

CHAPTER ONE

January of 2044 did not disappoint as I walked through the open Artemis High School gate and into the main hallway. The heat was intense and served as a reminder that wearing all-black clothing during Harmattan was a dumb idea. Hadn't my eyes just escaped the fierce dust thrown about by the hot winds? So what... I loved my black leather jacket. It made me stand out from the rest of my peers. Well, more than I already did. But this was a way I controlled.

As the students left the assembly hall and moved to their classes, their gazes turned toward me. They watched me walk through the hallway. This daily routine had become insufferable forever ago. And as usual, I had a simple goal; weave through the students and get to class unscathed, easy peasy.

"Hey, sorceress," Progress, a classmate of mine shouted from behind me. I facepalmed, my only goal destroyed with two words.

"Scarlet Witch, where are you going?" another bastard taunted.

"Wait for me, Jean Grey," Progress called. I answered him with an eye roll and a loud hiss of distaste. "Why so angry? You two aren't that different." His voice, cloying, was meant to win my attention, but I ignored his syrupy trap. Besides, Jean's hair, for anyone who knew the character, was long, luxurious, and orange. Mine was short, fluffy, and brown with an auburn streak down and along the sides. It could be that he was comparing my powers to hers, but that was just as dumb. He might as well compare the hills of Benin City to Mount Everest. I turned away, indifferent.

Large fingers seized my hand with another hand pulling at my jacket. In that second, Progress stood so close to me that I could smell his breath. My legs trembled as he gave me a devilish smirk that matched the look in his brown eyes.

"What am I thinking?" His eyes narrowed to slits.

My cheeks heated with embarrassment. I knew better than to give in to his taunts, but a direct hand touch was an auto-trigger for my powers. Why had I tuned out my mother's constant reminders to buy gloves? So now, because of my stubborn nature, my mind went into his and what I saw brought bile up to the back of my throat. Did all the guys here think such dirty and despicable things about me, or was he, hopefully, a one-off?

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

“Yuck!” I yanked free of his hold.

All the boys laughed except for one. He and I never spoke, and I didn't even know his name, but honestly, I was grateful to see him. He gave me faith that not every boy here was an asshole or a bully. But the image in Progress's head played over and over in mine. That bile hadn't left my mouth, and if I couldn't throw up all over Progress on the spot. Why couldn't I have received the gift of disappearing as my superpower? I never truly relished the power of knowing others' thoughts unwillingly since the moment I first did it four years ago. I shamefully closed my eyes as the boys' laughter continued.

“Yeah, that's how I'm going to handle your magic oranges,” he told me.

I glared at him. “I will end you.” Water was already rising in my eyes, which I strove to hold back. My tears would only fuel these bastards' cruelty.

“Are you going to choke us all with your magic, Miss Reho?” one guy taunted.

“Oh, how I wish I could.” I turned around and headed to class, wiping the little tears in my eyes and bowing my head in shame. Out of nowhere, something hard hit the back of my head. Burning pain radiated down my neck. Through gritted teeth, I cursed, “Assholes!”

“Your magic didn't let you catch that?” one asked, setting off loud, howling laughter.

“If your powers can't tell you who threw it, you'd better fight all of us, witch,” another said as the snickering continued.

To save face, and to prevent getting in trouble with the school staff who equally hated me, I refused to face them. Instead, I flipped my middle finger at those assholes and walked away.

Having superpowers? A nightmare. Especially in Nigeria, a country that has kept everything traditional and religious no matter the century. Because of that, my powers brought nothing but torment from my classmates, especially the guys, who all loved to call me names just because I have abilities they don't, and won't, try to understand. I've heard them call me Sorceress, Alien R, Madam Koi, Scarlet Witch, Jean Grey, Amadioha's daughter, Obinrin Bilisi, and Iju mmadu. Despite not speaking Yoruba or Igbo, I understood what the last two words meant. Both were ways to call

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

someone a devil. Ironic that the only two things I knew in another Nigerian language, besides my native Urhobo, were insults. No, my classmates were not big hero fans.

I feared the person I would become if my powers developed into something that could do more than detect thoughts and emotions. Imagine I had the power to choke with my mind. Those who mocked me would be gasping for air. I'd show them what an angry sixteen-year-old could do.

I entered the classroom, which was typical of all the classrooms here, and scanned my fingerprint at a small station by the door. I then walked to the back of the classroom to sit at a table where I'd be mostly immune from taunts. Our biology lesson would begin when the teacher entered. Teachers came and went often enough for me to have no clue who this lady was. And she never told us. We just called teachers, Teachers.

Even the ID she wore on a lanyard just had a barcode with the title TEACHER above it. And they called each of us, Student. If needed, a teacher might embellish 'student' with whatever that student was wearing. Today, I'd be Student-in-the-Black-Leather-Jacket. But the truth was, even teachers I'd never met knew exactly who and what I was. And not one of them started with a smile in my direction.

Our teacher wore a headset and sat at a desk behind a thick, bullet-proof, transparent wall from floor to ceiling. Speakers mounted up high and outside of the wall allowed us to hear her. Any needed materials were passed from the teacher to us, or from us to the teacher, through a part of the wall that was a large, transparent, bullet-proof drawer that allowed only one side to be open at a time. The teacher had come in through a door on her side of the wall, and she would exit that way, too. That door led down a hallway inaccessible to the students.

2044 had gone way beyond metal detectors and teachers carrying guns. Students were practically feral and often had guns made out of materials metal detectors didn't give a beep at. Pat-downs were deemed inappropriate by the PTA, so we were basically on our own. Why we still went to school, or why violent students still showed up, I had no idea. But here we were, and here I was, snug in the back of biology class. And since most of these teachers had no problem showing me how much they disliked me, or even hated me, I didn't mind that wall between us at all.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

We had a much-needed break after class ended. I'd had enough of dissecting fake SynFrogs and listening to our teacher's high-pitched sneer. He kept on rambling about how it was obvious our brains had already been thoroughly dissected because not one of us examined our SynFrog successfully. So yes, this break was much appreciated.

I looked down the hall for Nora, my only friend, whose class was SS2 Green, and not far from where I was in SS2 Blue. These labels meant nothing until it was time to segregate--I mean, properly arrange the students. Blue was for life sciences. Red for physical sciences and Green for humanities and arts. Unfortunately, boys crowded Nora's class, and I had taken enough insults earlier. I decided to head for the girls' bathroom instead. It was basically the only place I could find any solace. I gripped a sink until the cold porcelain reminded me to chill out. Plotting to hurt my tormentors was not a good look for my soul.

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I gathered up my courage and left the bathroom, returning to SS2 Green. Turned out, Nora wasn't even there. A couple of the students willing to talk to me told me she was absent. My powers didn't work over long distances, so I couldn't have known, nor did I know exactly where she was at this exact moment. Home, I guessed.

Another odd thing about school, which wasn't all that bad, was that we had hardly any homework.

Whatever we were required to do was super easy to finish and was sent through our laptops.

With school over and no Nora, I headed for my bike locked up outside. Of course, when I got to it, someone was around to say something snarky. This time, the girls had joined in on the name-calling.

"Why ride a bike when you can just fly home like other witches!"

Another girl explained saying, "I'm sure her bike flies only at night. That's typical witch-bitch stuff."

I tried to ignore them, but the girls snickered so loudly I that couldn't help but glance over at them and see their smug looks. Unbelievable.

I quickly put on my helmet and rode out. I hated the taunting, but I'd rather be called a witch instead of an "experiment." If they ever found out that that's all I am, some whack job's twisted science experiment, the taunting would be a million times worse. And, what made it worse, was that that "whack job" was my mother. But she wouldn't have done any of this if it hadn't been for fascists.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

Fascists had taken over Nigeria's main ally, Ghana, and had started a pointless war no one wanted, a war that we still feel the consequences from sixteen years after it had officially ended. They had unironically named it the Jollof War because Nigerians and Ghanaians have always argued about Jollof rice. It had never made any sense to me because everyone knows Nigeria has superior rice. So, because of that war, my dad went to the front lines and his legs were maimed for life. His legs were made bionic, but it hasn't been as cool as it sounds. They didn't function as promised, but they were better than his injured legs.

