

# DESTINY DELAYED

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Mr. Mukoro was sitting at the front of his verandah at about 5:30 a.m. The faint glint of early dawn revealed the figure passing his frontage. It was Chinedu Okah, and he stopped to greet.

"Bros, how you dey? You're up early oh."

"No," Mr. Mukoro replied. "I'm down late."

"Working on your research?"

"No. Working on an old project, approaching a breakthrough. I need funds to finish it, but I'm trying to find a way to finish it without the funds."

"It would be a real breakthrough if you can finish your project without funds. . . . Finish your project, abolish capitalism, and change the world to make life good for us all!"

Mukoro was amused in spite of himself.

"I have to be off early to escape traffic," Chinedu said. "I'm going to head office on the Island."

"Have you been transferred?"

"I hope so. Or at least, it should be promotion."

"That's some news," Mukoro said, standing up to give Chinedu a handshake. "When you return, we'll drink to it."

"Of course. That's if you aren't too busy with your project."

Mukoro laughed gently. "Go come, brother."

"Greet Madam and Nyerhovwo for me," Chinedo said as he departed.

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A moment later, a slim, dark Itsekiri woman stepped out with a seven-year-old young girl still groggy with sleep. The girl saw Mukoro and ran to hug him. "Daddy miguo."  
"Vrendo my child."

The woman curtsied "Miguo papa Nyerhovwo."

"Vrendo mama Nyerhovwo," he said with a smile. She smiled back, smacking the child's butt playfully and pulling her from playing with her father's beard, which she held on to. He screamed in mock pain, and she giggled as she was pulled away. The child slipped out of her mother's grip and ran back to him.

"Oghenenyerhovwo," her mom called sternly. "Come and bathe now or you will be late for school and they will flog you when you get there."

The little girl looked at her father askance. He nodded. She kissed the cheek he turned for her and returned grudgingly to her mother who dragged her to the corner of the house.

Mukoro signed and closed his eyes, and the numbers and equations came unbidden to him as they usually did.

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Chinedu Okah alighted from the Keke Napep that dropped him at a side street and walked a few steps to the head office of AUB, the Africa United Bank. He blended in with the top bankers and persons in the finance sector, his crisp blue suit and starched white shirt making him look as sharp as the drawn blade of a Mushin gangster intent on robbing someone at two in the morning.

He was glad to be here. He was glad to have left the position of cashier, handling the grubby notes of traders and students at the Yaba branch of AUB, and marketer briefly thereafter.

He approached the nearest help desk and presented his ID, informing the attendant that he had an appointment with Mr. Abiola Yusuf of Human Resources. She placed a call before signaling him to wait, for Mr. Yusuf was in a meeting. This early? Chinedu wondered. Well, he would wait. He had been waiting a long while after all: three years as a contract staff, and six years at the Yaba AUB branch. He was led to the waiting room to do what it was named after.

Finally, Mr. Yusuf walked in and shook his hand.

"Good morning sir," Chinedu said, surprised to see Mr. Yusuf spotting a blue Kaf-tan on a Monday morning. In Yaba branch, even the branch manager didn't wear native dress unless it was Friday. But this was head office. He guessed when one was this close to the top, one did what one wanted.

"Mr. Chinedu Okah, is it?" Mr. Yusuf asked in a Hausa accent.

"Yes sir."

"Walk with me."

Chinedu followed him out of the waiting room to an elevator. Mr. Yusuf punched in the thirteenth floor and spoke to him as the elevator rose.

"You read the e-brochure, right? So you know what we do here."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I want to give you a few pointers and show you around so you see and understand a bit more of what we do in this department."

They came out of the elevator and walked down a hallway.

"You were the most active marketer in the Yaba branch," Mr. Yusuf continued. "Only the best get recommended here. Your record is stellar. They say you pulled in six billion naira in six months, a billion per month."

Mr. Yusuf stared at Chinedu and nodded. He seemed to like what he saw in Chinedu's eyes. "Well. Now you will be helping us with something more than money."

