



CHILDREN OF
SABA

EPIC OF APHRIKE BOOK 1



N.K. READ

SAMPLE CHAPTER

CHILDREN OF SABA

Book I of the
THE EPIC OF APHRIKE
Trilogy

by
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Before the Beginning

Though time had stood still for him, the guardian was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain his sheath. His youthful features shifted momentarily in cadence to a clap of thunder that boomed across the heavens above, unveiling for a quick instant the weary churning soul of an ancient man who longed to be released to timelessness yet was chained, by purpose, to present reality.

He lifted his head and drew in a long breath. He smelt immortal menace in the cold night air that blew in from the lake. It fanned over his almost too perfect, sculptured face and wafted over his fiery leonine hair, penetrating deep into his old, tired bones.

Fingering his brass Coptic cross, he shuffled to the door with his cloak rippling behind him like a turbulent river. Pulling open its small shutter window, he peered out into the gloom. He could just make out the shapes of the other monks' huts on the hill below him, but beyond them, the shadows melded into the murkiness of the thick marshes and the restless waters of the great lagoon.

Fierce wind shook the small hut to its core and the guardian's heart raced. His mind's eye was fixed on the sky above the bay churning with dark, ominous clouds that flared with electromagnetic energy. The massive release of force was but a mere reflection of the agitated storm deep in the cosmos where coronal mass ejections released magnitudes of matter and waves of radiation into space above the sun's roiling surface.

'Things are not as they seem,' he thought.

The eerie tempest had been mounting over time, precipitated by whispers of capricious ghouls, ferocious serpents and dark djinni spirits persecuting the innocent, savaging the holy and possessing the sons of men. News of these malevolent hauntings had filtered across the mists and backwaters of the isolated cove, causing the ageless man great anguish.

The ganeloč were rising over the earth again.

Shivering, he drew his cloak closer to his skin, his gaze following the unusual sight of white flakes falling through the air all around the hut and inlet.

'Even the birabiro have lost heart, he whispered to himself. 'They who were most pure on this earth now shed their souls and wings.'

A soft voice slipped over his thoughts. *Fear not. However long the night, the dawn will break.*

The words gave him a modicum of peace. With a deep breath the ageless man shut the window and turned back to the rudimentary desk behind him, impatient to be finished with his scribing.

Spread out on the rickety wooden table, were piles of papyrus and goatskin manuscripts. Others, with ink still wet on their wispy surfaces, were pegged carefully to dry on strings that run the length and breadth of the small hut.

Picking up his reed pen he bent over the papyri, carefully outlining the fading words, filling the ancient hieroglyphics in with sooty, beeswax infused ink that he kept warmed above a flickering oil lantern.

The lamp's flame was currently victim to a horde of dusky moths, sending shards of flickering light through the wildly hued oleaginous liquids residing in the clear crucibles and alembic globes scattered throughout the earthen floor.

Whilst he wrote, his eyes pooled with the ancient knowledge and he mumbled the words, breathing life into the crawling text.

'People of Sheba;
This tale is one of great tragedy, of unfathomable wisdom,
Of unseen mysteries and of triumphant victories.
For the sake of our people, and our generations to come,
'Remember these words; keep them close to your heart
For they will guide you ...
Remember from whence we came ...
How we rose in the fifth millennium,
On earth's second-largest expanse
Known to the Ancients as Aphrike
– The land free of cold and horror,
Lauded by the First Men of Olde
as the 'Opening of the Ka'
– The womb and birthplace of mankind.
We are the Children of Saba,
Destined before the very beginning, purposed afore the present now,
Celebrated and feared by the illustrious, the brave and the wise
As the mighty and powerful who rose from the loins of Ibrahim and Cush
We are the anointed of grace, the offspring of valour
Who thrived on the vast highlands of the Samen
Who carved channels in earth's living rock and formed vast lakes
Who joined mountains with magnificent arches, aqueducts and bridges
Who raised the pyramids, we who formed the grottoes of the Nile and scooped out
The caverns of Salsette and Elephante ...'

