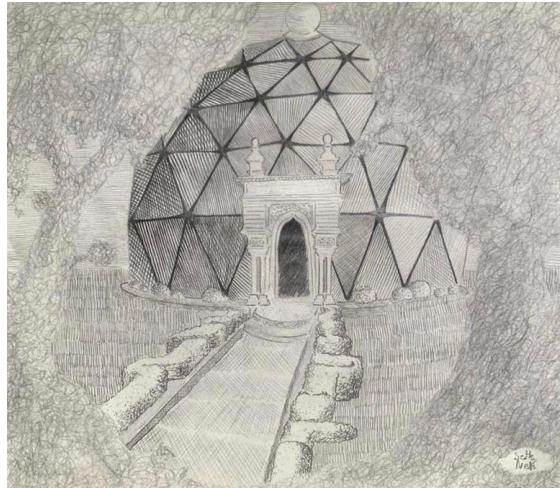


## An excerpt from MBEGU

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### Chapter 1



#### **Lawrence, I'll pluck your eyes out if they cause you to sin**

Inside the newly constructed Dome of Mbegu deities, dawn lathers her golden breath on the bare back of an eleven-year-old boy. The boy is prepared for the warm intrusion. As the future leader of Adavera, nothing should ever catch him unaware, not even the rising sun.

Taut and lean and weathered, the boy's honey-coloured skin is textured in threads of scars, pimpled by beads of sweat—a nearly ornamental shimmer on his flesh.

With one arm tucked behind his back, the boy carries himself through push-ups as the Northern Sea carries a powerful ship, lowering himself with controlled command, raising himself with determined strength.

Subtly, the boy's gaze floats upwards.

His target of surveillance is the drill sergeant who ushers in his every day: Kaherezah, his 80-year-old grandmother, his only living relative. Her petite, downy shape, swaddled from head to toe in a purple woollen wrapper, is imprisoned behind the curtain of the boy's eyelashes. But the boy can see clearly that her head is bowed, crow's feet diverging from her tightly shut eyes as she murmurs her incantations under her breath.

Those who see Kaherezah's four-foot-five frame walk across the village courtyard whisper about what her abilities might be. Though they might not see what power she carries, they know better than to doubt it, better than to judge a book by its cover. Her demure presence cannot dull the fact that she is the High Priestess of the Potency, the

bride of Kurusema Mbegu, the only being allowed to access the divine powers of the MOTHER.

A drop of sweat splashes into his eye.

*Ouch!*

Blinking in the pain, the boy temporarily loses himself in a thought that is licking up his spine. This particular thought is a fantasy so beguiling, that whenever it visits, it spreads hardness to parts of him. The thought is this:

*By Potency, it would be so sweet to die right now. Just imagine if Kaherezah's rage finally killed me...*

In a calculatingly swift motion, the boy's eyes shoot back up to his grandmother. Her eyes are open now. Her gaze piercing into the ground, sharp like two pieces of polished obsidian. She closes them again, entering into a deeper state of meditation. The boy's gaze quickly travels over the diminutive length of her—the woollen wrapper, faded from years of wear, flowing down in muted tones, merging with the earth; the fervent rush of her lips as she prays.

Watching her is a timid passion of his. Kaherezah seems softer in the light, more subdued somehow. As though the warmth of the rising sun is slowly peeling back her layers to reveal that soft, shiny, light thing inside her bones. The boy knows that she has it inside of her. He sees it glowing when she's asleep.

Often the boy has wondered what heinous event might occur if Kaherezah gave in to that softness buried deep inside her. He has dreamed of his grandmother soothing his wounds with a gentle kiss on his brow. He has dreamed of her forgetting all the things she learned from his grandfather. He has dreamed of her forgetting the Potency. Unfortunately, the boy has always been aware that these are merely fantasies. His grandmother is a High Priestess, and High Priestesses of the Potency do not have time for the niceties other humans can afford—especially not when they are responsible for turning a boy into a god.

A moist gurgle suddenly erupts from Kaherezah's throat.