They stopped in front of a large department marked UBD at the top of the entranceway. United Bank of Destiny.

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Chinedu could hardly believe himself when he was ushered into the UBD. Although he had read the brochure, he wasn't sure if he was being pranked.

"This is the measurement and extraction room," Mr. Yusuf explained. "This is where a destiny is mapped, measured, and extracted."

A procedure was in progress. A young man was standing in front of a machine that looked like an X-ray machine. Mr. Yusuf waved to the technicians in lab coats, gloves, coveralls, and goggles.

The technicians switched on the Destiny machine, and it emitted a whirring noise. There were a number of wires connected to the machine, which in turn were connected to screens round the room. The machine's whirring turned louder, and the air rippled in front of and behind the young man. The air took on a dark grey hue. The hue turned from dark grey to purple, and then to grey again. Then the air stopped whirling and one of the technicians switched off the Destiny machine.

"The screens do the soul reading, and the vibrancy of the colors displays the intensity of the destiny," Mr. Yusuf said, turning to Chinedu, who still stared at the operation and the operators. "The process measures the capacity of a man's destiny. The destiny is then extracted by the machine and stored in a soul cube."

As the young man was led away to wear his clothes, Chinedu noticed that his eyes looked dead, and his face was bleached of color.

Mr. Yusuf led Chinedu to another room marked Acquisitions and Mortgages.

"This will be your office. The destinies you determine and measure will be extracted and kept as collateral for their loans. Your job will be much like the old one as a marketer at the Yaba branch. But this time, you'll market young people who want loans, but who have no property for collateral. You'll convince them to use their destinies as collateral. It's a way for us to be of service to the needy. Think of it as an empowerment scheme, to help those who would otherwise not be able to get the funds they need. It's like student loans in America. This is, of course, a very sensitive department. You will see our lawyers to sign a nondisclosure agreement. That's fine with you, of course?"

"Yes, sir," Chinedu smiled knowingly. The monthly salary here was more than he earned in a year in Yaba Branch. In no time he could clear all his loans, even get a car. And moving to the Island would be possible.

Mr. Abiola's voice snapped Chinedu out of his reverie. "I read your dossier and knew that an overachiever like yourself would definitely be up for the job. Otherwise, we would have had you sign the nondisclosure even before you came in here. But I like to think I am a good judge of people. Or I wouldn't be head of HR."

Mr. Yusuf chuckled, and Chinedu chuckled politely in return. Mr. Yusuf kept walking and talking.

"Discretion is very important to what we do here. Not that it's illegal. The young men and women who come for loans all consent to have their destinies extracted and kept as collateral. Not that there is anything in the law about this, nor can the law make sense of it. We just don't want the uproar it would cause if uninformed ears got to know of what we do here. You know Nigerians are superstitious. They won't understand that we just want to help people."

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Mr. Yusuf led Chinedu to an office in the Mortgages and Acquisitions department. It was well furnished, with a sofa for visitors, a Surface Book on an expensive looking mahogany desk. "This will be your office," Mr. Yusuf said, gesticulating.

Chinedu was breathtaken by the office. It was three times larger than his branch manager's office at Yaba. Mr. Yusuf chuckled at his incredulity. Just then, a man in a purple suit walked in carrying a briefcase. Mr. Yusuf touched Chinedu on the shoulder. "The lawyer is here. I'll leave you both so you can get started in earnest. It's a new week, and you already have your quota."

Chinedu nodded.

"I stuck my neck out for you," Mr. Yusuf said as he stepped out. "There were dozens recommended for this post. All with stellar records. But I picked you. Like I said, I have a head for people. Don't disappoint me."

Chinedu assured Mr. Yusuf he wouldn't be a disappointment. "I'll have my first catch for you this week," he said. "I know just the person."

Mr. Yusuf nodded. "I knew you were the man for us."