Suddenly, a huge gust rushed through the wooden slats of the small shack. The man started and his pen stilled as the door to the hut suddenly flew open. Taking a deep breath, he turned around slowly.

A presence loomed in the darkness, a cloud of swirling, flaming particles that slowly coalesced into a titanic, black silhouette, complete with two hind limbs, a pair of clawing forearms and a gargantuan dome.

It has begun.

Courage. It is the appointed time.

The cloven hooved leviathan reared off the ground at twice the height of a man, thrusting its colossal skull through the open doorway. Its head was four-sided, rotating slowly and malevolently on the fulcrum of its thick neck stem, each plane shifting to reveal a different visage - a demon, a man, a goat, and a vulture. Above the revolving skull was a crown of seven protracted and curved horns ringing the massive cranium.

Its body was a chiselled, giant sculpture of bunched muscle squeezed under a tight membrane shimmering with translucent shapes and bright colours, forming and fading in rapid succession.

The guardian tensed, rising smoothly to his feet, transfixed by the creature's burning eyes that seemed to pierce through his every fibre.

With a mighty roar from its frothing, cavernous mouth, the satyr crashed through the doorway. It bared a pair of foot long ferocious molars dripping with a viscous liquid and breathed out a cloud of dark matter permeated with flaming, sparking embers.

Hanni, tafash. You were hiding and yet I have found you.

The telepathic whisper slid agonisingly over the guardian's extra sensory planes and he fought back fear, staring boldly into the eyes of perdition.

Correction. I let you find me. You were without sight until I lifted my cloak.

Täbtaba. Utter nonsense. I sensed you from afar before your inner eye saw me. I am after all the Prince of the powers of the air and the scion of Ng'ai. I am like He is, omniscient and in all places.

Lies! You deny the truth with such impunity that you have become the embodiment of untruth. You, who fell and were stripped of all power, will never ever come close to a glimmer of who He is. Instead you will remain as you have been through the billowing folds of time, languishing and drifting in obscurity.

BäCH'e! My wandering had purpose. I was forced to scour the nebulas and the debris of fallen stars for millennia for what is rightfully mine. And now finally, in this age, I will claim the mäfca and return to sit on the highest throne of the White Mountain where the Amalkt assemble.

The ancient man scoffed aloud at the ludicrous words.

Your horns have grown long through cunning and you will devour your own dragon's tail until you are no more. For you are the scorned, the despised and the reviled. You threw away your birthright and for that you will never be welcomed back to that which you seek. You will vanish like the morning star from the daytime sky and be rejected by all, visible and invisible. As above, so below.

Rage and loathing swept through the hut like a tidal wave and the guardian steeled himself against the soul destroying onslaught, bending his head against the scorching, black wind.

When the fiery blast finally receded, his eyes met the flaming irises before him. He glared defiantly into the cimmerician shades he found there, while wiping ashes from his ever-youthful face.

SayT'an of Is, your days are numbered. I will torment you before your time and avenge my loss. You will be annihilated. This is my word, as testified by rank after rank of heralds. This was made absolute, even before you even came into the present existence. Your fate is sealed!

Taking a step forward, the man of old rapidly darted to the left, moving so fast that his features blurred in the flickering light. His outstretched fingers reached for the long spear that was resting on the wall a few feet away and in one smooth movement, he cast it in the direction of the satyr. The weapon hissed through the air and sunk between two of the large curved horns.

Roaring in agony, the creature hastily backed out of the sagging, twisted doorway, crashing into the gloom. The guardian gave chase, seizing a shotel sword hanging to the right of his doorframe and charging into the obscure graveyard next to his hut. He cut and thrust at the thrashing creature whose fervent movements finally dislodged the spear, flinging it to the ground.

The man was a formidable warrior, bounding lightly across the ground in a whirl of movement, dancing over gravestones, sliding under tree branches, all the while thrusting the sword at the snarling beast, ducking its thrashing claws with ease. His shotel found its mark several times and the vicious wounds it inflicted dripped with luminescent liquid, staining the ground in a riot of shifting, viscid hues.

