

## The Souvenir



Given the circumstances, Imogen thought the sane thing to do was close her eyes, count to five, then look again:

*One ... two ... three ... four ...*

No, he was still standing there; wrapped in little more than a red blanket and holding a spear that scraped the ceiling. His sandals caked in red clay; his greying hair braided with wooden beads.

“Er ... hello?” She lifted her hand and wriggled her fingers in what she hoped was a friendly, non-threatening gesture.

He didn’t so much as blink.

“Mum!” Imogen called out. “Mum, there’s a Masai Warrior in your kitchen!”

She heard the main bedroom door slam open, followed by the sound of high-heeled shoes thundering down the stairs.

Delores appeared at the kitchen door, gasping for air.

“How did you get in?” she demanded, between huffs.

“You gave me a key, remember? So I could feed Mortimer while you were away?”

“That doesn’t mean you can just come traipsing in and out at all hours of the day, Imogen.”

“It’s ten in the morning. I just thought I’d pop in and ask –” she eyed the Masai tribesman dwarfing the refrigerator, “– how was the trip?”

Delores looked at the Masai with a pained, apologetic smile.

“I wanted you and your sister here when I made introductions, but since you’ve already let yourself in ...” She steeled herself, took four steps over to the statue-like Masai, and grasped his massive hand in hers.

“This is Achebè,” she said, “My husband.”

Mortimer climbed in through the cat-flap, took one look at the Masai, decided he wanted nothing to do with whatever was going on, and bolted straight back out.

“Your husband.” Imogen said.

Delores nodded and placed her other hand over Achebè's. "We met in the Ngorongoro Crater, close to the Serengeti."

"I teach geography, Mother; I know where the Ngorongoro Crater is."

"Achebè was trying to free a baby hippo that had got itself trapped in a mud pool."

"How very noble."

"So, I told the men on our tour truck to get out and help him."

"Of course you did."

"Anyway, the hippo was returned to its mother, the chaps returned to the truck, and Achebè and I discovered we had a mutual—"

"Do you have any idea," said Imogen, "how dangerous it is to get out of a safari truck when there are wild animals close by!"

Delores treated her to that infuriating, bemused look; the one that said, *Imogen, you're being a drama queen*, without her actually saying, *Imogen, you're being a drama queen*. "I'm well aware of that, darling. Achebè helped keep the other hippos distracted while we—"

"And when I said 'don't forget to bring back souvenirs'," Imogen continued, abandoning the "wild animals" argument as a lost cause, "this is not what I meant!"

"I am not a souvenir."

Imogen jumped back a step and shrieked. "You—you—"

"Speak English, yes," said Achebè.

Not only did he speak English, he spoke it, Imogen observed, with a slight northern accent.

"I think we should all sit down and start again." Delores said, half smiling, half smirking.

Imogen sat down on one of the breakfast bar stools. She folded her arms and watched Achebè as he stepped into the hallway to prop his spear in the umbrella stand. He returned a moment later and sat down at the bar, leaving an empty stool between them.

Delores, meanwhile, made a round of hot drinks: a latte for her daughter, a mint tea for herself, and an Earl Grey for Achebè.

"Christ knows what Dad's going to say about this," Imogen muttered.

“If he can shack up with a twenty-six-year-old air stewardess,” Delores said, “then I can marry a Masai farmer.”

Imogen couldn't really argue with that. “So you're a farmer,” she said, turning a sour eye on Achebè. “When I saw the spear, I assumed you were a hunter or something.”

Achebè smiled and sipped his tea. “A very common mistake among tourists,” he said. “The spear is for seeing off wild animals.”

“Ah, I see. Like lions and tigers and such.”

“There are no tigers in Africa,” Achebè said. “The main threat to livestock is from hyenas.”

“And when I think of the money we spent on that geography degree . . .,” said Delores, smiling into her mint tea.

Imogen pursed her lips and pressed on regardless. “So, what livestock do you farm?”

“Goats and cattle,” the Masai replied. “About fifteen in all.”

“That's not very many.”

“It's all I need.”