He patted Chinedu, who bowed before returning to the lawyer. Mr. Yusuf whistled as he left.

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Mukoro and Chinedu sat drinking at a beer parlor at Montgomery, Yaba. Bottles of Alomo, Guilder, and small stout littered their table. Hunched over, they discussed dreams and ambitions, as fermented as the leftover alcohol in their bottles. They were seeking ways to escape the penury that clung to them, like paint on the wall, ever fading, but never quite gone. It clutched them with the tenacity of a wounded soldier behind Boko Haram lines, far from home, but unwilling to leave this world without a goodbye to his family.

"So, I let them extract her destiny as collateral for a loan of any amount I want?" Mukoro was asking.

"Not 'any' amount, but an amount not exceeding eight figures in naira. And that's after reading her destiny to ascertain its worth."

Mukoro rubbed his beard. "I see," he said thoughtfully.

Chinedu looked at him with shrewd eyes that retained their sharpness despite the numerous bottles of alcohol they had consumed. "You don't seem overly surprised by any of this?"

Mukoro shook his head. "I studied systems engineering. And my PhD was in soul mapping and interaction with spirit particles." He glanced at Chinedu before adding, "What do you think my research and projects are all about? You could say destiny led us here."

Mukoro leaned forward and continued. "My grandfather was a great Jazzman in his time. He was blind, but could see more clearly than those with two eyes. He could uncannily put together pieces of the unformed future. You know, that is what they do when they map the soul and read a person's destiny. The device they call a soultrifier can map what we now call spirit particles or what the rest of the world knows of as dark matter. The soultrifier is built to calculate the propensity of the soul, like a sort of advanced probability. If you want to simplify it, you can say it's a combination of very advanced possibility tied to your DNA structure and other things we don't yet understand. Kind of like how we know a fit person might go into sports, or a lonely person into arts or literature. The soultractor is the real breakthrough. It finds a way to extract the unique strands of each person's propensity and store it in a soul cube."

Mr. Mukoro stopped talking to take a pull of his beer. Chinedu called for a waiter.

"Two more bottles of big stout." When the waiter departed, Chinedu turned to Mukoro and asked, "So what does all this have to do with your grandfather?"

"Oh yes. I got caught up in explaining about the process and my work. I love to talk about my work with those who can listen. Anyway. My grandfather prophesied that I would give my child a great destiny. This was before my first degree, when I

didn't know anything about this. He used the word 'destiny,' in English. Even though he wasn't educated or spoke any language other than Urhobo."

Mukoro's eyes became distant, as if he could stare across time to the event of the prophecy's utterance. "My grandfather had never been wrong in such utterances before. I don't think this one will be wrong, either. That is why I'm so focused on my research. I want to leave a legacy for my child. I want to ensure she gets that promised destiny. This is for her, you understand? It's my destiny to grant her a great destiny. I must bequeath her more than was bequeathed on me. But I cannot do much as it is. It seems destiny cannot be realized without funds. I can't even get a reasonable job with my PhD, much less funding for my research. I can't apply for foreign grants with a project like this. It has only made headway here, because of our combination of science and spirituality. It took the work of the council of Dibias, Babalawos, and scientists to discern how to interact with the spirit particles. So I can't get funds from outside, as they would not think much of a project like this. But if I can get the loan from your bank to finish my research, I can leave something for Nyerhovwo, and fulfill my destiny to gift her a great destiny."

"I see," Chinedu said. "Not that I wish to make you question this, since it's my job to get people to take loans. But you are also my friend. Isn't the loan unnecessary? The breakthrough has been done already and monetized. Of what use is your research?"

Mukoro laughed until tears trickled from his eyes and he wiped them. "You should know that no research is ever finished. All the technology we have is still being improved on. And this is a new area. There's still a lot more to discover."

Chinedu smiled. "So I'll see you at the office tomorrow, then?"

"Yes. You said extracting the destiny doesn't hurt?"

