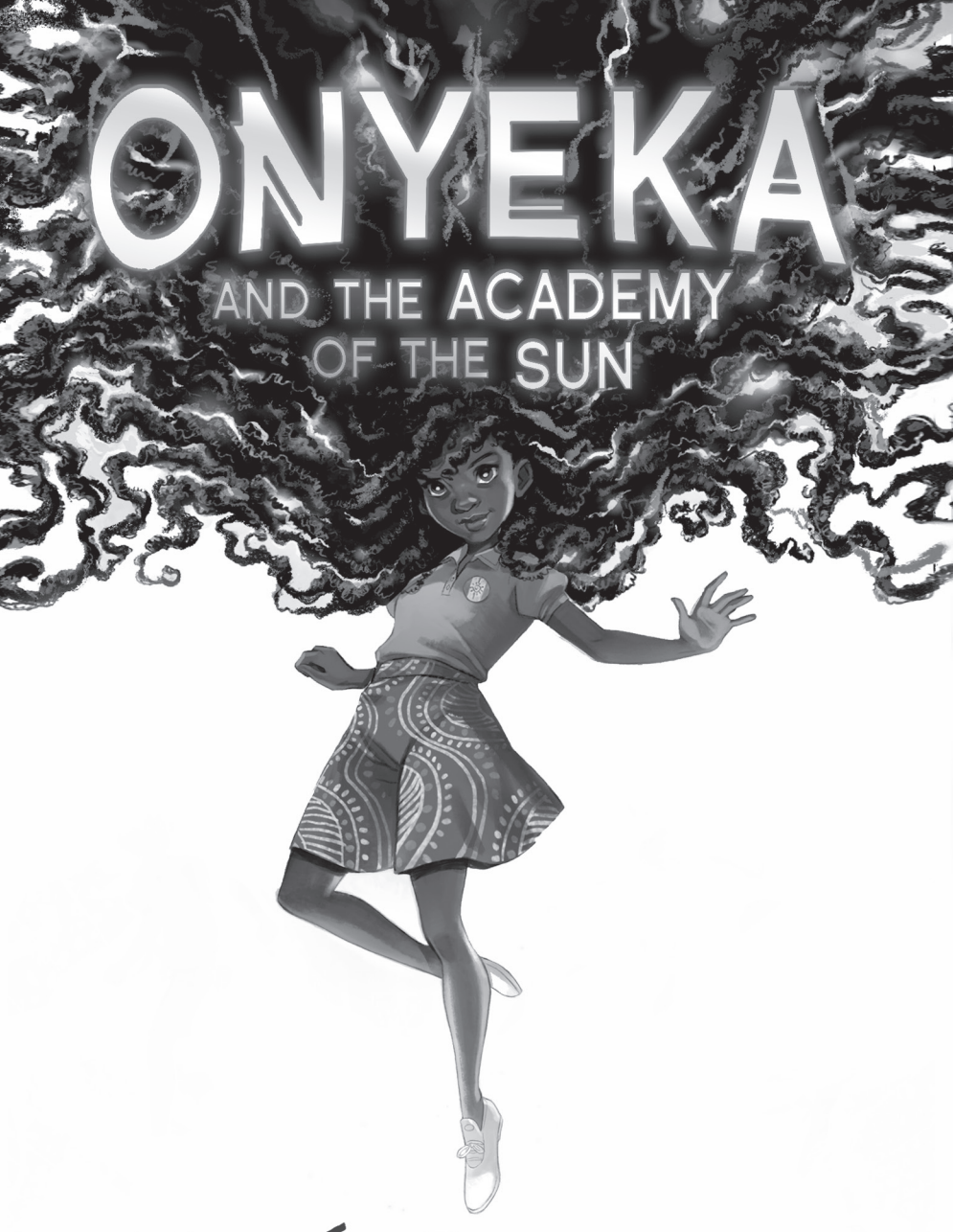
ONYEKA AND THE ACADEMY OF THE SUN



TỌLÁ OKOGWU

SIMON & SCHUSTER

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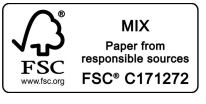

CHAPTER ONE

'Onyeka!'