“The Masai are about contentment, not greed.” Delores squeezed Achebè's hand. “They're happy with what they have.”

The Masai may have nodded; Imogen couldn't be certain.

“Mr Achebè,” she said, “I wonder if I may have a moment alone with my mother.”

“Anything you want to say to me, you can say in front of my husband.”

“I think it would best,” Achebè said, rising from his stool, “if the two of you spoke in private. I shall wait in the hallway.”

After he'd left the kitchen, Imogen rounded on Delores:

“Jesus Christ, Mother, what were you thinking! You can't just *take* him from his home, like he's some sort of tourist trinket! What will he do here! How's he going to make a living? How's he going to fit in! You're the mayor, for God's sake; what will the town council say!”

Delores sat quietly, drinking her tea.

“I will 'fit in' just fine,” Achebè said from the doorway.

“I thought you were waiting in the hallway,” Imogen said sharply.

“You were shouting at my wife.”

“I think you mean, *my mother*.”

He stood behind Delores and placed his hands on her shoulders. “I will have no trouble fitting in because I have lived here before: twenty years ago, while studying at Durham. I am sure much has changed, but I am also certain that I can—”

“You went to Durham University?” Imogen narrowed her eyes in disbelief.

“I’m sorry, didn’t I mention that?” Delores said mildly.

“No, Mother, you didn’t!”

“Imogen, is this sudden hostility because *you* didn’t get a place at Durham?”

Imogen went from *annoyed* to *apoplectic* without stopping at *angry*. “YOU JUST CAN’T LET THAT GO, CAN YOU?”

“I will make us more hot drinks,” Achebè said. “I understand that, to the English, they are a soothing balm for the soul.”

While he operated Delores’s industrial coffee machine with the precision of a seasoned barista, Achebè monologued a summary of his life so far: studying for a degree in Classics; returning home as a teacher to his tribe; his “retirement” when a student of his took up the mantle; his life as a farmer and conservationist; and his plans for the future ...

“An alpaca farm,” Imogen echoed. “You want to start an alpaca farm.”

“If there is one thing the English need, it’s thick sweaters,” Achebè said.

“We’ve worked it all out,” said Delores. “I’ll sell this place, and we’ll use the money to buy a farm close by.”

“Alpacas,” Imogen said, her voice barely a whisper.

“Yes, Imogen, alpacas.”

“And what is *he* putting into this venture of yours?”

“Maybe you should ask him,” said Delores.

“Fine.” Imogen turned in her seat to face the Masai. “Mr Achebè—”

“It’s just Achebè,” said Achebè.

“My mother has always had something of a romantic spirit. While I’m sure she thinks you and she are ... compatible, I have to confess, I have my doubts.

“This farm of yours; if it fails, she’ll lose everything, and I don’t think that’s fair, do you?”

“Indeed,” said Achebè, “which is why I too will provide financial assistance.”

Imogen smiled in what Delores thought was a rather patronising way. “And how much are you putting into this?”

“Four hundred thousand of your colonial pounds,” Achebè replied, in what Imogen could have sworn was a heavier African accent.

“But you said you were just a goat farmer,” she said, feeling the high ground crumbling beneath her.

“Among other things.” Achebè’s blanket started ringing. “Excuse me.” He tucked his hand underneath it and took out his mobile phone. He listened for a few seconds, then informed Delores and Imogen that it was his bonds broker, and he would take the call in the hallway.

Imogen watched him leave before turning to her mother. “Bonds broker?”

“He likes to dabble,” said Delores.

“From the Masai Mara?”

“There’s a mobile phone mast there. He gets better reception than we get in Kent.” Delores smiled the smile of the righteous. “I think an apology is in order, don’t you?”

“Fine, but what happened to the Masai being *‘happy with what they have?’*”

Delores shrugged. “Well, my darling, it just takes a little more to make him happy.”

The doorbell played a burst of *Beethoven’s Fifth*, followed by the sound of Achebè opening the front door, which, in turn, was followed by a sharp scream splitting the air.

“Ah,” said Delores. “That’ll be your sister.”