Still the unearthly creature advanced; its primeval roar shattering through the guardian's psyche.

Where is the häbt, the mäfca? Tell me where it is!

A flash of silver broke through the melee and a sleek bird dived onto the satyr, clawing at its gargantuan four sided head.

'No, no! Leave me be!' the ancient man shouted at the gryfalcon. 'I will take care of this. Seek out the aTS'nany and return with his present location!'

The bird obeyed, taking off and disappearing rapidly into the nether gloom.

The satyr advanced yet again, screeching for what it sought. Ignoring the deathly screams, the ancient man continued his silent defence, dodging the barrage of claws and fangs. Their feet slipped and slid to the music of high pitched shattering as they crashed through the crystallised corpses of the rare, giant, white birabiro flies that littered the ground.

He was so deeply enthralled in the brawl that he failed to notice the squall that blew through the open door of the hut, knocking the oil lantern from the table. It dashed to the ground, engulfing the floor in flames, which burst through the shack, setting alight the clear gourds filled with the mysterious liquids.

Seeing the blaze in the corner of his eye, he broke off his attack and raced back toward the old wooden hut. The small lean-to stood little chance against the driving wind that was whipping up the flames into a raging inferno.

Inside, the crucibles shattered under the pressurised high temperature, instantly transforming the exposed solutions into hazardous gases that violently exploded on contact with the heated oxygen. The guardian was blown to his feet by the shockwave of the blast. Groaning, he sunk to his knees, clutching his heart in pain, while the incensed monster staggered toward him.

'Makeda!' he screamed. 'Makeda!!'

How many more times must I ask for the māfca?

The man whirled around to see the satyr rise up, readying itself to strike again.

At that moment, it abruptly hesitated, its attention caught by something beyond the old man. The guardian followed the creature's gaze back to the blazing hut.

A colossal apparition was rising out of the smoke and ashes, a dense mass of glowing embers and light particles that danced together to form a leonine shape. It moved toward the black satyr who sneaked forward in malignant curiosity.

A huge golden mane that was splayed with the ferocity of the wind framed the newcomer's majestic features and it stood on its thickly muscled legs, its bestial scaly body ending in a spiny tail that whipped in all directions. Suddenly the two were on each other – light and dark – twisting and writhing, snapping and hissing in a deadly dance.

Taking advantage of the disruption, the guardian leapt to his feet, dashing recklessly into the inferno. He burst through the wall of fire and into the blazing hut, frantically clutching and grabbing as many of the manuscripts as he could. Flames licked at his cloak and singed his hair, but still he persisted. In a few short moments he had the majority of the papyrus sheets in his hands, but he groaned deeply at the sight of the few that were lost, crinkling up in the blaze into ashy fragments that drifted upwards in the inferno's whirlwind.

Looking around wildly, he found a pail of water. Pulling off his cloak, he thrust the thick cotton cloth in the water, dunking it in the liquid thoroughly. From above, white-hot embers from the falling ceiling rained onto his backside and spine, causing him to scream in agony.

Ignoring his burning back, he desperately took the bundle of papyrus, wrapped his wet cloak around it then with one long last look around the hut, plunged through the flaming doorway into the open right into the path of the raging creatures.

Their violent thrashing kicked up dust, stones and debris. The man of old ducked and rolled onto the ground to safety as the creature's blazing tails whipped around the small clearing until with one final strike, the were-lion completely engulfed the black creature in an ember inferno that burnt with a searing brilliance, lighting up the surrounding trees and brush.

The two creatures exploded in a glorious, flaming conflagration that rained fire back down to the earth and burned out rapidly, leaving behind a pallid, ashen desolation.

The guardian stood in the middle of the waste, his eyes looking wildly around him, clutching the sodden bundle of manuscripts to his bare, inflamed chest.

A small, seductive whisper slid quietly through his chaotic senses.

I prowl like a hungry, famished fiend. I will haunt your every existence and remain unceasing and unbowed until I find what I seek. You cannot hide from me for I'll be waiting for you on the road to Zālāalām.

The words slipped away but not before stinging the old man's soul with their tentacled darkness and he doubled over, his body spasming in agony.