My mother, like I said, created me with my weird powers. She was a scientist working on the Macaroni Project to make super soldiers. It was a strange name for sure, but my mom explained that the theory of the serum used to create those enhanced fighters was first developed in an Italian restaurant over bowls of chifferi with cannellini beans and tuna. Chifferi is basically elbow pasta, aka, macaroni. But Mom wasn't going to let those soldiers have all the fun. It had been mostly her hard work, so she took the serum, too. And that was about the time she found out the equations she had been given to develop were off, like deadly off. The serum killed. If only the military had allowed animal testing first, but they had insisted that all testing had to go straight to humans. Mom had said it was because they didn't want the threat of any crazy strong and otherwise enhanced animals possibly escaping into the public. That would've been the kind of PR impossible to come back from, especially if those super animals killed any civilians. The soldiers had already signed their lives away, so they were legally expendable, ethics be damned.

How she survived while the others died came as no surprise to her superiors when they found out she was pregnant with me. Because the only difference between her and the others was all of the pregnancy hormones coursing through her system. I was surprised they didn't make her create synthetic versions of those hormones to add to her serum, to try it all again. But the war was over, their deaths covered up, and the experimenting ended. Anyway, I saved her life, hence my name, Reho, which is 'hero' scrambled. I was her last, and only, pregnancy. Not long after, Audrey Omoye, Nigeria's first female president and war leader, banned her from all future military activities.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

My mother knew I was special when she first saw my hair color—a shade unnatural among Nigerian babies. However, I displayed no signs of having powers until I was twelve years old. Probably because of hormones again. I developed the ability to tell when people felt terrible and reported that to teachers and counselors in hopes of helping them. Slowly, I learned to sense people's thoughts and along with that, their truths and lies. Once my former school, Apex Academy, found out that they had a walking lie detector, they began to use my skills against each other. It seemed like right after that, school officials made the "wise decision" to expel me.

My parents moved us away from Lagos after my expulsion, and coincidentally, my mother's place of work, Xenocorp, created a branch in Benin City, which was on the verge of finishing its rebuild after bombs had flattened it to rubble. Benin City became home, but it had been a lonely life here as an only child with one solitary friend. Did I mention how lonely I was?

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Upon arriving home, around three o'clock in the afternoon, I parked my bike in the garage and went straight into the house. My dad sat in the living room with his laptop. I felt bad that Dad's bionic legs weren't working out for him like they were intended, but he told me that at least he still had his good looks. Okay... I guessed he was likely making another blog post about Nigerian politics and criticizing the Northern leaders and their ever-conservative ideals.

He was pretty moderate in his political beliefs, but he was still doing better than Mom and me. The two of us kept it solidly apathetic. Unless, of course, there was a need to speak up in the face of oppression or something. One of her favorite statements to me was, "I became a feminist, so you wouldn't have to." So, I guess she was standing up for women when she drank that serum. Sure.

"Welcome back, Sivwe," he greeted me by my family nickname.

"Migwo, daddy," I replied and walked over to him for a hug.

"Vrendo, my daughter."

Up in my room, safe within its violet walls, I dropped my bag next to my reading table. Off flung the school clothes and on went the super comfy top and short jean skirt. In my house, I don't get to drop my clothes and forget about them, I have to take them to the washing machine and get a load started.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

Mom wanted a maid, but I nixed that idea. There's no way hired help would have a head full of pleasant thoughts about our family, and I didn't want to hear it.

After laundry duties, I went into the kitchen and prepared Dad's favorite, Banga soup. Pounding the palm fruits was difficult times a thousand because Mom still hadn't bought a machine to do this for me. And once that was finished, I had to pound the yams. I was slowly saving up the money to buy my own pounding machine. When the soup was finished, I took a bowl out to Dad at the dining table, where he patiently waited.

"Well done, Sivwe!" he praised me. As is custom, I knelt. Then he told me the words 'bless you' in my native language of Urhobo, and I replied with 'amen'.

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After I had finished the evening's cooking and the usual chores, I heard Dad go off to bed early which was his habit. I went to my room and fell on the bed. The first thing I did was open WhatsApp to check if Nora was online. Fortunately for me, she was, and I quickly requested a video call, which she answered immediately.

"Hey, bestie, what's uuuup!" She was such a goof and I loved it.

"What's up with you? You weren't at school, why's that?"

In classic Nora fashion, she used my question as an opportunity for a friendly razz. "Oh, Reho, just use your powers on me. Read my mind, go on, go into my thoughts." She opened her eyes as large as she could and craned her neck forward as if that would help.

I facepalmed, laughing a bit before saying, "Nora, you know I need to be physically close to the person or I get nothing. However, if I try..." And I put a finger to each temple and closed my eyes.

"Psychic Reho sees a hot sexy boy with muscles and a really cute grin. What's this? He's your crush! I'm getting a name... It begins with a—"

"Shut your mouth!" But Nora's laughing at my performance. "I went to my auntie's today. She gave birth recently. So, I went to go see her absolutely adorable baby boy. So much better than going to school. How was school, by the way, Reho?"

"Seriously? How is it every day? It sucked."

"Let me guess; they called you Amadioha's daughter again?"

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"No, just Scarlet Witch and Jean Grey. They're probably saving that nickname for tomorrow."

Typical of Nora, she tried to see the bright side. "Hey, at least they called you superhero names.

They're slowly understanding what you are."

I grinned before clearing it up. "No, they still think I'm a witch."

"I'm sorry, Reho. All of this wouldn't have happened if your mom hadn't taken that damn serum."

"True. But I guess after sixteen years I should be used to it by now."

"I don't think I could ever be 'used to it'. You're suffering because of your mom. I feel bad for you."

"Don't. Everything's easier with a friend like you to get me through all this."

"I have an idea! Find your own hot n' sexy man!"

I broke into hysterical laughter that would've alerted my father if he wasn't such a sound sleeper. "A boyfriend? Me? Good one, Nora, good one." That's when I noticed she wasn't sharing in my laughter.

"Wait. You're serious?"

"Of course, I'm serious, bestie. Someone who can turn up the romance while you go through all this."

"Okay, Nora, I don't even need my powers to know that you've been overindulging in the rom-com section at the bookstore."

She chuckled in reply. "Maybe that's true, but wouldn't you like to have someone to love?"

"No, not really. Considering that he would be constantly afraid of me uncovering all his secrets, and I wouldn't be able to trust him."

"Maybe there's someone out there whose mind you can't read... You'd be into that guy, wouldn't you?"

"There's no such person."

"You don't know that."

"Nora, for god's sake. I'd have run into him by now. Or maybe it's just that that guy is halfway around the world, and I will never meet him. Okay? Now please, drop it."

"Okay. It'd just be nice to see a Peter Parker and Mary Jane relationship happen in real life." It was sweet, what she said, but I still burst into laughter.

"You know that I'm the one that's super-powered, right?" I asked rhetorically, and her expression showed that it was clear.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"But come on, Reho. You could date that guy who never laughs at you. Or... Has he joined them?"

She asked with concern.

I smiled and then sighed. "I don't even know his name. I mean, he seems like a good guy, but the bar isn't exactly high. Maybe he doesn't laugh 'cause he's scared."

"Hmm..." She stroked her chin. "That makes more sense, but relax, Reho. You'll get through all this. Just believe."

"I wish I could. I wish people saw me as just another teenage girl rather than a ticking time bomb."

"Reho, whenever you're feeling bad, I want you to remember something. You have saved my ass multiple times. Keep that in mind."

"Yeah, you and my mother have a habit of telling me that," I said and instantly heard a knock on my bedroom door.

"Hey, darling, I'm home."

"Mom's home. Goodnight Nora. See you in class tomorrow."

