

Caretakers

by

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The Caretakers arrived the year the skies turned yellow.

They had travelled the stars in pyramids the size of cities with mirrored planes that reflected the acid clouds, the poisoned seas, the folly of men ...

'Your world is doomed,' the Caretakers said.

The leaders of the world hung their heads and replied: 'We know.'

'We shall take specimens of whatever remains,' the Caretakers said. 'We shall take them to a new world, and start again.'

'Yes!' the leaders cried. 'We'll select the best of us! We'll give them to you with archives of everything we—'

'Just the plants and the animals' said the Caretakers. 'Not you.'

‘She’s gone,’ Aisha said when she returned home, ‘in her sleep, I think.’

‘So quickly?’ Bakari didn’t look up from his book.

‘The ozone depletion rate has increased. And she was very old.’

He nodded, thinking, at seventy, Mrs Ezekeil was only five years older than him and eight years older than his wife.

Aisha busied herself adjusting the geiger apparatus. ‘Do you remember what tribe she was from?’

‘I’m not sure; Tongwe, I think ... Aisha, listen to me. We should leave.’

The young had gone: abandoning the village for the cities to spend their final years watching the light fade from human civilisation. Only the elderly remained, gradually succumbing to untreatable viruses, cancers, or more commonly, despair.

‘I don’t know much about the Tongwe,’ Aisha said, looking sourly at a spent battery pack. ‘Did she tell you what she wanted us to do after she—’

‘I’ll do the same as always: a burial, a few words, then wait for the next one.’ Bakari took the screwdriver from her hand and held her tightly. ‘You know we have a better chance in the crater. It still rains there; we can drink the water if we treat it.’

‘Our friends are here.’

‘They’re welcome to join us, but we must go.’

‘All the animals there are dead, or have been taken. What will we eat?’

‘We can grow things.’

‘For how long, Bakari?’

He shrugged. ‘For as long as we can.’

'We can change,' the leaders of the world pleaded.

The Caretakers said: 'It has been decided. We are sorry.'

'You must give us a chance!'

'We cannot.'

'We can learn from our mistakes!'

'That's what you said the last time.'

'You can't just ... Wait, what do you mean "the last time"?''

Bakari and Aisha gouged an acre of farm land from the crater's tainted soil, working through the days and late into the nights. They'd brought enough gasoline to run the generator for a few months, and Bakari sometimes found more on his foraging trips outside the crater.

'You're using more fuel in your expeditions than you're bringing back,' Aisha argued. 'You shouldn't make so many trips.'

Bakari said: 'The Caretakers' language has a thousand different words meaning "try". It's the one thing we can learn from those assholes.'

The next day he returned with seventy gallons of fuel and a box of mangoes.

Aisha said, 'They're too ripe,' with juice running down her chin, 'but so good. Did you get them from the village? How are our friends doing?'

'I travelled further,' Bakari said, looking down at the floor.

'No wonder you were away so long. Did you drop in on the village? How are the sisters? I bet they've moved into our old—'

'They're gone, Aisha.'

'What?'

'They're all gone. I think there was a struggle. I know Iotunde kept guns, and these days the smallest disagreement will drive people to the precipice. Or it may have been mass suicide. The wounds made it hard to—'

'When?'

'Why does that matter?'

'When did they die, Bakari?'

'Two months ago, perhaps longer. I don't know.'

'And you would have kept this from me.'

'You seem tired lately. I didn't want to worry you.'

'It's because we left. We were holding them together! You knew that and you made us leave anyway!'

'It's not our job to fix the world, Aisha!'

'And that kind of thinking, Bakari, is why the world is broken.' She rose sharply from the table and went outside, taking the last mango on Earth with her.

'You're taking the rhinos?'

'Yes.'

'All of them?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'There are so few left; they will not continue unless we take every one, and even then it may not be enough.'

'But ... all of them?'

'Do you still need them for some reason?'

'Well, no, I ... I suppose not.'

Sophia wandered into the encampment while Bakari was away foraging. He'd been gone for three days and he returned with a heart of lead: in his travels, he hadn't run across a living soul. And now his sorrow turned to confusion as he stared at his wife who seemed to think she could hide the interloper by spreading her arms wide in front of her.

'Don't be angry,' she said.

Bakari looked at the square of cabbages he'd spent a year cultivating, now crushed flat.

'This is Sophia,' Aisha added quickly. 'She's an elephant.'

'I worked as a safari guide for thirty years; I know she's an elephant. Where did she come from?'

'How would I know?'

'And you called her Sophia?'

'It was painted on her side.'

Bakari rubbed his chin. She is old. Her meat will be tough, but if I dig a smoking pit around the camp I can preserve it. It could last two years or more.

Sophia snorted loudly and wrapped her trunk around Aisha's waist. Aisha coughed twice and quickly wiped her nose, though not before Bakari saw the blood running from her nostrils.

'We're not eating her, husband,' Aisha said, stifling another cough. 'She can help with the ploughing, you can use her to carry things in and out of the crater. She will be company for us.'

'Yes, of course you're right,' Bakari said, his soul broken. 'She'll have to earn her keep.'