'Makeda! Forgive me!' he called out, sliding to the ground senseless.

The Call of Meroë

A loud cry echoed through the ornate corridors of No. 85 Simba Place, a midsize home set in the midst of a small, gated community in Nairobi.

Seconds later, the door to a darkened bedroom off the second floor landing was smashed in with force. Inside sat a slim faced teenager clad in a sweater vest over distressed jeans and a Skullcandy Aviator headset wrapped across his black dreadlocked hair. Oblivious to the intrusion, he was hunched in front of a bank of hi-tech monitors spread out before him while his thin fingers rapidly manipulated an outrageous motorcycle through the gritty streets of GTA's Los Santos.

There was a lean, cheetah like stance to his crouch over the cabled CPU. His thin tall body was taut and alert while his unusual silver eyes, framed by tortoise shell spectacles, hungrily swept the screen.

It was no surprise then that the animal in him roared when his leather-lined earpiece was torn roughly from his ears. Spinning with fury to confront the intrusion, he yelped in shock at the sight before him, his blood instantly running cold.

Staring back at him was a pair of strangely flaming eyes framed by a black ski mask. Worse still, the camouflaged figure toted a chilling AK47 in his hands. Looming behind him were three more similarly masked shadows.

The teen took a half leap out of his chair but a gloved palm snaked itself over his mouth firmly and wrenched his left arm from the keyboard, twisting it roughly against his back, rendering him immobile.

The first intruder tapped the teenager's shoulder with the weapon's barrel.

'Where's your sister?'

The teen's livid and frantic eyes narrowed at the guttural growl. He reared up, trying to free himself, stopping cold when the gun barrel was levelled at his skull. Slumping against the unseen captor behind him, he used a trembling right hand to point to a door across the hallway.

While two of the thugs bundled the silently struggling seventeen year old out of his room, their cronies run toward across the hallway. They paused momentarily, before one of them kicked in the door.

The husky vocals of dulcet, female voice emanated from a pair of bright red Sony speakers. The butt of a gun crashing into the unit abruptly brought the song to a stop.

The teenage girl curled up on the large red and black bed jack-knifed upright, flinging an android tablet to the side. She was a statuesque girl, her rounded curves hidden by fire engine red striped pyjamas but it was her heart shaped face - a canvas of defiance and self-possession - that momentarily captivated the intruders.

The intruders occupying the doorway were subjected to a pair of silver-grey eyes blazing with anger at the unwelcome and rare intrusion into her sanctuary.

'Who the hell are you?' she cried out.

Her red-dyed locks whipped around as she pointed to the door with a courage that defied the chilling fear now coursing through her. 'Get out!'

'Wacha mchezo, chica! You're coming with us, now!'

'As if!' she shot back defiantly, only to recoil at the sound of a loud scream.

Her eyes widened in shock. 'What have you done with my mother?'

Ignoring her demands, they silently advanced. Grabbing her from under her arms, they propelled the belligerent and kicking girl into the corridor. Behind the departing party, a plaintive call sounded out from the open Skype video chat window.

'Kendi! Kendi! What's happening? Kendi!'

The sound of a single lonely toll chiming from the clock above the mantelpiece resounded through the darkened maisonette.

Despite the early hour, hot air travelled listlessly through the open shutters. Laden with moisture, it settled on every surface, transforming into tiny beads of water under the onslaught of the wall mounted, air-conditioning unit cranking at full power high above the den.

A tall, ebony skinned man in pyjamas sat in a high chair in the middle of the room. His hands were tied with rope behind him and his feet bound to the chair legs. Above a bloodied nightshirt, his face was ashen with agony, featuring a series of open wounds.

On the floor beside him sat the two teenagers, similarly tied up. Standing in the room like sentinels from hell were five heavily armed men. More thugs could be heard ripping through cupboards, computers and drawers throughout the first level of the home, while the shadows of two others roamed the exterior of the darkened house.

'You'll pay for this!'