"Night night, bestie."

I hung up and got up from my bed to open my door. The clock read 21:00 which was typically when she would come home. My mother wasted no time entering the room. She was still wearing her white lab jacket. She was also wearing a blue dress and heels. She always looked nice for her job.

"So, what have you been doing in here, young lady? I could've sworn there's been a time or two when I've heard noises."

"What kind of 'noises'?"

"Not important." She looked at me a little oddly. "Though I've wondered..."

My curiosity controlled me, and I broke a significant rule, using my powers on family members. "You think I'm watching porn?" I gasped.

"Young lady, use that ability on me one more time, and I'll log you out of my head and out of the Wi-Fi—permanently."

"That's quite the warning, Mom. First off, you know you can't shut me out of your mind for more than an hour tops. Secondly, I'll just buy data for my sim card."

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"Do not talk back to me," she countered. "Well, I guess you won't be needing your allowance then, hmm?" And that was all the warning I needed. I apologized quickly, and once she accepted; it was like nothing had happened.

"So how was school today, dear?" she asked. All I could do was shake my head. "Okay, take a seat.

We need to talk." We both sat down on my bed. "How many people called you a witch today?"

My throat felt full of emotions, but somehow, I choked out, "How much longer do I have to endure all this?" My voice cracked at the end. I waited, expecting to hear a word of encouragement. My mother always knew how to give me just the right pep talk to motivate me.

She felt my face with her thumb, running it down as the tears began to flow. "You look just like me. If it wasn't for the difference in hair color, you would be my younger clone, my 'Sarah Junior'." She quipped, trying to lighten the mood. I kept my face the way it was, I couldn't even slightly smile.

"Well, how much more do you think you can endure?"

A sudden coldness hit my core. This wasn't the pep talk I was expecting. "I don't know. I just don't want people to treat me like I'm a bad person anymore. I want it to end."

She pulled me close to her chest and then wrapped her arms around me. "You're not a bad person, my darling. You're a wonderful daughter and the best I could ever ask for." Now, this was more like what I was used to from her. She'd never hesitated to praise me.

"People don't see it that way. The discrimination is becoming too much for me." I was sure she could hear the pain in my voice. "Before I started having these abilities, it was all fine for me, but now it's like I'm a problem. I'm not allowed to participate in sports, and they always challenge my results. I'm just so tired!" Now the dam broke, and I was sobbing. My mom hugged me tighter, rubbed my back, and tried to console me.

"Oh, my darling girl..." She softly patted me on my back till I stopped crying. "You see yourself as a freak, an outcast, but all I see is a beautiful young woman, a miracle born to me on January 23rd of 2028. You are the only reason that I am alive today." She wipes away the rest of my tears with the warm touch of her fingertips. "Your native name, Sivwe means saved." She'd told me this before, but only now did I feel the weight of her choice. "Now, I want you to ask yourself. Could such a name be given to someone cursed? Tell me what you really are."

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"A gift, Mom," I muttered. "I am your gift." I didn't entirely believe my own words, but I felt safe in her embrace, and I knew she believed it, so for now, that would have to be enough.

"Good. And don't you ever forget it. It'll be your sweet sixteen soon, and I don't want you to have any bad thoughts going into it."

"I won't," I said, ending with a sigh.

"I don't have your powers to know if you're lying or not, but I don't need them. I'm your mother, Reho. I can see truth or lies in your face and hear it in your voice. Work on believing your words. Remember, my darling, all those people calling you harsh names would do anything to have your abilities." She gently held my face, her eyes meeting mine. "When I remember all you're going through, I'm just glad it wasn't when I was your age, in the late 2010s or early 2020s."

"Why so?"

"Nigeria then was much different than Nigeria now, it was even more traditional and religious. Homosexuality and gay marriage were illegal and laws were repressive."

"How did it change?" I asked, gripping my bed.

"I mean, the war came and after the chaos, the country decided to liberalize. Science was why we won the war and there was more focus on it." She smiled at me. "After this, you can see that everything you're going through is just a storm. And what happens to all storms?"

"They calm." I nodded

"Good. So promise me you won't let their words bother you again."

"I'll try. I promise," I answered, and she kissed my cheek. Then I lay on my bed while she got up and headed towards the door. "How was work at the lab?" I asked just as she reached the threshold.

"Interesting. Any more than that, you know I can't say. But if there are ever any changes to your powers, let me know, okay?"

I nodded mainly because I didn't want to argue. I had told her again and again that my powers have reached their peak, but she constantly disagreed, saying that the original plan for the soldiers exceeded being used as lie detectors. I also frequently asked if anyone had tried to recreate the serum for use but she kept flipping the conversation at every question.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"Try not to overthink, dear, and get some rest. You've got school tomorrow." She offered me a kind smile, her furrowed brow showing her concern. Too tired to fake a cheerful reply, I gave her a half-hearted thumbs-up. "Good. Goodnight Reho Sivwe Oruese."

"Mmm, goodnight." I yawned.

"I love you, my angel." She blew a kiss in my direction, and I lazily blew it back, albeit with high affection.

I love you too, Mom." I watched her leave the room, closing the door behind her.

CHAPTER TWO

The next day, I got up from bed very early at 5 am and rushed to my studying. We had a test today, and I knew they would force me to write inside an empty hall once again. To them, the alternative was me pulling answers from the heads of the *oh-so-innocent* students. Hilarious. And what made it even more ironic is that the students who were going to write the test together would cheat. They always cheated and the school never cared. But they still make me look like the villain.

I looked at the alarm clock next to my bed where I sat. It was 5:27 am. I knew what I would hear next, so I braced myself for it.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"REHO! IT'S TIME FOR YOGA!" My mother called from the living room downstairs.

"I'M COMING, MUMMY!" I yelled back at her. I got up from my bed and arranged it properly. Still wearing my red spiderman nightwear, I walked downstairs to mother had already spread the mats, wearing her red sports bra and a tight pair of sweatpants that made her look more fit than any forty-four-year woman had any right to. This had been a tradition since I turned ten; if it wasn't yoga, it was jumping jacks.

"You know I have a test today? And remind me why we do this every day?" I said, crossing my hands as my mother prepared to stretch.

"Because it's healthy for your mind and helps you get a fit body. You want your body to be fit like mine, don't you?" She smirked, raising her hands over her body with pride.

"My body is already like yours."

"But you see, I'm forty-four and I don't look old at all." She smiled, and I nodded. "Plus Tega is joining us. Right, love?" She pointed to my dad, who to my surprise was dressed in yoga trousers and a grey tee shirt. He had not joined in yoga or exercise due to fear of damaging his bionic leg.

"Are you joining us today, Daddy?" I asked.

"Your mother said it will be safe for me and help my leg work better." He said, shuffling his feet.

Come on, there's only one way this goes. His mind was a cloud of uncertainty, constantly second-guessing the decision he was about to take. I smiled at him

"Mummy is right... You'll be fine." I wish I believed what I said.

We began the yoga, and as we continued, I held my father's hand, and a vision came to me like a slideshow. First, my father sat with someone in our living room, then he dropped dead, and finally, the person chuckled.

"Ahh!" I fell on my knees, holding my head. This was the first time I had a vision, hardly accurate but still sent shockwaves through my body.

"Reho!" My mother knelt next to me, lifting me, and snapping me back to reality.

"Was it cause of something in my mind? I know our hands touched," My dad said. "Did you see anything?" I looked at my dad, pondering if I should tell him what I saw, which could be inaccurate and place him in fear or keep him unaware. The latter was safer; hence I shook my head.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

My mother kept her worried look while my father, who clearly enjoyed the yoga suggested I prepare for school.

I got in the shower and hummed my favorite song from my favorite artist, Tems. I brushed my teeth and changed into my clothes for school, a long green fitted gown with my signature black leather jacket and leggings underneath. There were very few days I didn't wear my jacket, making it an informal uniform for me. The last time I wore a formal uniform was in primary school. I picked up my phone, an aquamarine glowing transparent iPhone XX, put the books in my bag, and headed downstairs at almost 7 am.

