

Season of Crimson Blossoms

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| Nigeria |

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He scaled her fence yet again, as he had done twice already, at a quarter past

eleven because he knew, by careful consideration, that if she had not gone to the madrasa, she would be alone. Having gone round to the front, he peeked from behind the wall and saw her watering the beds of petunia that had not been there the last time he had taken the liberty to invite himself. He watched her scooping water from a yellow bowl and sprinkling it on the plants. She put down the bowl and straightened, one hand on her back, the water dripping from the fingers of the other. She turned slowly and their eyes met. He came out from behind the wall and she tentatively threw an arm across her breasts and immediately put it down.

‘Good morning.’ His voice faltered, but he bowed briefly and held up his hands in front of him.

She placed a hand over her thumping heart.

‘I, uh, I just brought back your phone, you understand. As promised.’ He gently reached into

his pocket, his other hand still held up, and pulled out the phone. He held it up for her and she considered it for a while. Finally, she nodded. He moved forward, slowly, extending the phone to her.

‘Sorry about... everything.’ He watched her run her thumb over the phone as if to reassert her ownership, marking her possession like an animal would with its scent. ‘I don’t usually do this, you know, going into peoples’ houses... you understand. None of my guys will ever bother you again, *insha Allah*.’

She looked up at him, and because she was thinking of Yaro, there was a watery glint in her eyes. ‘Thank you.’

He nodded and turned to leave.

‘Wait.’

He turned to face her.

‘Your name? You didn’t tell me.’

‘Reza. They call me Reza.’

‘Reza?’ She rolled the word on her tongue like one savouring the taste of a new meal. ‘You must have a real one?’

He had had a real name, once. His lisping teacher with narrow shoulders used to call it every morning when he took attendance. ‘Hassan Babale.’ The name sounded like an echo from his memory. ‘But everyone calls me Reza now.’

‘Hassan. I will remember that.’

He nodded, mumbled something and made to turn again. She was fidgeting. Then she ran her fingers over her temples.

'Would you like to . . . have some water or something, I mean. I'm all alone, here . . . for now.' She was looking down at the damp bed of petunias Hadiza had so lovingly planted to add colour to her mother's austere yard that hosted little birds at sunrise. That was the precise moment, Binta would reflect later, that the petals of her life, like a bud that had endured half a century of nights, began to unfurl.

A snake can shed its skin, but it will still remain a snake

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hen Reza slipped his hand under her wrapper, he discovered, much to his

surprise, that the clump of ancient hair he had encountered the first time was gone. She was amused by his startled expression and offered the faintest of resistance when he undid the wrapper and peered into her. She allowed him to sit her on the cushioned stool before the dressing table. When he knelt before her, she turned her face away and pressed her thighs together. But once he prised them apart, gently, and snuggled between them, putting his tongue to her clit, she held his head of miniscule anthills and quaked. And because they were alone in the house, because she had always wanted to, because she could not stop herself, she moaned. With his tongue, he unlocked something deep within her. She soared with tears streaming down her face.

When they were lying on the bed, still unable to look each other in the eye, Binta, her back to him already, moved further away. 'I am not a *'yar iska.'*

Condition frowned. 'Well, I never said you were. I think very highly of you, you understand?'

'I don't want you making assumptions about me because of what had happened. I am a decent, respectable woman, you know. I have never been with any man other than my husband, God rest his soul.'

'I understand that, trust me. I would never think of you in such light.' He sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. 'I don't understand how this thing happened?'

She sighed. 'Since the last time you came and . . . I have been thinking people could look at me and see fornication written across my forehead. Or perceive its smell on me.'

He chuckled. 'You smell nice. And there is nothing written on your forehead, you understand.'

'No, you don't understand. You may be used to such things. I am not. The first few days, I was overcome by guilt and shame. I couldn't attend classes at the madrasa for fear people would know what had happened. And when you didn't come I thought you despised me for what had happened, what I had let happen. And then a week passed and I thought oh, well perhaps I wasn't even good enough for him. What could he possibly do with a hag like me.'

'No, no, you are not a hag, stop saying that.' He crossed the bed and put an arm around her. 'And I didn't despise you. I thought you despised me for taking advantage of you and I had no idea what to expect if I came back. I didn't plan for any of this to happen, you understand.'

'No one must ever know about this.'

'They won't hear it from me. I promise.'

She sighed. 'So, why do they call you Condition anyway?'

He scoffed and moved away from her, turning his back to her. 'It was a long time ago. I was young then.'

She turned and looked at his tight muscles and saw how snugly his skin suited him, reminding her how young he was, and how old she had become. She drew the sheets over her bosom.

'I have many brothers, from the same father, you understand.' He cleared his throat, as if to cough away the dust the years have cast on these unvisited memories. For a while he was silent.

'They always made fun of me, because my . . . because my . . . because I was different, you understand.'

She reached out and patted him on the back, tracing the scythe-shaped scars on his back.

'They always said bad things about . . . you know, they were always saying bad things, you understand. So one day, when we closed from school, Bulama came to say things to me. He is older than me and he was always picking fights because . . . he was always fighting me because I allowed him. But I had had some grass then, my first time, and I was feeling . . . you know, bold, you understand. So I gave him a good beating. When he was down I shouted: No condition is permanent.' And he chuckled.

She was surprised by the ease with which she laughed. 'So that was how.'

When he turned and smiled, she saw, for the first time, how handsome he was. They looked into each other's face, their eyes saying the things their hearts were thinking, things they would not voice.

Binta looked away first, thinking how insane it was that she had just slept with someone who reminded her of her first son, who was probably younger than Yaro had been when he died. She covered her face with her palms. 'How far did you go, with school I mean?'

He sighed. 'I was expelled in my final year in secondary school.'

'Why?'

'I broke a teacher's nose.' He shook his head sadly. 'He wanted to flog me on the assembly ground because they found me dealing weeds to some students.'

'So, what stopped you from going back and finishing up somewhere else?'

'Too much metal in my head, too much knife fights, too much weed, too much . . . stupidity.' He tapped his temple with his finger. 'Ten years is a long time. There's too much smog in my head now, you understand.'

When her silence, so profound, resonated with him, he glanced over his shoulder and found her with her palms over her face.

'Are you all right?'

She could not tell him that some of her tears were for him. But that most of it, the ones gilded with reminiscence, were for Yaro. So she sniffled and wiped her face with the bed sheet. 'You could always go back.' Her voice was thick with remorse. 'I went back. You could do it too. You are a man; it would be easier for you.'

'You?'

'I was taken out of school to marry a man I barely knew, Allah rest his soul. After my first two sons, I told him there was an adult education class in the neighbourhood and I wanted

to join. He was reluctant at first, but I persuaded him. I studied while raising my children. I had my daughters Hureira, who is married now in Jos and Zainab, who died at birth, and then I had Hadiza. All while in school for my teacher's certificate. I was a primary school teacher for about twenty years in Jos. I had to quit when my son relocated me here.'

He looked at her with renewed admiration. 'A *gaishe ki*, Hajiya.' He tapped his right fist in his left palm, offering her the salutation of the '*yan daba* thugs.

Binta threw her head back and laughed.

He watched her laughing, and wondered what his mother's laughter would sound like, or if she ever laughed like this. When the sheet she was holding against her bosom slipped, exposing the mounds of her breast, he wondered why he was sexually attracted to a woman who was older than his mother.
