

After the End—the Great Change—the laws of physics no longer apply, barriers between worlds have disintegrated, and children (called meta-humans) are born with strange abilities. Dikéogu, a sixteen-year-old Nigerian and a fledging rainmaker who can control the weather, has escaped slavery and is in Timia, a city in Niger, the country directly north of Nigeria.

• TUMAKI •
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Dikéogu Audio File Series
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Current Location: Unknown Region, Niger
Weather: 36° C (98° F), N.I.U.F. (Not Including Unpredictable Factors)

This audio file has been automatically translated from the Igbo language.

Tumaki

I found the electronics shop two blocks from my hotel. All I needed to do was go in the opposite direction of the market.

The small store was packed with all sorts of appliances and devices. A few were from Ginen, like the solar powered e-legba that was part machine and part plant and the very small unhealthy-looking glow lily. Most everything else was very much from earth. Thin laptops, standard e-legbas, all kinds of coin drives, batteries, and hardware like bundles of wiring, piles of microprocessors, digicards, and every kind of tool imaginable. It was a tinker's dream. It was my nightmare. Way too cramped. I planned to be quick.

To make things worse, the place was air-conditioned. The minute I walked in, my skin instantly started to protest. I wrapped my hands around

my arms as I stepped up to the counter. A woman stood behind it. At least I thought it was a woman. I'll never get used to burkas. Maybe it's the southeastern Nigerian in me but those things are creepy.

About fifty percent of the women in Niger wore them. Most are made out of stiff cotton and a cotton screen covers the women's faces. You can barely see their eyes. These women, especially when you see them walking down the street at dusk or dawn, scare the hell out of me. They look like ghosts, all silent and mysterious. No, I've never liked burkas.

"Yes?" she asked. Okay, so I had been standing there staring. I never knew whether I was supposed to speak to these women or not. And since I couldn't see their faces, I was even less sure.

"I . . ."

She sighed loudly, rolled her eyes and held out a hand. It was a careful hand. My mother would have described it as the hand of a surgeon. Her nails were cut very short, the palm of her hand slightly calloused. Her fingers were long and they moved with a precise care that reminded me of a snail's antenna.

"Hand it here," she said.

I gave her my broken e-legba.

She turned it over, tapping the "on" button. The damn thing only whimpered. Never have I been so embarrassed. All e-legbas do that when they're broken. There are different whimpers, weeps, moans, or groans depending on the type of breakage. What kind of obnoxious engineer programmed them to do that? It's bad enough that the thing is broken. Why should a machine act like a whiny child?

"What'd you do to it?" she asked. As if my e-legba was some living creature.

"It's a long story," I said.

She turned it over some more between her antenna-like fingers and laughed. "This is practically a toy," she said. "This is your only personal device?"

"It's a prime e-legba," I insisted, indignant. "An electrical god of the best kind."

She laughed her condescending laugh again. "A lesser god, if a god at all. With a weak solar sucker, sand grains in the fingerboard, a faulty *and* cracked screen, and probably a smashed-up microprocessor."

It gave a sad pained groan as if to stress her points. I wanted to grab and hurl it across the room. *What do I need it for anyway?* I thought. But in the

back of my head, I knew I wanted to watch my mother's news program. And I had a copy of *My Cyborg Manifesto* on it, a much-needed Hausa/Arabic dictionary, and it picked up a fairly decent hip-hop station whose signal seemed to remain strong wherever I went.

"I can fix it, though," she said after a while.

"You?"

She looked up, her dark brown eyes full of pure irritation. I stepped back, holding my hands up. "I'm sorry," I said. "I . . . my mouth is what it is."

"It's not your mouth that bothers me," she said. "It's your brain. My *mother* owns this shop. Not my father. Does that surprise you, too?"

I didn't respond. It did surprise me.

She nodded. "At least you're honest." She paused cocking her head as she looked at me. Then she brought my e-legba to her face for a closer look. As she inspected it, she talked to me. "My mother's an electrician. She taught me everything I know. My father's an imam. He tries to teach me all he knows, but there are some things that I cannot digest." She laughed to herself and looked up at me. "You're not Muslim, are you?"

"No."

She grunted something that sounded like, "Good."

"But you are, right?" I asked.

"Sort of," she said. "But not really."

"Then why do you wear that damn sheet?" I asked.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Because you don't want to," I said.

"You don't even know me."

"Do I need to? A sheet is a sheet." I saw her eyes flash with anger. I kept talking anyway. "Doesn't matter if you look like a giant toad with sores oozing puss. You shouldn't . . ."