"Reho, do you want me to drive you to school?" My mom asked me, but I had other ideas.

"Unnecessary, ma. I'll take Lightning. Nora's coming over." I replied, then leaned in and kissed her cheek.

"What about one for daddy?" My dad asked, and I gave him the same treatment.

I went into the garage next to our house where Lightning was, along with two cars, both for my mother. Lightning, my black dirt bike was a birthday present from my dad for my fourteenth birthday and I had zero plans of letting her go. They all ran on biodegradable or hydrogen fuel. I put on my black helmet and waited in front of my house for her. After ten minutes of waiting, the butterfly I knew as my best friend arrived. Her glowing dark skin and braided hair looked beautiful from afar.

"Hey, what took you so long?" I asked her. She panted like she ran a mile, drenched in sweat. "Here." I passed a handheld battery-powered fan to her to cool her body as the Harmattan heat and dryness made her look less pretty.

"Sorry, Reho. I didn't leave my aunt's place till this morning, so it was a long journey, and a lot of nonsense ensued." She replied, but time was ticking.

"Okay, no problem. Now hop on the bike, and let's go," I commanded, and she did that quickly. She wore a blue jean jacket with a striped t-shirt and a black skirt. We drove off. My street was relatively calm, but on getting to the road, swarms of drones, hoverboards, and other gadgets joined the road with the cars and bikes, if these weren't all powered by green energy then it would be a climate nightmare. There were also glass roads and holographic news reporters talking about how democracy has thrived in Nigeria ahead of the presidential swearing-in once we went deep into town. I haven't

made mention of palm fronds and art like the Queen Idia and Benin bronzes to blend the culture with the tech.

"Why are you going so early to school, anyway? It's just 7 am and there's no assembly today because of the test?" She asked.

"First, because there's no assembly, second so I can avoid any insults from people, and third, so I can brace myself for once again writing in a lonely exam hall," I said, as we narrowly avoided hitting a stray goat. It really fazed neither of us. Nora giggled like a preschooler after it, and we continued our chat.

"None of these are good enough reasons, you know that, right?"

"Here's a third reason, it'll be a billion degrees once it gets to 8 or 9, and I'm not wearing this helmet in that temperature."

"Nawa. You're a science student, and you're saying 1 billion degrees." She chuckled.

"Do you want me to tell you your entire search history cause I will?"

"Jokes on you, I use a VPN."

"And jokes on you, I'm going to your brain not your phone," I said, and we laughed together as I rode. The banter always made moments like these fun, and she enjoyed my bike, we even use it to take rides around Benin city.

We finally arrived at the ugly-painted mess also known as my school. Someone thought turquoise, silver, and red was a good color combination.

Barring a few cleaners, it was empty, so we walked towards my classroom with ease, discussing as we walked.

"So Reho, most of the people who throw these insults at you? Is it because of religion?" She asked a hilarious and realistic question that no one had ever asked.

"I mean, it's not because they hate my hair color, is it?" I said with a smile while laughing in my belly.

"Imagine if they knew you were atheist though?"

"I think they do. I didn't bother to tell them though. It's ironic they call my powers unnatural when they literally believe in a supernatural realm." I said, my mind flashed to being called a witch by my

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

teacher in SS1 and asking the school to do a deliverance sermon, and yes the school promptly sent her packing.

"Weren't most of Jesus' miracles unnatural?" She asked, and I smiled.

"Don't even try to understand their ideology. It's only a matter of time before they give me the Joan of Arc treatment." I told her and she nodded.

"So by Joan of Arc treatment, you mean burning your body alive on a pyre because of blasphemy?"

"Yeah. Exactly that." I answered. "Honestly, the only thing stopping them from burning me alive is my age, once I turn 18. They will come with their gasoline and matches."

"For what it's worth, it's not like there's a hell you can go." She replied, and I scoffed playfully.

"Of course, there's no hell but considering the world saw Joan as a heretic until Napoleon christened her, they'll probably think I'm with Satan, after all, they call me his daughter."

"Actually, it's daughter of Amadioha." Nora corrected. That wasn't necessary at all.

"Thanks, Nora," I spoke with no obvious expression. "Fun fact; If Joan was alive in today's France, that bitch would be atheist too."

Nora laughed out loud to the point of cough, so I rubbed her back to soothe it. "Definitely, Joan would be a stoner."

"Drinking beer and belly dancing on social media," I said, and Nora smiled at me. The distance between the school gate and my classroom was relatively long, but she made it feel much shorter.

"Hey. If it makes you feel better, just know that I'll be willing to die with you when the time comes."

"No, you won't," I replied to her so coldly that she couldn't even try to cover up what she said.

"Yeah, you're right. But I'll mourn you for the rest of my life. I cross my bra." she stated, rather aggressively while doing an X sign over her chest. I giggled but didn't need to check to know she was spitting the truth.

We entered SS2 Blue, my classroom, took a seat, and brought out our books to study. I was a science student, hoping to become a scientist like my mother before me, and Nora studied social science. Her dream was to become to set up an organization to help orphaned, disabled, and mentally ill students. Our similar end goal of human development was the pillar that kept our friendship firm.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"So Nora. How confident are you going into the exam?" I asked her, but deep down it was just another excuse to use my gifts because although I resented the reaction it brought, I always loved the abilities themselves and I always wanted to take them to the next level although I haven't displayed new abilities in over two years. I mean, I'm untrickable. No bigger strength than that on earth.

"I'm actually really confident that I'm going to pass." She replied. "And yes, I know that you're going to check, but trust that..."

"..... this isn't where I'll lie to you." I blurted out and covered my mouth once I uttered those words. I kept a prolonged silence, the same reaction I had when I first read minds through hand contact. Deja freaking vu.

"Omo! Reho, did you just..." she said, but before she could finish, I removed my hand slowly from my mouth.

"Finish your sentence. Yes, I did. I did it again. What the fudge was happening?"

"What's going on Reho?" She asked, her eyebrows drawing together. "Are you alright?" She placed the back of her palm on her neck.

"I'm fine, but it's like I can know what you're going to say next," I stated, it was still hard to believe, but it seemed like I could go deeper into their head into speech prediction. Wow!

"Oh, oh oh boy," she said, shaking in her seat and narrowed eyes at the same time. "Complete this first: I hate the way Man United played this weekend. I was furious because that's not what..." she said and swiftly, I knew what was next.

"The reds do. I feel ashamed to be supporting that club." We said simultaneously. I screeched. Just when I thought I had reached the final level of my powers, boom, another comes in.

"Fuck yes! You can detect lies, truths, thoughts, feelings, and now people's own speech. You're unkillable!" She once again hyped me up, and since it was Nora, who was I to turn down my personal hype woman? Seconds later, the sound of students entering the school brought us back to reality.

"Relax Nora. This isn't even that big. All I can do is know what they'll say next. I'll hardly even use it." I played it down, but in my mind this was huge. This kick-starting of a domino effect will end with me dying or being immortal. Who knows?

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"Hey, at least you have another skill, more to come." She said, "You better head to your private hall for your safety," She said,

"Later butterfly," I kissed her cheek, before sneaking unsuccessfully to my hall and enduring more witch insults from students and adults alike.

###

Once I was done with the tests, I walked downstairs to meet Nora. I had to do it like a sneaky snitch. My plan was very simple. Find Nora and get the hell out of the school. After the test, we were going on a mid-term break, which meant that I would not return to school till next week and honestly, that break was all I needed.

Nora had just finished her tests and was leaving her class when I approached her.

"Hey, bestie. How was the exam?" I quickly asked her and using my abilities, I felt the positivity instantly. It was almost contagious. Nora wasn't normally the brightest student and while she had massively improved in SS2, she still struggled academically. Meanwhile, I would get outstanding results and people would always disapprove of them.

