

Chapter 10

The sun's penetrating rays beat down the cataract of Utaya, slowly burning away the horrors of the night. Divers perched in exploring the area around the waterfall, looking for Brice Tannoy's body. On the small beach, inspector Bakari, with the Nairobi Police Department, was finishing up questioning the witnesses.

"There's something I still don't understand," he said, scratching his head, "you said you were holding your brother's hand at the moment when he was projected over the ledge..."

Alice, wrapped in a bathrobe, had pulled her hair back into a thick pony tail. Her face was hard, her expression cold; an exterior completely controlled in order to avoid breaking down, but also to better help her loved ones.

"Yes," she replied.

"And yet you didn't feel this invisible creature that was at that point so close to you?"

"No. It's as though it was empty for me, but absolutely real for my brother."

The police officer frowned grimly, perplexed. He opened his mouth, but closed it again. There was another question he burned to ask, but he hesitated. For a reason unknown to him, this young woman left a strong impression on him, and he was afraid of her reaction. Finally, his cop instincts got the best of him: e projeter lui-m

"Do you think it's possible that your brother, under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or hypnosis maybe, could have imagined his "attacker" to a point where he made himself feel the assault, and threw himself over the cliff?"

Alice inhaled deeply. She was beginning to feel revolted and annoyed to a point where she could no longer stay calm.

"Do you listen when you're spoken to, inspector?" she asked, anger in her voice.

Then, without leaving Bakari the time to respond, she continued:

"I told you earlier that my brother was bleeding to death. This 'creature' had disembowelled him and his hands were covered with blood. Did he imagine that, too? Nicolas and I watched him be put to death. Did we imagine everything, too? Inspector, have you ever heard the sound of organs and intestines being slashed open?"

A long silence followed the young woman's words. Le policeman couldn't seem to look into this woman's eyes and he was chewing the inside of his cheek. He cleared his throat before he spoke:

"I'm aware that all my questions are hard on you, that they make you relive those painful moments, but I'm just trying to understand. On one hand, the rational, logical police officer in me rejects this scenario as being completely unbelievable, but on the other hand, I..."

He stopped talking. His eyes began rolling around, as though all the demons of Africa were dancing around just under his eyelids.

"And on the other hand?... " repeated Eric Tannoy who had noticed his reactions.

The eyes of the inspector suddenly stared directly at him. "Has anyone ever spoken to you about Akuj?" he asked seriously.

In the distance, an elephant trumpeted. On hearing the name Akuj, a frisson ran across the shoulders of all those who had seen the flight of the witch doctor-hypnotist. His words suddenly echoed in their minds: "The devil! He has returned! Akuj is within him!"

"We live in a modern world where technology has done away with the old beliefs," Bakari continued, "but there are still on this Earth many mysteries that remain unsolved..."

Nicolas, like his friends, were dying to know more about this Akuj, but like them, fear of knowing too much paralysed him.

Finally, no one learned anything more about the creature. A diver yelled: "Over here! He's over here! He's stuck under the roots of this tree!"

These few words sent Caroline Tannoy over the edge. She fell crying into the arms of her mother. Eric put his arms around them both, pulling them against him.

In the lake, a second, then a third diver went to help the first and a few seconds later, they came back up to the surface with Brice's body. His skin was ghostly white, almost blue, certainly drained of blood. A tarp was laid out on the beach and the policemen carefully laid the dead body down on top of it. He was curled up into a foetal position. His eyes, wide open, were stuck in an expression of terror. Too terrible to look at.

A policeman took pictures, then Bakari approached the body and knelt down next to it. He pulled on a pair of latex gloves and tried to pull Brice's legs down away from his chest. Something seemed to protrude from his abdomen. Something dark brown and black, slightly cone shaped, pointed and curved.

The inspector grasped the strange object and pulled it loose. Then, holding it up before his eyes, he turned it over in his fingers to examine it. It was a ringed horn, eight or ten inches long. The witnesses to the seen froze in place on seeing the unbelievable discovery and followed the inspector's gestures attentively. No one said a word, but multitudes of questions ran through each person's mind.

Inspector Bakari broke the silence. A grave expression on his face, he looked from one of them to another, as though he was about to reveal a particularly difficult truth.

"This is the horn of Akuj," he finally said.

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The wind howled. Occasionally, a short dust storm beat across the village. The surface of Lake Turkana reflected the eerie light of the rising moon. Off in the distance, pink flamingoes took flight, becoming mere shadows across the volcanic evening sky.

Invited guests in the closed circle of the Turkanas, Eric Tannoy, Nicolas, Victor and Enzo watched a handful of adolescent girls dancing. The howling wind their only music, they jumped in place, straight and high, in line with each other, their small breasts moving in rhythm with their steps. The warriors, not at all interested by this presentation, were talking amongst themselves and laughed loudly. Their bodies scarred and their faces adorned with ivory implants, they wore somber capes and ostrich feathers on their heads. Their braided leather bracelets and hunting knives hanging from their waists, as well as the spears and shields set down close by reminded all who could see that they were warriors above all, and that only the famine had turned them into fishermen.