"Yes, it doesn't hurt. It's just a net weight of probabilities and the person's propensity to achieve a thing. In the same way that being paralyzed doesn't kill."

"I know. I just want to confirm. And the destiny will be kept intact, returned and reintegrated with the source?"

"Of course, it will be returned and reintegrated once the loan is fully paid, along with interest."

"And it's legal for parents to take a loan with the destiny of a child, a minor?"

"Yes, although it's a legal grey area, as the law doesn't recognize the procedure yet. But the law is still catching up, so you have nothing to worry about. You cannot sin where there is no law. Parents and legal guardians can consent on behalf of their children. It's like taking your child for a bone marrow transplant."

"I'll talk to my wife about it tonight," Mukoro said, and frowned as if he hadn't been reassured by the idea that what he was doing was a sin, even if he wouldn't be held responsible.

Chinedu noticed the look on his face. "Remember you are doing this for her. And to fulfill your grandfather's prophecy."

"I know," Mukoro nodded.

Chinedu poured his remaining drink from the bottle and ordered three more bottles for Mukoro. Mukoro thanked him, took another long pull, and then asked, "Nothing more for you?"

"Naaah, I'm all right for now," Chinedu said. "I have to rise early for work tomorrow. I have to wake up by four and leave before five to beat Island traffic."

Mukoro rose to shake Chinedu's hand and see him off. "All right, good night."

"Don't forget to talk to madam about it this night," Chinedu called as he left.

Mukoro returned to his drink, his somber thoughts rising vampirelike, despite his efforts to bury them in ethanol.

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That night, Mukoro cuddled his wife Bianca. She snuggled into his arm.

"Was she asleep before you left her?" she asked.

"Yes. Her love for that story never stops her from falling asleep before the end." He chuckled, remembering his daughter's droopy eyelids closing as he read to her.

Bianca shook her head. "She'll only ever fall asleep when it's you reading. When I read to her, she stares at me with glittering eyes till the story is done. She trusts you."

Mukoro was silent, knowing where the talk was headed.

"I heard all you said before. I need to know that I can trust you to do right by her."

Mukoro sighed. "She's my daughter, too. And I love her. You know that."

"I know. You have been a good father to her." She paused a moment, then asked. "You say this mortgage of destiny won't hurt her?"

"No, it won't hurt her," he said. "The process doesn't hurt; it only dulls one's chances. It is a destiny, after all. I can't use mine because I need to be sharp to use the funds. And it can't be you either," he added, forestalling the question he knew she wanted to ask. "They won't take a middle-aged housewife's destiny. I know, sexist, but that's how it is. It has to be hers. As it is, what future does she have here?"

He waved at the dilapidated structure in which they lived. "Things aren't like in my time when education was government subsidized. Since the monetization of schooling, the university is beyond our reach. They say education is the future. And we can't afford to pay for a college degree. So what's a destiny without a future? This is for her." Then he whispered, "And for them," looking at his wife's stomach.

She turned to face him. "What do you mean by 'them,' papa Nyerhovwo?"

"Do you think I don't know you're pregnant?" He cupped her cheek gently. "I have known since you stopped asking for money for pads two months ago."

"I should have known that would give it away," she said. "I was just relieved to save you the expense."

"Well, there will be other expenses. And my on and off consulting job can't help us. I need to do this for them." He held her hands. "Let me save this family with this loan, with her help, I'll secure a future for her and her brother. But once I finish my project and have a bit of stability, I'll repay the loan. Then we can ensure a great destiny for them."

Bianca was quiet for a while, then said "Or sister."

He smiled and kissed her. "But we already have a girl."

"Well, boys are trouble."

"Good trouble."

"Like you, huh?" She jabbed him in the ribs.

He laughed. "I have to leave with her early in the morning to beat traffic. And you have to take permission for her absence to her school. So should we sleep now?" he asked with a slanted eyebrow.

"Did you also learn how to be so subtle at your PhD program?" she asked, pulling her shirt off, mounting him and kissing him deeply.