The defiant cry came from the woman clad in a faded velour robe. Curled up on a settee, she was bound at her hands and feet yet her fearless glower had the thugs in the room shifting in their safari boots. Nonetheless their presence remained and her threat faded into the shadows.

A flat screen TV on the far wall flickered with images from a foreign news service. Labour protests in Southern Africa; drought, famine and religious militancy overwhelming the Sahel; an increase in the number of terror outbreaks across the globe; bombings and protests; and a bulletin that reported that a leading Japanese car company was the first to mass produce cars with hover technology.

The newsreader's voice dropped when she read out a news bulletin focused on the alarming reports of dense, black clouds forming over cities throughout Africa. These anomalous, never-seen-before contours were also spreading through most of the world. Speculation on whether they were natural or a product of excessive pollution, raged in the media and on social networks. The report went on to state that scientists and meteorologists were unable to get accurate readings on their composition, their panic palpable to the public.

Watching the display with some concentration was a silhouette seated at the back of the room, his features shrouded by the shadow of night. Unseen, his lips twisted at the sound of the newsreader's last report, before he turned the screen off with a quick flick of the remote, plunging the room into a gloom punctuated by shafts of moonlight.

'So Dr Munene, here we are.'

The low, husky voice sent chills through the room.

'Will you tell me what I need to know or shall I be compelled to use everything in my power to subdue you?'

'Do your worst!' whispered the ebony skinned heavysset man in the chair, lifting his head slowly to reveal the extent of his torture. Despite his bloodied face, his steely grey eyes flashed with boldness.

His high cheekbones, his broad forehead and the chilly rage in his eyes evoked the spirit of the thousands of valiant warriors who'd marched on their enemies across the ancient battlefields of Africa.

He was clearly not man in need of pity and it would not have been a far stretch of the imagination to envision him sinking a long spear into the ribcage of his family's captor.

Using the only weapon in his power, he twisted his head to face the hidden man. He spat out a stream of blood and gore that landed on the superb crocodile leather loafers of his inquisitor.

The unseen man calmly wiped the shoe clean against the soft pile carpet.

'I'm not surprised at your resolve, your righteous anger and your honour,' he said softly. 'You were always the high achieving idealist, the purist amongst your peers. I do admire you sir, really I do. It inspires me that you started life as a lowly cow herder yet fifteen years later, you graduated from the University of Nairobi with a Doctorate in Policing and Criminology, walked into a management job with the Kenyan government and worked your way up the ranks rapidly to end up as Kenya's youngest Police Minister at the age of 31. You then turned your back on politics at 45 and begun to speak out against corruption and greed, becoming internationally renowned for your campaign against the immoral government that you'd recently served in yourself. Truly impressive!'

The man in the chair clenched his jaw but said nothing.

'I will enjoy breaking you but first let's see if your family can save you the inevitable agony. Mrs Makena Munene,' crooned the sinister figure, turning to address the woman huddled on the couch.

'Under the visage of professionalism and spotless make-up lies the sharp mind of one of Africa's luminaries in the field of anthropology. Two PhDs, one of them garnered by your ground breaking paper on the origins of the Omo Valley tribes that won the prestigious International Dissertation Field Research Fellowship Award. Will you tell me what I need to know about the key that was given to the Munene family centuries ago?'

Instead of offering the required response, the woman on the couch sucked her teeth insolently.

A long silence filled the large room and from their lofty positions on each wall, a quartet of ancient and regal elders trapped behind glass and wooden frames statically gazed down at the scene unfolding below with their striking light grey eyes.

'How about your children?' said the mysterious stranger, undeterred. 'Mwenda ... or shall we call you Sir Haq, online bandit extraordinaire. Now, now, no need to look so surprised! You know I'm talking about! How did I find out? How else? You were careless and left digital footprints all over the Net last year when you infiltrated government websites along with members of your Vudu Collective.'

The announcement had the desired effect, both parents swinging their heads to stare at their mortified son.

'You didn't know, did you Dr and Mrs Munene? Mwenda heads a hard core, hacking community. He's responsible for distributing denial of service attacks on various public service sites in the past year. He flooded them with excessive traffic causing them to crash catastrophically. Pretty extraordinary for a seventeen year old living in relative luxury in the 'burbs of Nairobi!'