"It was great. I rained fire on the test likeeee it was amazing!" She said with a loud voice, drumming the floor with her feet and I couldn't help but just join in her joy. I gave her a friendly hug, which she reciprocated.

"I'm so happy for you, Nora. At least now we can finally rest and have fun."

"Yeah. And speaking of fun, your sweet sixteen is coming up. How's it going to be?" she asked me with a grin, and I just chuckled.

"I honestly don't even know." We walked down the hall towards the door. "I mean, it will be different this time now that I'll be with you, unlike my other birthdays since I was twelve."

"Your parents will throw you a party, abi?" She said, I know she was clearly trying to tease me. After all, she knew I was a mommy's girl.

"You think you're funny, don't you?" I replied and responded by punching her shoulder playfully. "I'm sure she'll just give me some money and ask me to have fun while taking care of myself. And I'll be spending that money with you." Nora blushed at that response.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"Okay, so now we just need to plan our activities for that day." She said, "But first, I'm really thirsty, writing a test during harmattan is not helpful.." She added, and I looked in my purse, then looked back at her.

"No problem. I'll buy you a drink."

"Of course, you will. I'm happy to have you."

If only the others felt the same way you did, I thought to myself as we turned back and walked to the school canteen.

###

We walked out of the canteen, prepared to leave the school and head home but a guy approached us as we walked. He was the same skin color as me and about my height, and although he wasn't all that good-looking, a part of me felt attracted to him, his innocent appearance and calm demeanor being the cake. I recognized him as the only guy who didn't laugh at me yesterday.

"Hey, are you the school witch? Cause I need your help." Oh. Forget 'innocent appearance' - here was the red warning flag, darker than blood.

"Could you be more polite, please?" Nora confronted him with a stern look on her face, triggering him to step back, trembling a little, which was really endearing.

"Yes, I can detect lies and truths," I answered. "I'm surprised you have heard little about me, though. My popularity in this school is something else." I added, and he nervously chuckled.

"I hardly hear things. I mostly just mind my business, plus I'm not really social. I hide a lot, actually."

He answered, I checked, and he was truthful, which was actually a turn-on for me.

"Well. At least you're telling the truth." I said, moving closer to him as I had been standing behind Nora before. "So what exactly do you need my help for?"

"I need you to use your abilities on my girlfriend." He said and while I didn't laugh aloud, it sounded so hilarious in my head.

"Okay. So what's your name?" I asked.

"Aaron, Aaron Chamuke. And you?" He stretched his hand for a handshake and I took it. When he touched me, I felt a tingling sensation.

"Reho, Reho Oruese," I replied. "So, what about your girlfriend?"

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"I believe that she's lying to me, that she might cheat on me." He answered with a watery gaze. "I just need you to use your witchcraft and find out the truth of whether she's lying."

"Okay. First, let me clear this up." I stared directly at him. "I am not a witch. I can connect to people's inner mind but it's not magic. And second, I can't start using my abilities to infiltrate someone's privacy for your relationship. If she really loves you, she'll tell you the truth." He stared back at me, his face looking like he was ready to beg.

"What if she doesn't love me? What if she's been lying to me this whole time!" He cried out. Well, he didn't cry, but he wailed, the pain in him so clear.

"I'm not sure...." Before I could even finish my sentence, he brought out his wallet.

"How much do you want? Two thousand?" He offered, but I politely chuckled and used my gesture to reject it.

"I don't want your money."

"Three thousand? Three thousand five hundred? Five thousand? Tell me how much you want?" He aggressively offered. I didn't need to go into his head to see that he was talking from a place of desperation, but there was no way I was capitalizing on that, I actually hated capitalism.

"Hey, hey, Aaron. Listen to me and take a deep breath, because I'll be honest with you. The money you're offering me? I spend more than that on hydrogen fuel for my bike." I replied, and he calmed down, throwing his wallet back into his pocket. "Just give me a minute," I said, then pulled Nora to a corner to talk to her.

"Reho. Why didn't you take the money?" This was the first thing she asked me, and while it offended me slightly that she expected me to charge, I brushed it off.

"I don't need his money."

"Well, I do."

Really, Nora? Greed much.

"No, you don't Nora. If you did, you'd have asked me! He looks messed up and worried." I told her.

"He's broken inside."

"Yeah. He's suspecting his bird is playing chess with their relationship." She stated.

"You're the one with a social life. Tell me, should I help him?" I asked her. I wasn't familiar with any of this. The last thing I wanted to do was make an already disastrous situation worse. After briefly thinking, she replied.

"Yeah."

I got back to Aaron, who was waiting there grumbling under his breath and shaking his head repeatedly. "Okay let's go.", I said to him, He led us to my classroom SS2 Blue, where his girlfriend sat at the back tapping on her phone. I recognized her at once. He walked over to meet her while I stood at the door. "Isn't that Akpevwe?" I asked Nora.

"Yeah. I didn't know she was dating Aaron." Nora replied.

"Neither did I," I said, then turned my attention to the two lovebirds as they embraced each other.

They were talking louder than expected, so listening to them was no issue.

"Hey, Pancake," She said as she welcomed him.

"Hey, babe," He said, and it was so poorly delivered, you'd know he wasn't good with girls. They continued their awkward flirting, and it's no understatement when I say that I was struggling to contain my vomit. I wasn't into anything romantic. That was Nora's niche. I was more into science fiction and fantasy.

After whatever that encounter was, Aaron walked up to me and said it was time. Nora and I followed him to meet her, and she was far from pleased to see me.

"Oh God, Aaron, you brought the witch?" She groaned heavily, and I just waved my hand at her, to which she responded with an eye roll.

"Listen, babe. You said that you were telling me the truth. Reho is just here to confirm that." Aaron said, but she was fully against it.

"So you're saying you trust this demon more than me, babe?" She said and by checking, I knew she was clearly trying to guilt trip him. She was hiding something. "What if she lies?"

"Listen... I won't lie after all. I don't like what I hate." I replied, trying my best not to attempt telekinesis on her to see if my streak of new powers would continue. Girls bullied me a lot and Akpevwe was the ringleader. The female version of Progress. "Now put your hands on mine," I instructed calmly, as I stretched my hands forward.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"I'm not putting my hand so you can put any of your spells or charms on me." She answered.

"Listen, if I could put any spells on you. I'd start with politeness." I snapped back at her and Nora cooed.

"That one loud," Nora muttered.

"Babe, just put your hand on hers!" He begged and she reluctantly did it. I turned to him.

"Go ahead. Ask her a question and I advise you to ask a big one."

He took a breath and asked what had been bothering him. "Do you love me?"

"Yes. I always have. I always will," She answered and without checking I knew it was a lie because these were two polar opposite teenagers on the social pyramid, but I checked anyway and the things I saw - not just the truth but her thoughts and feelings - were really grim.

"So Reho, is she telling the truth?" He asked me, but I remained silent. The truth would escalate the situation and ruin his day.

"Ask her again. This time ask it like you mean it," I said, and he did that and, just like before, she gave the same answer.

"Reho, is she telling the truth?" He asked, hyperventilating while I remained reluctant to speak.

"Buttercup, let's not waste our time with her." She then removed her hand from mine and pulled Aaron away. "Like I would ever lie to you?" That statement was the trigger I needed. I turned towards Aaron.

"She's lying to you. She doesn't love you. She doesn't care about you. All the times she said she was sick and left you in the rain, left you waiting for her. All because she didn't want to be seen with you. She sees you as below her." I spat it all out, stomping the floor, and deepening my tone.

Aaron became speechless for seconds before swallowing his spit and facing her, "Babe is this true." She trembled but kept searching for ideas to deflect the question.

"Are you doubting me for this creature? Aaron, which spell does she have over you?"

"The only spell I'm curious about is the one you put Aaron under, that he couldn't see how terrible you actually are." I shot back at her and I was basically just fighting for Aaron. "Now, if you know you're not lying. Put your hands on mine one more time and let's see how it goes." She hesitated. I had put her in a tight corner. Either she put her hand, and I exposed her, or she walked away.