The young girls ended their dance and blended back into the night. Everyone was quiet as the sorcerers began their intervention. These men could easily be told apart from the warriors because they wore ivory ornaments in stacks around their necks, and their shoulders were covered by animal pelts.

The one who seemed to be the chief was sitting close to the guests, a large pelt bag close to him. He traced a circle in the dust and threw stones into it along with sticks, as he murmured chants. Time and time again, he repeated this gesture, under the respectful regard of those around the circle, while the others silently moved around the Turkana's circle, spitting on the ground.

"Something stinks!" murmured Victor. "What is it?"

"It's called ekeriau," replied Emerson, "it's a root that keeps evil spirit and enemies away."

Emerson Blake was a friend of Eric Tannoy, a bushman from the United States who spoke Swahili and Turkana, a red haired giant with skin burned from decades of sun and *Johnny Walker*. He knew all the wild territory of Kenya and Tanzania; and all the inhabitants, man and animal, had already crossed his path at one time or another. Nothing that happened in the wild countryside was unknown to him, and so when the boss of Jua Tembo asked him about Akuj, he had told him:

"If you really want to learn the story of Akuj, you have to meet Ng'imorok, the Turkana sorcerer."

However, the path leading to the great lake was not the easiest. The four friends first went to the dusty airport of Lodwar, where Emerson was waiting for them with a 4x4, then they went to the village of Ng'imorok, under a hellish heat, exposed to possible attacks from the Merille or the Ngorokos. Emerson had warned them of the danger, and he had even packed automatic weapons just in case. Cathy Troendhal very wisely stayed at Jua Tembo. Alice, on the other hand, would have wanted to go to Turkanaland with the men, but she decided it was best if she stayed at the orphanage to support her mother and grandmother, and take care of the animals.

Ng'imorok threw his sticks and stones into the circle for the last time, turned to Emerson and said, in Turkana: "I am ready."

"We're all listening," replied the American.

And so the sorcerer started narrating the story of Akuj. His voice was deep and gravelly, he spoke slowly, frequently marking pauses, allowing Emerson to translate his words:

"A long time ago, in the ancient times when the peoples of the plains lived in peace, when drought was yet to come and when game was abundant, lived an old woman named Akuj. She lived in a hut, just a few thousand steps from here, close to the lake, alone, and she survived on the offerings brought to her by the people she helped, since she was known in all of Turkanaland, and farther still, to be a healer.

"When women had difficulties during their pregnancies or if they regularly lost their babies during birth, they came to see Akuj. The old woman put her hands on the woman's round belly, and a few months later, the woman would give birth normally.

"However, after a few years, people started to notice that the children born in this way developed a tendency to do bad things. Mean, liars, hypocritical, aggressive, they all seemed to come from the same mold, almost as if they had inherited a talent for being evil. Popular rumors confirmed these worries in people's minds, and they came to this conclusion: Akuj was a creature of the devil and she had transmitted the power of Evil to these children. People's anger rose quickly and one night, an armed delegation came to her door. They caught her and burned her alive.

"The Ancients said that she screamed so loudly that her cries resounded from the surface of the lake for seven days. Her black silhouette vacillating in the flames, her face deformed, her skin burned all the way to the bone, Akuj continued to spit her venom, saying she would have her revenge, even from the grave, and that her descendants would carry Evil in them to places she could not carry it herself. And so, in the red cinders, from the forehead of her blackened skull came forth a long ringed horn.

"The next day, all those who had been born thanks to the old woman made a terrifying discovery: the same ringed horn grew from their foreheads, too.

"They were burned, as well. It was horrible. Making the decision to burn their own children destroyed entire families, but it was vital to act quickly if we did not want these demons, inside these men and children, to carry out Akuj's vengeance."

Ng'imorok marked a pause a bit longer than those before and Eric Tannoy took advantage to ask a question: "The story seems very old. How can we be sure it's not just a legend?"

The sorcerer reached for his animal hide bag and plunged his hand into it. When he pulled his hand back out, he was holding a ringed horn.

A thick silence suddenly fell on the village. All eyes were on the object and no one dared break the fearful inertia that had fallen upon the camp. In the end, it was Ng'imorok who spoke first:

"This bag contains all the horns of those condemned at that time."

He handed the strange object to Eric Tannoy who studied it a moment before passing it to Victor. The Englishman looked it over carefully before remarking:

"It's not at all burned or blackened."

"No," replied the sorcerer. "When my ancestors picked the horns up out of the ashes, they were intact, as though the fire had no power over them. The bodies of the children and men had become dust, but not their horns..."

The terrible images of the night before danced about in Nicolas's head. He saw Brice folded in two under the assault of an invisible ennemy, his stomach bleeding, a horrified expression on his face. When the horn was finally in his hands, he narrated the events of the night before to the sorcerer and asked him what he thought.

"It's Akuj," confirmed Ng'imorok. "No one can kill the demon. He has always existed since the world has existed and he will always exist. Whatever the appearance he takes on, visible or invisible, he will continue his evil work until the end of time..."