The boy quickly lowers his gaze, gulping hard. When Kaherezah smells emotions that disgust her, she...

A thick yellow mucus splatters on the red earth before the boy. His grandmother's phlegm. The boy grimaces in anticipation. He has displeased his grandmother, somehow.

'Lawrence!' Kaherezah's voice is thin like wind, her palm raised to the corner of her mouth, wiping wetness.

The boy's working elbow is paralysed at that moment. He is crumbling until his other arm swoops in to the rescue, slapping the ground, breaking his fall in a high plank.

'Yes, Kaherezah!' The boy mutters. *Potency damn me in fire!* His mind scrambles and swears.

The percussion within him is manic. Breaths are boulders burrowing up his chest. His head, a savannah pounding with the stampede of a thousand elephants.

'What are you, Lawrence?' Kaherezah asks, her cane tapping the ground in a steady rhythm.

'I am the temple of the Most-High God,' the boy shakily answers.

'Who is the Most-High God, Lawrence?'

'The Potency of Mbegu is the Most-High God,' his voice breaks.

'Is this statue behind me God?' Her metal cane rises to the east.

The boy's gaze follows the cane, settling on a giant stone primate. 'No,' the boy says, registering what he always registers when he sees the stone primate. 'That is just one of God's faces.'

As was taught to the boy during his divinity class, this deity shaped like a chimpanzee was erected by his grandfather, Kurusema Mbegu. Kaherezah taught the boy that after decades of ardent prayer and supplication, his grandfather finally received what he asked for, when ancestor after ancestor, and father after father, dove into his bloodstream; eager to breathe through him and hunt through him and live through him. God became flesh, and flesh became God; the Potency was born. Overcome by his ancestors, Kurusema neither ate nor slept, until he moulded to perfection a 15-foot chimpanzee—the first of many stone idols.

'Now, boy,' Kaherezah growls, her voice muting the world, 'if your focus is not on the idol which stands behind me, is your adoring gaze meant for me? A... a... mere servant?' She asks this incredulously, as if the thought of it alone is absurd.

A dread of realisation impales the boy. He has indeed performed a grave sin. Gritting his teeth, he braces for impact, his eyes filling with water.

'Lawrence,' she says warningly. 'I'll pluck your eyes out if they cause you to sin.'

Before the boy can form the next vowels, before he can repent, a nearly inaudible hiss slides from his grandmother's lips. By its authority, an icy wind blows in from the earth, lightly kissing the boy's face, his mouth, his eyes—the dusty precursor to hell. Inky, shadowy limbs emerge from nothing, blanching out the golden glow of sunrise, draping every surface in opaque blackness. And then cold, clammy hands grip every inch of the boy's body, holding him in place.

Kaherezah's voice rings clear as a bell. 'By the power of the MOTHER, Oh Great and powerful Potency, show your son the way.' Kaherezah gleefully raises the cane high, a servant parting waters, her cane the symbol of obedience. And then melancholic whispers erupt, in clawing, slicing sounds, tearing through the air.

*The boy will remember to fear us!* The thousands of whispers chorus.

The boy turns to catch them. All he sees is swirling darkness, growing and angry shadows. And then after a deep and silent breath of time, the shadows attack. Invisible blades, sharp as razors, cut into the boy's skin: his cheeks, around his eyes, his chest, his arms and thighs and stomach and groin. The agony is unbearable.

'Ayiii maaa! Please, I beg, stop!' Hoarse cries claw from the boy's gut. 'I will chase the spirits of the fathers until I wear their faces,' the boy cries out.

All at once the ancestors vanish: their thick black shadows melting into thin air.

Dawn then abruptly resumes her throne, turning everything crisp and auburn, illuminating the boy's world again, inspiring incandescence to burst through the innumerable windows of the Dome.

Even the birds are animated again, streaking the air with colours and filling life with song.

Humid warmth lathers the boy's back, crawling down his legs, leaking delicious heat into the flesh torn open by his ancestors, by the Potency.

'The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom,' Kaherezah growls.

Running his tongue over cracked, bloody lips, the boy drinks in the familiar savoury tinge of metal.