"I mean, it's not like you can get pregnant again," he said.

She leaned back, letting the sounds of joy that flittered from her and bounced off the walls bring a little blue to the cold yellow of the room.

\* \* \*

*3 years and 8 months later . . .*

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A Black Range Rover and a white 4matic Benz parked in front of a Chinese restaurant in Awolowo Road, Ikoyi. Mukoro climbed out of the Range Rover while Chinedu climbed out of the 4matic. They shook hands and were about to go into the eatery when Chinedu tapped Mukoro and said, "Let's talk in the car first. I have some sensitive information."



Mukoro nodded and opened the door of the Range Rover and they both stepped in and closed the door. The AC was running. Mr. Mukoro spoke first.

“There’s something wrong. The loan defaults in seven months, isn’t it?”

Chinedu nodded.

“I don’t understand why I’m unable to clear the interest, try as I might? There’s always something left, and the loan itself never goes down.”

Chinedu shrugged and said, “But you seem to be doing well.”

“Which isn’t the point,” Mukoro cut in harshly. “You know I want to clear the loan and recover something else more than money. Nyerhovwo is in secondary school and just wrote her Junior WAEC examination. In another three years, she will be looking at attending the university.”

“You have the funds for that, don’t you? And enough for Oghenemudia too, for that matter. How is he, by the way? And Madam?”

“They are fine,” Mukoro said perfunctorily, dismissing the question. “I’m not talking about any of that. I’m talking about Nyerhovwo. Her teachers report that she lacks interest in everything, even though her grades are middling and fine. And her eyes are always dead.”

Chinedu’s brows creased momentarily. Mukoro would not have noticed if he had not been watching for it.

“You know something of this, don’t you? And why my businesses seem to be doing well but never well enough to clear the loan?”

“I don’t . . .” Chinedu began.

Mukoro cut him off. “No, no, don’t do that, please.”

Chinedu sighed and looked Mukoro in the eyes before he began. “I turned a blind eye to a lot of things when I started, because I needed the money and the upgrade. But the truth is, I always knew something was off. The way I was chosen, the department, my handler. But I was hungry, and they knew it. Too hungry to ask questions, too hungry to think, or choose to do the right thing. Head of HR truly was a good judge of people. I think I’m basically a devil in a suit, sent to tempt the vulnerable for their destinies. I get the low and the desperate like myself and yourself.”

“The destinies,” Mukoro said, returning to the subject he desperately needed to discuss.

“They were never going to be given back,” Chinedu said. “Your businesses are monitored and sabotaged. Not enough for you to notice, but enough so you can’t repay the loan on time and the destinies become theirs. They are sold at ungodly amounts to powerful men who take them for themselves to enhance their chances at success, or gift them to their families. That’s why the rich and powerful in Nigeria are becoming richer and more powerful.”

Mukoro listened in silence. Chinedu said, “You knew this, didn’t you?”

“I began to piece it together recently. I suppose, like you, I always knew. But my poverty prevented me from thinking straight. The obfuscating green of the naira tempted my gaze away from the truth.”

“Your research?” Chinedu asked.

“I’ve finished it. The machine I built can map souls and extract destinies, just like the one at the bank. But mine is more energy efficient, as it runs on solar power. I tried to get investors or talk to people in government, but I met roadblocks at every turn. I couldn’t even register a company for it. I was blocked from Corporate Affairs Commission up.”

“This is a government enabled monopoly,” Chinedu said. “They don’t want competition. That’s why the rest of the world doesn’t know about it.” Chinedu lowered his voice and added, “If you push too closely, try to go to the press, or talk to too many people about this, you might wind up in a shallow grave somewhere.”

"Or an accident," Mukoro said calmly. He lit a cigarette and handed one to Chinedu who took it and lit it. Both men smoked in silence for a while.

"I can't let it go," Mukoro said. "It's my daughter's destiny."