The teen's silver eyes flashed under the tortoise-shell glasses slipping down his nose. 'Those ministries ... were corrupt and ... and defrauding the people of Kenya!' he stammered.

'How righteous! In fact, how bold and brave for a shy teen who hardly leaves his bedroom, has never kissed a girl and spends hours building hyper computers and gaming, rather than running around outside after a ball like most of his age mates.'

'Hey!' Mwenda's eyes flared with anger.

The man ignored him, continuing his mocking attack.

'How virtuous would you feel if you knew that your online activity led us right into your family's network? And that found all we needed to implicate your father in corruption? Or shall we say we altered a few files to our satisfaction.'

'You planted false information on our computers?' said the woman on the couch. 'Why? What have we ever done to you?'

'It's not what you've done. It's what you know. Information that I need and will do whatever I can to find it.'

'Who are you anyway?' the girl on the floor hissed at the concealed man, her fingers working furiously behind her, trying to free herself from the cords biting into her wrists.

'Ah! Kendi Munene. Who am I pales in significance to who you are! Emerging songbird with a honey-smooth voice, who ducks school to record EPs and practice with her jazz band. Who pierced her belly button on Monday, went to an illegal bar on Tuesday and rode a matatu for five hours on Wednesday with a boy she barely knows. Is there anything you'd like to tell me?'

The girl's normally quick tongue had no comeback and she swallowed nervously, her eyes dropping away from the hurt look in her mother's eyes.

'How do you know so much about us?' said Mrs Munene hoarsely.

'That's because I taught him well.'

At the soft whisper, the twins and mother whipped their heads toward the bleeding man on the chair.

'Dad?' Kendi wailed.

'I know him. You also know him. Show yourself, man!' Dr Munene demanded roughly, glaring at the mysterious man hidden by the shadows.

'It would be my honour.'

The subject in question rose to his feet and stepped forward until a shaft of moonlight fell on his face, exposing his identity and eliciting instant gasps from the bound woman and her children.

'He was once my protégé and our friend. Now he's my ... our ... worst enemy!'

The Ewaso Nyiro tributary glistened as it bubbled its way past a remote game reserve, west of Isiolo town in Kenya's North Eastern province. Away from the haze-laden skies of the city, the sun's rays had no barrier, scorching a path straight through the atmosphere; frying all exposed skin to a crisp.

It was no wonder every living being below sought shelter. Bright blue and red agama lizards scurried for shelter under the rocks and crocodiles burrowed into the riverbank's mud. Under the shade of the mugumu trees, the waters of a mountain fed tributary collected into a natural, protected pool nestled in a deserted gorge. It was here two frolicking honeymooners were cooling themselves after a long, hot hike through the reserve.

The newlyweds were jolted from their kiss by the sound of slow flapping and they looked up to see a gigantic creature soar through the blue sky above them.

'What was that?' The young groom clambered out of the water and lifted a hand to shade his eyes from the bright light while he followed the trajectory of the flying creature.

'A bird?' said his young bride, treading water. 'I've never seen a one that large, ever!'

Whatever it was suddenly swooped down to the ground and disappeared behind a thick stand of Doum palms a few hundred metres away from them.

'Wow! C'mon!' said the young man. 'I've got to check this out for myself.'

He loped off toward the distinctive trees.

'Come back!' the newlywed bride plaintively shouted after him.

He ignored her, disappearing from view beyond the rocks.

The young woman huffed under her breath. 'Really, right now? I was looking forward to 24-7 romance on my honeymoon, not pointless distractions of the wildlife variety!'

Annoyed, she waded toward the shore and picked up her towel that was hanging on tree branch to dry herself.

'Tafadhali, miss?'

At the words, the new bride jumped in shock, spinning on the sand to find a stranger standing behind her.

Her heart banged against her chest walls while her eyes took in the trespasser.

