

The Morning the River Came Back

The alarm never rang. It didn't need to. Amara woke to the sound of frogs. She lay still beneath her woven cotton sheet. There were dozens of frogs - maybe even hundreds - calling from the restored wetlands behind her house. Her grandmother used to tell her that when she was a girl, the frogs lived in the fields and the wetlands of the farm behind her house and sang in the mornings like this. Then they stopped. For forty years, they stopped. Now they were back.

Amara opened her eyes. Outside her bedroom window, pale gold light poured into the house through the reed-woven blinds. She was twenty-six years old. She knew that her life had never known a world without the Great Reckoning. She had grown up in the evacuation camps near Mombasa. But that was another life. This was her life in 2047 in Kisumu. She pushed herself up from the bed.

The kitchen was filled with the aroma of the morning's sorghum porridge. Her mother, Zawadi, stood in the kitchen window overlooking the garden, her tea in both of her hands as she thoughtfully considered something in her mind. "The tomatoes need harvesting today," her mother said. "I know. Jabari's team is coming at eight."

The garden contained tomato plants, maize, and nitrogen-fixing cowpeas, all planted in the same way that the land restoration collective had planted them many years ago. The bees were buzzing in the garden, and the solar irrigation line drew water from the constructed wetland in the field. At the other end of the garden stood a fig tree that she had planted herself eight years ago when she was eighteen years old and had come to Kenya as part of the Youth Regreening Corps. It was taller than the house. Amara felt a small pride whenever she looked at the tree.

It took her twenty minutes to walk to the cooperative to pick up the farming seeds they needed to begin the planting season. She walked slowly on the path to the cooperative, like her supervisor, Kamau, had taught her when she first began working for the Restoration Service. Walk as you belong here. Not like a visitor. Not like someone who is just passing through this area. Like someone the land recognizes and accepts into the ecosystem of this farm.

As she walked to the cooperative, she noticed new leaves on the yellow-barked acacia tree growing near the path. The stream next to her farm had more water than she had seen the day before due to the rains that fell from the highlands earlier that week. And perched in one of the reeds was a yellow weaver bird, upside-down and focused on whatever project it was working on.

She stopped walking. She watched the bird. It did not care about her presence. It was entirely occupied with the project it had spent its life doing since becoming a yellow weaver bird millions of years ago. There was something complete about the bird that made Amara feel something that she could not quite name. It was not happiness, nor was it peace. Still, there was a sense of rightness about it. As if everything was as it should be.

She thought of the camps, the dust, the plastic sheeting in the hot Kenya wind... She remembered a boy who once asked her what a forest smelled like, and how she had no answer he

could understand. There had been no shade there, no birds, only heat pressing down and the sound of tarps snapping in the wind. Even now, she could not forget how quiet it had been.

She continued on her walk to the cooperative. Twelve people were inside the cooperative's greenhouse. Jabari, the cooperative's leader, was waving at her. "Amara! The river gauge has finally reached four-point-two meters!"

Four point two meters was the threshold that they had all worked towards and achieved for the first time since the Great Reckoning. The reforestation efforts that they had put in place for the watershed upriver had begun to show results. "We should tell the elders," she said. "They already know," he said. "I called Mama Akinyi. She cried."

Mama Akinyi was one of the area's oldest women and one of the first to begin the conservation of the land. For so many years, it was thought that the land would never be able to recover from the damage of the Great Reckoning, and how the farmers had ignored the land and begun to sandblast it. When she cried, she was crying not out of joy or relief at the conservation efforts. She was crying out of relief that the land had finally begun to heal. That it was something they had been fighting so hard for - and for which they had given up hope - that it had finally come to pass.

That evening, when the sun dipped beneath the hills outside of Kisumu's village, the community gathered once more on the banks of their river.

Someone brought a drum. Someone brought their grandmother. The children ran along the edge of the river, shrieking with joy at the sound of their friends playing nearby. The old women sat in a row along a chitenge cloth and watched the setting sun illuminate the river's surface. There was no speech that night. There was no need for speech.

Amara sat with her feet in the river's water. It was cold and clear and made a sound like breathing as it ran over smooth stones in its bed. She thought of the long and difficult path to where she was today. She thought of the displacement, the grief that followed, and how the farmers had pushed too far too soon with their land-clearing efforts. She thought of the children in the camps who had never seen a tree. She looked up to the fig tree on the hillside, then to the river.

The frogs had started to call once more.

Amara smiled.

Good.

Good.

Keep going.

Keep going.