"Don't be stupid," Chinedu said. "The powers that be . . ."

"I made a promise to my wife. I told her she could trust me. She did."

"You have a family now. Your son . . ."

"So what? I should sacrifice my daughter's destiny for the family? For my son?" Mukoro looked at Chinedu with wild, angry eyes. Chinedu sighed and resumed smoking. After a while they both finished.

"I am not nobody now, you know," Mukoro continued. "I know things. And I have power."

Chinedu shook his head. "Not compared to the people who control the bank. They are the same people who control Nigeria. The governors, senators, the cabals behind the president."

Chinedu opened the door, but did not get out. "I've been looking for a way to quit. Being a headhunter for destinies is taking its toll on me. I just haven't found a way to do so safely. I'll be heading home to my fiancée now. See that you return to your family, okay? Don't do anything rash."

Mukoro said nothing in response. Chinedu closed the door with a sigh, walked into his car, and drove off.

\* \* \*

*Eight months later . . .*

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Mukoro walked into the AUB head office and was led to the Department of Soul measurement and extraction. He had an appointment. It was the appointed time . . . for him . . . For Nyerhovwo. He had a debt to pay. Or not pay, rather. Some debts you paid by not paying. He had dined with the devil. And it didn't matter how long the spoon. Silver bullets kill werewolves, it is said. But Nigerian devils ate silver and chewed their way up the spoon, to your fingertips, then down your hands, till they licked your brains off their own fingers.

He looked at his Audemar. It was such an expensive timepiece, but despite the costliness, the glowing jewels, his time was up and he couldn't buy more. It was eleven o'clock. Fittingly the eleventh hour.

He walked into Chinedu's office. The lawyer—the devil's advocate—was there, along with another man, probably Chinedu's handler. They were there to oversee the handover.

Chinedu said some words to Mukoro, but he couldn't hear them. The words fluttered past him. He caught some words. "Defaulted on the loan . . . destiny is forfeit . . . sign here . . . Mr. Mukoro. Sign?" There was a paper in front of him. They handed a pen to him.

He looked at them and smiled. He would sign for them in blood. He stood up and tore his jacket open. "When you sell your soul, or another's, you should always sign in blood. I'll sign with my blood, since I made the trade."

The occupants of the room gawked at him. Lining his jacket were a number of wires running into a device sewed into his coat. He pulled out a detonator. The occupants of the room all backed away.

"Bomb?" Chinedu's handler queried.

"No, it's not a bomb," Mukoro said, spitting. "Not the type that takes lives, anyway. Just the type that takes destinies."

The handler raised an eyebrow. "What do you want? More money? You can relax. We have money."

"I don't want money. I want my daughter's destiny. I knew you would never give back what you stole. So once I confirmed, eight months ago, I started reworking my



prototype. It will rip the destiny from everyone within a ten mile radius and integrate them with the operator of the device.”

He turned to Chinedu. “I told you it is my destiny to gift my child a great destiny. And I will not be denied by thieves and saboteurs.”

He screamed at them. The lawyer backed off.

“Yes,” Mukoro continued. “When I activate my device, it will rip the destinies off everyone in this den of thieves and integrate them in me. Including my child’s. I can ask for just hers, but you all don’t deserve what you have. Thieves!”

The handler rushed at Mukoro and he pushed the button on his detonator. The air came alive, crackling with electricity. Thunder boomed outside and it began to rain. A blast tore through the room, mini-blasts occurring around everyone as their destinies were ripped from them and drawn to Mukoro. His eyes blazed with each destiny he integrated, while those he took their destinies from fell with dead eyes. A dozen, two, three, four dozen destinies and Mukoro’s eyes glowed. Then his device overheated and burst into flames. He ripped it off and tossed it away.

Chinedu, the lawyer, and the handler stood before him with dead eyes. Mukoro turned to them.

“I know you pressed the security button and the police will be here soon,” he said, pulling a gun. They all backed off.