He was clad in a thick long white cotton gown gathered at his waist by a faded belt made of a green threads and a shiny brassy material. Regardless of the sweltering heat, he wore a

voluminous, dirt-encrusted, cloak over a gown that had formerly been white. Wrapped around his head was a light coffee coloured turban that crowned his lean five foot ten frame. Under the headdress, his unusual face was framed by mane of golden-brown curls that tumbled to his shoulders.

His skin glowed with luminosity and she stared at the anomalous, thin ribbons of gold that flashed under it, but it was his eyes that hypnotised her, their hazel golden irises burning deep into her soul.

What an eccentrically dressed and outlandish man, she thought to herself. Where had he come from?

'Isiolo?' the man said in a soft, sonorous voice, his long fingers idly playing with a brass Coptic cross that hung around his neck.

She blinked a few times before the sound of a bird's call broke through her trance. Her eyes widened even further at the sight of a sleek silver falcon dropping from the sky. It flitted above the strange man's head and the woman gawked at its unusually glossy silver plumage.

'Isiolo?' he repeated, oblivious to her bewilderment.

She wordlessly pointed east. The man bowed deeply and then with a lingering smile, walked off as silently as he had arrived, the silver falcon resting on his shoulder.

The young woman watched him leave, noticing how he seemed to float over the heat waves rising off the ground. In just a few seconds, he'd vanished from view, lost among the shimmering palms.

Mystified, she stood still in the heat with her towel in her hand until her husband raced over the rocks toward her.

'Did you see it?' he said excitedly. 'I missed it, but it must have come this way. I thought I saw footprints on the ground but they've disappeared.'

His bride shook her head, slightly lost in a trance. 'I only saw a man ... and a bird,' said the young woman dreamily. 'A very unusual man, and a very odd bird.'

'What are you talking about?' The groom shook his head, wondering if his beloved was suffering mild sunstroke. 'Let's get you back to the hotel.'

The newlyweds made their way to their tented campsite while the object of their bewilderment strode down a laneway that meandered around a well-kept farm on the edge of the savannah.

He approached the farm's gate and paused as he watched an elderly woman standing beside her boma, feeding two plump Jersey cows a feast of maize cobs. The diminutive woman had a distinctive tattoo that ran up the length of her wrinkled arm and the man studied her closely.

Eventually she sensed his scrutiny and slowly turned to face him. Their eyes locked and a strange energy crackled between them. She suddenly started and stared at him in surprise, her eyes narrowing as if trying to remember an old, long-forgotten acquaintance.

Wa Meroë. Daughter of Kush.

When she took a hesitant step in his direction, the stranger broke their shared gaze and hurried away, continuing his journey through the hot and dusty terrain toward Isiolo, a town that rose like a mirage from the red sandy landscape.

Six hours later, while the sun waned in the west, the cloaked man alighted from a cramped nine seat, twelve-passenger matatu bus at the infamous Nairobi Bus Station. He pulled his shroud over his head and with the silver grykin perched on his shoulder, made his way out of the crowded terminal. He weaved past hawkers peddling food, small wares, and made-for-tourists cheap copper and aluminium jewellery, oblivious to the stares and whispers that followed he and his pet bird's progress.

He strolled through the city, taking his time to drink in its sights in the early evening light, his drab-white cotton robes flapping around his ankles while his enormous cloak billowed behind him like a wave.

After decades spent languishing in political, economic and social quagmire, Kenya, as most of sub Saharan Africa, was in a boom phase. Nairobi reflected the mood of the continent and its metropolis throbbed with life, commerce and a sense of change that tinged the air with

palpable excitement. However, the local infrastructure had yet to catch up with the country's rapid economic growth.

Named after an ancient water hole known to the area's original Maasai residents as the 'place of cool waters', Nairobi was a city swollen with buildings, cars and swarms of people. Its pavements heaved with humanity and were blanketed by smog, dust and fumes that floated up from the heaving road traffic.

The jams clogged its thoroughfares bringing progress to a slow crawl, drawing the impatience of hooting drivers while the mud filled potholes that dotted the tarmac boulevards further tormented their wheel chassis.