She pointed a long finger in my face like a knife. "You have got to be . . ." She stopped. I saw where her eyes flicked to. The black tattoos on the bridge of my nose from my time as a slave on the coca farms. I could tell she got it. She understood my obsession with free will.

"My mother and I are electricians and this town is dominated by patriarchal New Tuareg ways and even stronger patriarchal Hausa, Old Tuareg, and Fulani ways. People here still . . . expect things. My mother and I play along. My father, well, he prefers us to play along, too. Everyone's happy."

"Except you have to live under a sheet."

“Business is business,” she said with a shrug. “It’s not so bad. I get to be an electrician who is female.” She looked me in the eye. “Plus, sometimes I don’t want people looking at me.”

That was the excuse my close friend Ejii often gave whenever she wore her burka. I didn’t buy it from Ejii and I didn’t buy it from this girl.

“Well, other people’s problems should be their business, not yours.”

“In an ideal world, certainly,” she said. “So can you pay?”

“Yes.”

“In full?”

“Yes.”

She paused, obviously deciding whether she could trust me. She brought out a black case and opened it. Her tools were shiny like they were made for surgery on humans not machines. She started to repair my e-legba right there. It was a simple gesture, but it meant a lot to me. She’d noticed my tattoos, considered them, yet she trusted me. She trusted me.

Minutes later, a woman came in also draped in a black burka. Her mother. I was about two feet away from her daughter. It was too late to step back from the counter.

“*As-salaamu Alaikum,*” the woman said to me, after a moment’s pause.

“*Wa ’Alaykum As-Salām,*” I responded, surprised. She glanced at my tattoos but that was all.

People came in and out of the store. Her mother helped customers, sold items, chatted with them. But I was focused on the electrician fixing my e-legba. I ignored my claustrophobia and the freeze of the air-conditioning. I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to move.

She had my e-legba in pieces within three minutes. She tinkered, fiddled, replaced and tinkered some more. After about a half hour, she looked up at me and said, “Give me a day with this. I need to buy two new parts.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

From that day on, that store became my second home. Her name was Tumaki.

Poetry

My e-legba was nothing to Tumaki. She could take apart and rebuild the engine of a truck, a capture station, a computer! She could even fix some of the Ginen technology. You should have seen what she did to that pathetic glow lily that I saw the first day I was in the shop. She got that plant to

do the opposite of die. Once, she tried to explain to me her theory of why nuclear weapons and bullets no longer worked on earth. She started talking physics and chemistry. I remember nothing but the intense look on her face.

She was a year older than me and planned to eventually attend university. I wasn't sure if she liked or just tolerated me. When I was around her, I couldn't stop talking.

"We just use pumpkin seeds," she told me one day while she worked on an e-legba. We were talking about how to make egusi soup.

"See. That's where you people go wrong when you make the soup," I said.

"Us people?" she said, as she unscrewed some tiny screw.

"You people. Yeah. You know, those of you who live here in Timia," I said. I shrugged. "Anyway, Nigerians call it egusi soup for a *reason*. Because we use egusi seeds. Goat meat, chicken, stock fish, fresh greens, peppers, spices, and ground *egusi* seeds. What they serve in the restaurants here is a disgrace."

"Fine, we'll call it pumpkin soup, then," she mumbled, as she placed another screw. "Makes no difference to me."

"Ah ah, I miss the real thing, *o*," I said, thinking of home. "With pounded yam and a nice glass of Sprite. Goddamn. You people don't know what you're missing." I wished I could shut up. I didn't want her asking me any new questions about home. All I'd told her was that I was from Nigeria.

She only glared at me and loudly sucked her teeth. I grinned sheepishly. I was just talking, totally drunk on her presence. No matter how much rubbish I talked, though, she never got distracted enough to lose track of what she was doing. She could listen to me and work on a computer like she had two brains. Tumaki was genius smart. But she was also very lonely, I think. I figured this might have been why she didn't tell me to get lost. Maybe it was also why only two weeks after I met her, she did something very unlike her.

I was half asleep when I heard the banging at my hotel room door. It was around two a.m. I don't know how I heard it, as I was outside in deep REM sleep on the balcony. It was rare for me to sleep this well.

When the banging on the door didn't stop, I got up, stumbled across the room, no shirt on, mouth all gummy, crust in my eyes, smelling of outside and my own night sweat, barely coherent. I opened the door and came face