“Have you heard the saying that destiny can be delayed, but not denied? A seemingly nonsensical phrase, but true nonetheless. Destiny is like energy; it can be transferred, but not destroyed. And it can’t be transferred permanently. Its unique code is tied to the original owner’s DNA. So when it’s not gifted to anyone and the current holder dies, it goes back to its original source if they are still alive. When I die, all the destinies I have taken will go back to their owners, if I don’t gift them to anyone else. You will have your sordid destinies back.” He paused. “And my daughter, too. That’s all I wanted. I am after what is mine”

“What is yours?” the handler asked. “We gave you the loan. You defaulted. You have no right.”

Mukoro pointed the gun at the handler and he backed away.

Just then, the police—three men and a woman—burst into the room. Time slowed. Mukoro smiled at the handler, who was waving at the SARS unit not to shoot. But Mukoro knew. The Nigerian police would not refrain from shooting an armed man pointing a gun at a senior bank manager. You could trust the police to do their jobs the one time they shouldn’t.

Mukoro heard the shots of multiple guns going off. His body hit the ground. The bullets had hit him faster than it had taken the sound to travel to his ears, breaking him, along with the sound barrier. His vision dimmed. The handler was screaming for an ambulance and for a destiny extraction machine before he died. Mukoro willed himself to die; his destiny. He closed his eyes permanently and fulfilled it.

\* \* \*

*2 weeks later . . .*

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Chinedu sat with Nyerhovwo and her mother. The relatives had all traveled back to the village after the funeral and they were alone in their apartment in Lekki.

“The bank reached out,” Chinedu said. “I am no longer with them. But I agreed to liaison with the family on their behalf.” He did not say that he had negotiated his release by promising to smooth things over and ensure the Mukoro family’s silence. “They are offering to discharge the debt of Nyerhovwo’s destiny and also pay a huge compensation for the accident of Mr. Mukoro’s death.”

“I still don’t understand how they can mistake a respectable businessman like Mukoro for a robber,” Mama Nyerhovwo lamented.

"You know how stupid Nigerian police can be . . ."

As Chinedu glibly droned on, Nyerhovwo got up and left them to it. Her brother Oghenemudiaga was asleep, and the adults were happy to see her go, not wanting to have such difficult conversations around her.

She went upstairs to her father's room, then to his private study. She rifled through the papers scattered on his desk, pulled out one and scanned it briefly. It read "Destiny extraction and replication." She knew this already. Her father's last work was not just about extracting destinies forcefully. It was also about replicating energy signatures and mimicking them. When he died and the originals went back to their sources, the copies stayed or came to her, his closest DNA match. So now she had the destiny of a couple of hundred people. Her father had gifted her a great destiny, as he had always wanted.

She closed her eyes, letting the thoughts and desires wash through her. She opened her eyes, and they glowed fiercely. Some things pushed her from within. She had to finish her father's work. She let the thoughts and visions drive her as she began to look over his research.

As she read, her eyes closed, but her reading did not stop. Voices whispered the words to her. The voices were the physical manifestation of possibilities that had torn a path through other realities to find their way to her. She already knew the words. Other voices whispered to her, increasing in tempo and numbers: "We are legion. We bring you your great destiny."

She dropped the book and held her head in agony. A great destiny did not mean a good one for the holder, or a sane one for that matter. She willed the voices away. They grew silent for a moment, then issued from her as colors: violet, violet-grey, then purple—dark manifestations of all that was in her. The colors gathered in the room above her, then merged together, changing and expanding into a black, torrential darkness that gathered around her. She looked at it with eyes wide, and through this open doorway to her soul, the colors rushed furiously into her.

She closed her eyes. When she opened them, they did not seem like the eyes of a twelve-year-old. They were deep and mysterious, shining with a dark, speckled light of unspoken things, of a great and powerful force waiting to be unleashed on a greedy, wicked, and unsuspecting world. But her look contained something even more wicked. This destiny would not be denied.