'She will.'

And so, after a breakfast consisting of cabbages, Sophia went to work. She could pull their makeshift plough faster than two humans; she could dig potatoes from the earth with her trunk and place them in baskets mounted on her flanks. She could lift and carry with little coaxing or instruction.

Bakari, begrudgingly impressed, said that she may have come from a sanctuary. 'The staff probably set the animals free when they became too sick to look after them. She may have walked hundreds of miles looking for someone to take care of her.'

'And now here we are,' Aisha said, 'taking care of each other.'

One day, a few months after she arrived, Sophia vanished. Frantic with worry, Bakari took the truck to search for her. When he came back the following day, Sophia had returned, with her baskets full of supplies.

‘Do not ask me how,’ Aisha said, hugging the elephant’s trunk. Aisha had been too weak to accompany him on his search, but the joy of Sophia’s reappearance brought her new life. Bakari prayed it would last.

‘A guitar,’ he said, taking the battered instrument from the basket and trying a few chords. ‘Where on earth did she find a guitar?’

‘And how did she know you play?’

Bakari snorted. ‘So she is psychic now, is she?’

Aisha told him to stop being uncharitable and play something.

And so he played, every night, for Aisha, and Sophia who swayed gently as he tripped and crashed his way through the only two songs he knew: *Clair De Lune* (learned because the tempo was one he could manage), and *Bridge Over Troubled Water* (the song his wife loved above all others).

'Our last ships will soon depart for EarthIII. We thank you for your cooperation.'

'We didn't have a choice,' replied the last surviving member of the UN Council. 'I don't suppose you've reconsidered.'

'We cannot take any of you. We are sorry.'

'Then all I can say is ... fuck you; every last one of you.'

It was the first time Bakari played her song all the way through. Aisha, her head resting on his shoulder, her frail body covered with a blanket, her breathing so shallow, whispered, 'That was beautiful.' She tried to wipe the blood trickling from his nose, but didn't have the strength, so when he held her close and pressed his eyes shut, she smiled, and slipped away.

Sophia helped him dig the grave, nuzzling him softly as he wept a silent prayer. Bakari patted her trunk and said, 'I think it's time we said goodbye, Sophia.'

It took him another six days to dig a fire pit: a deep circle with two arcs sprouting outward from its centre. When Sophia tried to help, he pushed her away.

He filled the pit with whatever would burn: dried shrubs, fruit, furniture from his home, the last of his gasoline ... On the seventh night, he lit the fire and went to sleep.

Sophia woke him a few hours later, tapping his head with her trunk and blowing softly into his ear.

'Sophia, what are you—?'

Bakari screamed and scooted backwards on his heels.

The Caretakers looked at each other with huge unblinking eyes, then at Bakari. They stood seven feet tall, little more than bleached white exoskeletons with small oval heads missing their noses and mouths.

Bakari struggled to his feet and watched them as they examined the grave.

'You came,' he said.

One of them looked back to the burning pit. *'That is our symbol of greeting,'* it said, its voice a light inside his head. *'How did you know of it?'*

Bakari told them he'd seen them making the sign with their hands on television, many years ago. The creatures looked at each other, then both asked: *'Why did you summon us?'*

'This is Sophia.' Bakari pointed at Sophia who was carefully straightening the stones on Aisha's grave. 'She came to stay with us, and my wife said we should keep her because she knew that one day I'd be alone. Sophia is loyal and brave and hardworking, and we wouldn't have survived without her. I ask that you take her with you.'

One said, *'We have enough African elephants.'*

'No, not if you don't have Sophia.'

'If we take her,' said Other, *'you will have no one.'*

‘I will soon join my wife. If you don’t take her, then she’ll have no one.’

‘We are sorry; we cannot—’

‘You’re taking nothing of us,’ Bakari shouted. ‘The things we’ve done: our stories, our music, our art ... it’ll die with us! We’ll blink out of existence as though we were never here!’

‘She is not human.’

‘She was loved by humans. She changed two humans in strange and unexpected ways. She is everything about us that’s worth saving, so please ... take her.’

The Caretakers turned to face one another, conversing in silence. Other tilted its head stiffly to each side, stepping back then forward. One followed his movements. They repeated the pattern again and again, eventually slowing until they stood motionless.

The darkness above tore in two, and a pyramid descended from the poisoned clouds, its surface playing visions of the stars.

‘We think,’ Other said, without taking its eyes from One, *‘that perhaps we need more elephants.’*

‘One elephant,’ said One sharply, *‘One more African elephant: we agreed. Why must you always do this?’*

‘Thank you.’ Bakari wiped the tears from his eyes. He pressed himself against Sophia’s flank, drawing strength from her heartbeat. ‘You be a good girl,’ he whispered. ‘Remember us.’

Then he turned to the Caretakers. ‘She likes—’

The pyramid shone as bright as a sun, and when he opened his eyes, the Caretakers, the pyramid and Sophia had gone.

‘—cabbages.’

Bakari searched the sky for her until the fire began to die. He picked up his guitar and lay down next to Aisha, as the night closed in around him.

‘Clair De Lune, my love – I think I have it now.’