The stranger paused at shop windows, mesmerised by the blinking, twirling displays, the half-naked mannequins and the bustling checkouts.

He was pushed aside by thousands of robotic city workers, marching like black ants on their way back to their homes. They walked daily for miles to find work as cheap or forced labour in the city's Industrial Area factories. Their homes in the vast slum towns of Kibera and Mathare and the rundown suburbs of Jericho, Kaloleni and Pumwani were all they could afford with their minimal wages.

Passers-by ogled at the man's strange wardrobe, his curious aura unnerving them but he smiled gently at their stares and they quickly looked away.

However, brushing past the crowds, he sensed slivers of anxiety, dissatisfaction, paranoia and self-loathing mixed in with greed and raw ambition. The heavy emotions roiled in their souls, reflecting the churning, thick blanket of smog that hung statically over the city.

At one point he thought he sensed an anomaly in the crowd. He turned his head sharply to meet a pair of disturbing eyes about ten feet away. The irises were ablaze, with small flames flickering around the red eyeballs and they stared at him with bare malevolence for a split moment before the figure suddenly dropped its gaze and disappeared into the throng.

The bird on his shoulder chirped softly.

'Yes my feathered friend, the T'älat abound all around us,' he whispered.

The cloaked man stood in the middle of the pavement staring at the rapidly disappearing silhouette then he tilted his eyes upwards to closely studying the sooty and towering vertical cumulus.

Unlike the fast forming, swift moving storm clouds of Africa, this had a still, heavy and ominous presence, a colossal aerial spectre suspended above Nairobi. It was surrounded by smaller, umbrella like dark billows that seemed to move in formation, with frond-like tendrils hanging down toward the earth.

The hearts and souls of men consume the mist, worshipping and desiring the very beast that devours them.

Looking around the rushing crowds, he lowered his cerebral shield for a quick second and at once a powerful wave of super-conscious echoes flooded his senses. He felt an overwhelming sense of fear, pain and burden rush at his soul.

To play with fire is to invite fire.

I don't need to be warned. I can take care of myself. But where is the light in this darkness?

He reached out over the gloomy sensory fields, urgently searching the murkiness, sighing deeply in relief at the presence of a powerful radiance interwoven into the matrix.

Beware. There are stars whose light only reaches the earth long after they have fallen apart.

He shut down the extrasensory plane abruptly and hurried his steps, eventually turning into the city's notorious River Road. The cluttered avenue was filled with bizarre sights and smells. Its heady mix of spices, open-air toilets and fried food assaulted his senses.

Dominated by Asians, Indian and Arabs, the population of the city's North East was made up mainly shop owners and descendants of labourers who built the railways over in the late 1800s and early 1900s who'd since settled into trade and business. The streets were packed with locals and tourists alike, the former looking to make a quick shilling, the latter on the hunt for tribal curios, excitement and cheap lodging, their backs weighed down by outsized rug-sacks.

Most of the wholesale fabric and spare parts shops were closing their doors for the day and he dodged the myriad of traders darting from their retail fortresses. They dove into their late

model European cars and were quickly whisked away by their drivers to their palatial mansions in the privileged suburbs of Karen and Muthaiga.

Avoiding a pack of mutts tearing into a plastic bag filled with rotting food scraps and bones, the man finally slipped into a deserted laneway. It was lined with tiny, crowded hovels and inquisitive eyes hiding behind threadbare curtains. He stepped over a muddy puddle and inched around a napping drunk while politely turning down a slurred offer from a lady of the night slumped against a grimy entryway.

He eventually made his way, at the end of the path, to a single, dim light bulb that swung on a long wire.

It illuminated a flight of stairs that led into darkness and he paused, looking around him cautiously before descending into the labyrinth.

A soft double knock repeated thrice on a wooden door at the bottom of the sunken steps led to the sound of a series of locks and catches being unlatched, followed by a shaft of light spilling out into the corridor.

'After all these years, is it really you my friend?'

'Indeed.'

'I received your message. We have much to do. Come in.'

'Amäsägnalähu.'

The guardian stepped forward and vanished into the warm glow.