The situation stressed Aaron who avoided eye contact with either of us. She put her hand on Aaron's shoulder and looked him in the eye; he took multiple deep breaths to calm himself., pretending to mishear everything and just wanting to remain in denial. Ignorance is bliss, after all.

"Hey, Aaron. Listen to me, I love you, okay, I really love you and there's nothing this witch is going to say that will change that." She took her finger and ran it down Aaron's chest area, right on the blue t-shirt he was wearing. Nora, meanwhile, just sat watching all this drama unfold, definitely finding all the jokes to make when this was over. Akpevwe was clearly trying to get him on her side and considering that she was hot, even hotter than me, it looked to be working. "Now, Aaron, babe. Why don't we leave here and head to my place, where this witch won't be and where my parents aren't home and I can finally grant your wish? I will..."

"Pop your cherry." We said together as I completed her sentence, and she turned her attention to me with a glare. I never thought my new power would come in handy so quickly. "Seriously, you're trying to manipulate your 'boyfriend' by promising to break his virginity, a promise you won't even fulfill. How low can you go?" I blasted her, and Nora opened her mouth.

"Please mind your business, Iju mmadu." She warned me, and that was the final straw.

"Normally I like to mind my business, Akpevwe. But I won't be able to sleep at night knowing that if I don't act, you'll continue hurting this guy right here." I said, and she laughed.

"Hurting? Aaron, am I hurting you? I kiss you and I send you sweet messages online." She confidently said. Aaron just stood, touching the base of his neck and looking at the floor.

"He can't even respond. He's worried, he's anxious, in a way he's actually afraid." I said, but she just shook it off and it was at that moment that I knew this boy needed to be helped. No matter the outcome, it wouldn't end pretty. "Alright fuck it! Aaron, this is going to hurt you, but I promise you'll thank me for this in the future."

"What are you doing?" She asked, desperately wishing time would speed up.

"Check her phone and see if any of the pictures you took together are there, then check her chats and see if her chats with you are there, then go further into her photos. You'll find some surprises there." I said and Aaron immediately requested her phone.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"Aaron, are you mad? Why are you listening to her?" She struggled, but Aaron was insistent. "Fine. Take it!" She threw the phone at him and he checked the phone.

"Where are our pictures?" He asked.

"I deleted them for space." She replied, and I facepalmed, not just because she was lying but because of the poor quality of that lie. I told better lies to my mother as a kid when I wanted more Christmas presents.

"And our chats are gone! I pinned your chat!" He cried out, his shriek was a mallet to my heart, but I held firm.

"It's no big deal, don't be a wimp." She tried to cover up, but Aaron kept scrolling and opened his eyes and mouth at something. "What was that?" She asked, and he pointed the phone at her.

"Are these your traps, Akpevwe?" He asked, his face reddening and his eyes protruding.

"I was keeping them to send to you," She answered.

"But below, you typed for my baby, Progress. View in VR for extra pleasure." He said and then had a realization. "Progress? In your class?"

"Relax, I can explain."

"I'm such an idiot! I'm such a fool! Mumu! I'm so stupid!" He said angrily, handed her phone to her then used his hand to punch a wall nearby making him sob, a scene that was too disturbing for me to watch. "You never loved me, did you?" He screamed at her.

"No. I don't love you. Why will I love you? Do I look like your mate?" She clapped back at him in an indifferent tone.

"But why would you lead me on like that?"

"Because she sees you as gullible and easy to manipulate." I chirped in and she collected her bag to leave, but not before dropping one final warning on me.

"Stay out of my business or I'll beat the witchcraft out of you!" She said and left the class while Aaron sobbed. I walked to him and Nora walked up to me. As I moved into his head, I saw terrible thoughts. To him, time had stopped, and she broke him inside.

"Nora, let's take him to guidance and counseling," I said to her,

"Is it that serious?" She asked. "I mean. I know he's heartbroken but...."

"Forget the heartbreak. This boy is going to kill himself!" I yelled, and she wasted no time in joining me to lift him up and take him to the guidance counselor.

Then we walked outside the school, got on my bike, and rode off.

"Never let me engage in teen romance drama again," I told Nora as we left, and she chuckled.

"Congratulations on saving another life." She tapped my back. "Can't wait to see where your powers take you." Neither can I, bestie. Neither can I.

CHAPTER THREE

Friday arrived, the eve of my sweet sixteen. I was home all day mainly because of the mid-term break and I didn't have any plans, in particular, to carry out. So I was at home, playing video games. I had a PS5 in my room, so wearing my headphones; I played Mortal Kombat 13, using Kitana against scorpion. It wasn't the most fun activity playing against the CPU but it still put on a better challenge than Nora who I always smoked in video games, not so much in board games.

"DIE! COME ON! ALMOST THERE!" I yelled as I aggressively tapped x on my gamepad. "YES!" I screamed after I finally won. I took off my headset and the first thing I heard was.

"Reho! Come downstairs! I'm back!" My mother's voice plundered through my ears. I opened my door and ran downstairs to meet her. She had just arrived with some groceries, including vegetable oil, palm oil, peppers, tomatoes, and onions. I had a sense of calm and ease that it was going to be another spectacular stew.

"Migwo, mum! Welcome." I greeted and hugged her.

"I've been calling you since, Reho. Why didn't you answer?" She asked.

"Sorry about that. I was playing video games and my headphones were on." I apologized to her, and she just sighed, like she was tired.

"About that... Remind me to seize it next year when it's time for your WAEC exams."

"Games or headphones?" I asked.

"Both! You won't be getting that PS8," she replied. "And speaking of school, take a seat!" She ordered, and I took a seat in the kitchen while she stood, arms crossed. "I have been making some plans and some calls about where you will head to after your secondary education. Among my options, I have listed MIT."

"MIT?" I yelped, touching my parted lips with my fingers. "I've heard of MIT. That's the institution of technology in America. Is it a Medical or Mechanical institution?" I asked and my mother smiled, impressed by my knowledge.

"I see you've done your research." She replied. "Well, you tried, but it's actually Massachusetts Institute of Technology."

"Oh. I was close, though!" I said I've heard of prominent scientists who had gone to MIT and it's the perfect place to go. "You attended MIT right, mum?"

My mum lifted her eyelids at this question. "No. I attended the University of Benin here in Nigeria, here in Benin." She answered, and I nodded my head, remembering her purple matriculation and convocation gowns, as well as horror stories of ASUU strikes.

"But you did your masters there?" I asked her again, and she shook her head.

"University of Valencia, Spain." She answered, and I scratched my head. *Do I even know my mother?* She had previously told me about her experience at MIT. I just couldn't put my finger on the spot.

"P.H.D?" I asked, this time nervously because I was sure that I was wrong, but my mother just giggled.

"Relax Reho, you're right. I did my PhD at MIT." She said and I breathed out in relief. I knew I'd get it, eventually. "I don't want you to school in Nigeria, even though the educational system has massively improved. You're finding secondary school very difficult here and people will have a harder time understanding your... Gifts." She stated, and I was all for it. After all, I'd never left Nigeria in my life and as a girl who grew up in more Hollywood than Nollywood and barely spoke her own language, America just seemed like that place plus my mum would have connections there.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"I agree. I fully agree. I want to school in America." I replied, but unknown to myself, I opened a way to another round of encouragement. Yay!

"You'll have to do more than agree, Reho. Increasing your grades is something you will have to do. You're more than an A- student, you can be an A student or an A+ student, you really just need to put in the extra effort." She said to me, "SAT exams aren't like WAEC, they're more difficult and require extra preparation. Can you promise me you'll excel?"

Jeez, woman! Way to ease the pressure.

"I promise you, mum. I will excel in my exams and I'll get into MIT." She blushed as I replied.

"Of course, you will."

"So, mum. What brought you back from work so early?" I asked. It was new for my mother to be home early. She was never home early. Once she left by 8 or 9am, it was till night.

