm and smelling of her hands. She didn't wake up to watch him go, but she leave the bake on the counter for him where he could see it. That had to mean something, that she make breakfast for him, even if her face say he wasn't her son no more. He feel the weight of it in his rucksack and hope that, no matter where he end up, when his mother say her prayers his name was still in her mouth.

They switch lanes on the overpass and join the bulk of the traffic heading toward the city. He look up at the sky, lighter now that the sun was higher, but still kinda cloudy,

hazy, and he see black specks circling. Corbeaux. Better than any signpost.

He watch the birds circling slow. His mother, Janaya, used to say that once you see so much corbeaux, you know you nearly reach Port Angeles. Is not like they ever do anybody anything but is something about the silent way they does circle, and how sometimes you could see a whole set of them just sitting in a line on a telephone wire, watching. Once you see corbeaux you know is dead they there for. And in the city, dead don't bound to be a stray dog or a manitou or old meat that restaurant throw out in the drain. Could be a woman head that the police never find even after they find the rest of her body; could be a man floating, fat and swell up with water in the harbour; could be a child in a crocus bag that nobody know there till they see the corbeaux flying.

When he was a small he used to ask Janaya how come they never went in town to go cinema or concert like everybody else. She give the same answer that she give when he ask about his father, if he was still in Port Angeles: 'Is only dead in the city, Emmanuel. Rasta don't deal with the dead.'

Traffic slow to a stop as they reach the main intersection and Darwin could see the big concrete arches of the Port Angeles transit station. The driver pull up at the traffic light and before babylon could come out from nowhere, blue lights flickering, to give the old man a ticket for carrying him in the tray, Darwin bang the side again, 'I go take it here, uncle!' and jump out.

He cross the road to where a long line of people was hustling into the station, everybody face set up, walking fast-fast like fire ants. Some heading up long stairways, others down corridors and the rest pouring through the gates into the city centre. He turn back for a second to look for the truck and

the girl inside it, but the traffic light had done change and she gone.

He feel his foot brush something on the ground. Look down and see it was a man asleep on fold-out cardboard boxes, the crowds walking around him. He hitch his backpack up on his shoulder. Probably better that he didn't try anything with the girl. Better so. He walk through the tall concrete arches and melt into the city.



The line of people outside the fast-food place at the city gates long like judgement. It start at the counter and stretch all outside on the pavement. The place smell like piss and old cooking oil but people still stand up waiting for fried chicken like if they don't know morning was time for tea and bake, time to settle yourself with something good that smell like home before you have to face all the people who come out in the day with wickedness.

Darwin try to get his bearings and figure out which way would take him into the old city. A set of cars park up on the taxi stand with drivers fighting for passengers so they could leave first with a full trip. A bright red car, drop low, zoom past, skip everybody else and pick up two women on the go instead of parking and waiting their turn. They speed off in the direction of the harbour and the other drivers cuss them as they pass. The newspapers say that whole area, where the cruise ships come in and businessmen and politicians sip drinks while looking out toward the sea, going to be the new and improved Port Angeles. He sure nobody bother to ask old Port Angeles how it feel about that.

Darwin ignore the taxi stand and keep walking. They wasn't getting his hard-earned dollars so early in the morning. It wasn't far and, if he was lucky, he could eat the bake before work start in the yard.

Town wasn't nothing like he imagine. Big city suppose to have plenty tall buildings and shiny stores and restaurants with fancy-looking people sitting outside. Maybe that is the