"Well, since you asked. They gave me a leave to rest since I'm going to be having an all night at the lab tomorrow." She replied.

"All night? Like a vigil or something? Has one of our aunties invited you again?"

"No, Reho." She laughed. "We have some tests and experiments to run, so it will definitely take us the entire night. Some secret hullabaloo relating to the RSF. I don't even know who they are."

Right as I was about to reply, my mum's phone rang and her ringtone, Heat waves by Glass Animals played out, she quickly answered the phone.

"Hello." She greeted. "Yes, I'm Reho's mother. Are you one of her teachers?" My mother asked and a part of me became scared inside. *Had I gotten into trouble again?* Like I said before, my mum knew how to punish me and I definitely wasn't ready to have anything seized from me. "Oh, is that what she did?" My mum asked the person talking to her over the phone and I definitely knew I was in trouble.

"Alright. I'll talk to her. Thank you. Have a nice day." She ended the call and turned her attention to me sitting meekly.

"What have I done now?" I asked, and she just laughed. I wasn't sure if I was to frown or smile at the laugh.

"Apparently, what you did now is something for me to be proud of." She answered me. "That was your school guidance counselor who just called, and she wants me to thank you for what you did on Tuesday."

"Oh, what did she say I did?"

"According to her, you brought one of your classmates who was feeling suicidal to her and she wants me to thank you for that." My mum said to me and I just blushed. "You've saved another life, Reho! I'm beyond proud of you at this point. "Keep it up."

"Okay," I replied. "SOOOOOO Since I behaved well yesterday, can you consider what I told you earlier and let Nora and I party all night tomorrow?" I asked. This was my perfect chance to bust a move.

"I'm sorry, Reho but for your own safety...." she said but was interrupted by the doorbell.

"I'll get it!"

I hurried to the front door and opened the door, expecting to see Nora and no one else, but by no chance was I expecting who I got.

"Aaron, what are you doing here?" I asked with a fluttery feeling in my belly and a tentative smile building on my face. "And how did you know where I live?"

"I just came to hang out, and I asked Amina at the canteen for the location." He answered.

"What do you mean by hanging out?" I asked, suspicious as I always am.

"I really want to thank you for what you did for me on Tuesday. And well, I just wanted us to have fun." He replied, I didn't jump in to check his mind, rather I waited for him to answer my questions and then discover his lies.

"What's your idea of fun, Aaron?" I queried him.

"I mean... Just to get to know you more, I guess." He answered, this time looking down on the floor like he was visibly shy and I could tell that he didn't feel comfortable.

"Sure. Come in. We'll go to my room." I told him and he lit up. As he entered, he picked up a bunch of flowers, which I'm sure he kept there. "What are those?" I asked.

"Oh, I got you flowers, Reho." He said and though I tried to resist the urge, I ended up laughing but stopped once I realized it might make him feel bad.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"Why did you get those?" I asked him.

"Well, I wanted to give you something to show that I'm grateful... About Tuesday." He stammered, and he normally wasn't a stammerer, but this time he was so nervous that it was frightening me.

"That's really sweet, Aaron, but I'm not into flowers." I politely declined, but that annoyed him more.

"Of course! Of course! I should've gotten chocolate or drinks or something better than useless flowers." He cursed himself, and I'm serious, it hurt me to watch.

"Aaron, Aaron!" I gestured my hands, trying to calm him down. "I need nothing from you. Come in."

I told him, then he dumped the flowers on the floor and entered inside. I walked up with Aaron to my room and opened the door.

Once we were in, I locked the door, and he marveled at my room.

"Wow!" He exclaimed.

"Like what you see?" I asked while tickling him, something that made him laugh. "Make yourself comfortable, Aaron." No boy had ever visited me at home, talk less about my room.

Aaron, however, gestured around the room, making comments.

"Your room has its own bathroom/toilet, its own wardrobe, and a fridge and it's still really large." He said, skimming his fingerprints along his jawline.

"Yep! My mother said this is the kind of room she lived in when she was in university." I replied and opened the fridge. "Ribena, Yoghurt or Energy?" I asked, and he replied with Ribena. "Astute choice!" I threw the Ribena at him and he caught it rather smoothly. He nodded with a grin on his face while looking around the room, then headed to the posters on my wall.

"Lies are like cockroaches for everyone you discover." He said, and I completed his statement.

"There are more that are hidden."

He chuckled, resting his hands on the poster as though he wanted to rip it off, "Did you really need to put it on the wall?" He asked, and I used thumbs up to agree.

"Yeah. It's a personal code I live by. That's there as a reminder." I answered, and he continued reading the room.

"You also have a Joan of Arc poster?"

"I'm a teenage girl who's constantly accused of witchcraft and heresy. Clearly, there wasn't a better role model for me to have."

"Clearly! Are you even a Christian?" He sniffed, and I shook my head. "A poster of the Chelsea team, too?"

"I've always loved blue."

"And you have a poster of star wars? No way! Who's your favorite character Reho?" He squealed.

"Rey. Rey Skywalker." I answered.

"Great. Mine is Rey too." He stated, and I sighed.

"No, it's not. Your favorite character is Obi-Wan Kenobi." I said, and he bent his face, desiring to shapeshift into a mist. "Relax Aaron. It's not that deep, but it also isn't something that you need to lie about." I assured him and though he still felt sober, he continued looking at the posters.

"You have Natasha Toney on your wall, too." He said.

"Yeah. A strong independent woman with a loving heart and also a scientist. These are the role models I have." I replied. "Who would you consider your role models?" I asked him, but he acted shy to give a response.

"That won't be necessary at all. I'm not that important." He answered, but I shook my head.

"Never say that again. You're important and you always will be." I said, and he acted surprised by that, as no one had ever told him that and as I just checked, no one had.

"Are you a feminist?" He asked, then quickly covered his mouth.

"I'm not a feminist, Aaron. The women before me already fought that battle." I instantly remembered something, a question I should've served Aaron on Tuesday before the unfortunate events of that day.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course,"

"I noticed something about you," I said. His mouth whispered a cold 'what'. Honestly, he couldn't be comfortable around me. Though my brief silence did nothing to calm his dread. "Relax, it's nothing bad it's just that whenever you were with the boys... you never laughed. Why?"

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

He let out a peal of fluctuating laughter but still struggled to find the words to speak. In reality, I expected a simple answer. Maybe he feared I was planning revenge and didn't want to take the risk.

Then again, I could get the answer from his mind but that would take his mouth's job.

"Cause it's not cool," he said. "They bullied me a lot too, and till now they still do, I don't want to be one." He sat on the bed as I held my mouth in surprise following that reply.

Empathy? Towards me? I questioned internally. Nothing was going to stop me from telling Nora how wrong she was for thinking it was out of fear.

I purred in delight and a desire to build a bond with him, "You seem hungry. Mind if I cook something for you?"

"Thanks a lot Reho. You too much!" He said.

"Alright. The TV is here, so you can play some video games. The Dstv is also subscribed so you can watch. I haven't subscribed to the streaming so maybe soon."

"Alright, I will,"

###

After leaving the room, I headed to the kitchen to cook. I brought out 2 indomie supreme noodle packs and 2 eggs and cooked until, of course, my mom showed up behind me.

"Reho? Who was that boy?" she asked, and I turned to look at her grin-wearing face.

"Oh, he's just a friend, ma." I instantly said, and she held my hand.

"Reho. You know you can tell me anything, right? I'm your mother and even if your dad won't understand, you know that I always will." She told me, a classic bait tactic she used to make me spill.

"And by the way, I'm very glad that you're taking this step in your life. It shows that you're growing as a teenager and...."

"Wait! Wait! Wait! Mummy, that's not my boyfriend." I quickly replied.

"Did you use your powers on me?" She calmly asked.

"You put your hand on mine!"

"Fair enough." She replied. "So who's that?"

"That's Aaron. The boy I took to guidance and counseling." I said, and she nodded in realization.

"Makes more sense. Just know that you can tell me anything Reho—" She said, looking into my eyes.

"I want you to know that," we said together, and I quickly covered my mouth. It would prove too late as she already noticed.

"What did you do?" She asked, pulling my palm from my hand gently. "Don't lie to me."

I sighed, "I won't lie to you... I've developed a new ability."

"When was that?"

"Tuesday." I looked at the floor to avoid her gaze.

"Why did you wait until now to tell me? After three days?"

I considered lying to her I forgot but she knew I hardly forgot things, especially things of this scale. I inherited her retentive memory, and like all things, the truth became my answer.

"I was holding out for more abilities. This isn't huge or special."

"Not big or special?" She placed two on her chin and forced a laugh. "You're capable of speech prediction. We could've done some tests to help you manage them,"

"I know, mom but maybe on Sunday, we can research since today and tomorrow are off. I promise"

She smiled, genuinely this time. "I take your word for it."

"Also, let me know if he falls in love with you. It's the best way to observe Lois Lane syndrome."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Well, that's when people fall in love with someone who saved them." She answered, and it intrigued me to learn more. My mother had previously given me an essay on Stockholm syndrome so I was definitely going to inquire more about LLS later.

###

After preparing the noodles, I carried the plates and took them in a tray to my room. I didn't lock it, so I just opened it and entered, shutting the door behind me with my foot. I found Aaron naked on my bed, masturbating while wearing a VR headset and I was certain he was using it to watch adult videos because of the sound of moans in the background. I tried to scream, but no sound came out. My skin tingled with discomfort and a part of me wished I had never seen it. He didn't notice me coming in because of the headsets he wore. I didn't have any, so I was sure he came with his. I didn't want to make a scene or else I could've yelled, but I dropped the tray on the table and observed him as he went on. It was as uncomfortable as you'd think, but I had to do it. As he did it, I checked his feelings with

my powers and noticed a switch. First, he concentrated on how to please himself, then his mind went empty of all worries, and he finished. Immediately, the thoughts of ecstasy turned into self-loathing. He took off the headsets and raised his head as his eyes locked with mine. He immediately panicked. "Aaah! Did you see me? Do all that?" He screamed like he saw a ghost.

"Yes, I did." I calmly answered.

"What the! Oh, I'm so stupid." He groaned, even slapping himself. "I need to go." He said as he pulled his clothes to him, a buttoned long-sleeve shirt with skinny trousers and a hat.

"Stay!" I urged him but he began talking to himself. In his head, he felt so unworthy of life.

"I'll always do something stupid. I always will. I'm sure your mother heard me from downstairs." He complained, clenching his fists and pointing them at his face.

"Aaron, just sit down and calm down. My room is soundproof unfortunately but don't worry." I walked slowly to him. "Relax, Let me help you." I held both his hands and sat next to him on the bed.

"How was it?"

"I don't know! I feel so dirty, I feel so terrible." He answered with a hard edge to his voice and an inability to forgive himself. "I wasn't supposed to do that at all. In your room, of all places!"

"Hey, *Oshare!*" I waved my hand at his face. "This room is a safe space, okay? Okay?" I convinced him and he nodded. "Your heart feels so heavy. There's so much guilt in you." I opened my mouth as I saw something else in his mind. "You hate yourself?"

"Why won't I? My life is useless, just moving aimlessly without any purpose at all." He wailed.

"That's not true!"

"How would you know that? Is it because you can read minds?" He asked.

"No. Because no one's useless." I replied. "Now how about you get in the shower, freshen up, put your clothes back on, and when you're done? We'll talk properly and I can help you feel better." I tried to make my voice as sweet as possible and thankfully, it worked.

While letting him stay was far from the most rational decision, making a scene or letting him leave in his state would have crushed the confidence that needed lifting.

He did all that and came out dressed, then sat next to me on the bed.

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"Alright, Aaron. I want you to be honest with me. Why did you want to kill yourself on Tuesday?" I asked, but he gave no reply, still lowering his face. "Aaron. This is a safe space. Please tell me. Was it because of what Akpevwe said or that she 'broke up' with you? What happened?" I pleaded and after letting out a cough, he spilled the beans.

"I just see nothing good in myself, my uncle and aunty insult me at every chance they get, I'm not cool like the rest of the boys, no girl likes me and they insult me too, not to mention that Akpevwe called me gullible and easy to manipulate and I'm also struggling with porn and masturbating." It took some time to take this all in, processing my words in my head but I replied to him.

"Aaron, can I tell you something? Porn and masturbating is not a struggle unless you make it in your mind to be one. If you don't, it's just a stage of growth." I said to him, "My mom told me she had the same problem as a teenager. It's normal. Your hormones are acting up."

"Wait. So you masturbate too?" He asked.

"No, I don't. I will admit that I have feelings of sex here and there, but since most people think I'm a witch, I won't be having sex soon or ever." I answered. "I want you to know that this isn't a problem, but it's things like self-hate and the inner pain that make you feel like it is."

"Are you sure?"

"Beyond sure. Just focus on the best of yourself and focus less on what you think are struggles, etcetera." I told him. "Speaking about that, what do you think is the best of yourself?"

"I told you Reho. There's nothing good about me!" He cried out, but I held my ground.

"Give me your hand!" I said in a deep tone.

"What?"

"I SAID GIVE ME YOUR HAND!" I commanded him and, whether out of fear or obedience, he gave me his hand and I went into his head. "You loved playing musical instruments. You used to play in the school assembly when you were a kid."

"Yes. Yes, I did." He stuttered.

"You can also draw. And paint!" I said. "You are good at mathematics. You have computer knowledge, you want to study programming and you're good at it." I left his mind and looked at him directly. "You can do all these things. I saw your past, and how happy you were as a child. I saw your

future. It's astronomical." I had seen no one's future previously, and though I didn't get a clear look this time, I knew the levels he would reach.

"It is?"

"Of course it is. But it's being blocked out by these negative thoughts." I told him. "I saw how your aunt traumatized you."

"Yeah. She had a habit of yelling at me and..."

"I meant sexual trauma." I interrupted him. Bringing up a dark memory in his life was the last thing he would've wanted but the need overshadowed the want. "I saw how your uncle beat you up when you told him that," I said, and soon, tears formed in his eyes.

"It still hurts me!" He sobbed, and I hugged him, putting his face on my chest like I'd hold my child when I had one.

"I know it does, but you have to let go of the pain and everything that's making you depressed. It's the only way to be happy again."

"I don't think I can do that." He muffled.

"I know. That's why I'm going to help you." I said and raised his head up.

"You're going to help me quit porn?"

"NO. But I can set you free of the pain in your heart, and that may lead to you eventually quitting," I replied, then put my finger in his head.

"What are you doing?" He asked, very nervous and skeptical. I responded by putting a finger of my other hand on his lip. Mind manipulation was uncharted territory for me but I had to try, it was the only way to save this kid.

"Shut up! And let me take your pain." I said softly and went directly into his head, then manipulated his mind. "Now embrace happiness!" I said and immediately let go. He fell flat on the bed for about 2 minutes, unconscious, before waking up.

"How are you feeling, Aaron?" I asked him, curious if it worked, and worried that I harmed someone's kid while trying to help."

DAVID RAY - THE PSYCHE

"I don't know why, but I'm just feeling really, really positive and optimistic. Like there's something great about me, but it's more than a feeling, it's reality." He said and swung my arms, wrapping him in a hug. "How did you do it Reho?" He asked,

"I've never done it before, but I just felt since I could read minds and thoughts, maybe I could change them."

"So you made me happy?"

"I pushed all your positive memories to the front and the negative ones to the back," I replied to him and he kept smiling, broader than he ever did since I met him.

"Thank you so much, Reho. That's two I owe you now." He said. "Mind if I sleep over? I could do with a break from my aunty and uncle." I'd be a different evil if I turned him down.

"Sure. I'll talk to my mother!"