I flinch, a prickle spreading across my scalp as Cheyenne's impatient voice cuts through the panic rising in me.

'Come *on*, fam! While it's still 2025.'

The already stuffy heat of the changing room grows hotter and the sharp smell of chlorine stings my nose. I feel like throwing up.

'I'm not coming out,' I mutter at the thick, wooden door separating us.

A quick shuffle of feet, followed by a sharp knock. 'The pool's gonna close at this rate,' Cheyenne replies without any sympathy. 'Have you got it on?'

I stare at the swimming cap Mum insisted I wear, resting on the floor where I threw it. I knew it was going to cause me problems.

'It won't fit,' I say. 'I tried already. My hair's too big.'

Cheyenne makes a noise that sounds both like a sigh and grunt . . . a *srunt*. 'Can't you just ditch it?'

I snort back. 'You know what Mum will do if my hair gets loose or wet.'

'She won't find out,' Cheyenne replies. But we both hear the lie in her voice. Mum always finds out. It's her superpower.

'I'm not coming out,' I repeat, but there's a wobble in my voice that gives me away. I'm no match for Cheyenne.

She knows it too and pounces immediately, like a cheetah from one of the wildlife documentaries Mum loves. We watch them together the rare times she isn't working.

'Open up,' Cheyenne hollers, and the whole changing room grows silent around us.

My belly tightens. I hate it when Cheyenne does that. Just because she loves attention, doesn't mean I do too. The already tiny space of the cubicle closes in around me and my chest tightens, making it difficult to breathe. Energy surges across my skin, but I force it back down. I can't get upset. I am absolutely not allowed to lose control. It's Mum's number one rule.

I remember the first time I felt like this. Mum and I were waiting hand in hand at a bus stop and a group of kids started making fun of my hair. Mum ignored them, then bent down to me, as if she knew I was about to lose it. Her smile was

gentle as she told me that I needed to control my emotions because bad things would happen if I ever set them free.

This was before she taught me the Fibonacci numbers that help keep my emotions in check. Apparently, it's some mathematical sequence from ancient India, but someone decided to name it after an Italian guy. It works though. It's hard to lose your temper when you're trying to remember what the next number is.

I close my eyes now and start counting, running through the numbers as I try to calm down.

Zero . . .

One . . .

With each number, I trace the shape in my mind, giving it a colour, texture and taste.

Zero is a rough-edged blue and tastes like waffles, no syrup.

One I give a shiny orange with the sharp tang of vinegar.

Bit by bit, the prickle under my skin goes away, but I continue to count, just to be safe.

I'm back to number *one* again. This time it's brown and squishy, but with the rich flavour of the doughnuts Mum never lets me have.

Two is a hazy, dull grey. Completely boring and *normal*.

I stop counting as number *two* does the trick and my racing heart begins to slow. The door handle rattles and I jump. I'd forgotten about Cheyenne. I unlock the heavy door and she slips in wearing a blue swimsuit. Her face is shiny,

and I can smell the coconut oil wafting from it. She always uses too much. Even in her hair. Today, she's pulled it into a short Afro puff, held in place by a red, stretchy headband.

It's weird seeing her without the furry cosplay fox ears that usually rest on her head. Cheyenne is obsessed with Katsuki, her favourite anime character, and she likes to dress up as her. I'm used to it, but I always catch people giving her funny looks. Not that Cheyenne cares what anyone thinks. Sometimes I think she likes standing out because it makes everyone pay attention, as if she's daring them to say something about her fashion sense. I prefer going unnoticed.

Cheyenne's got Turner's syndrome, and she has to take special hormones to help her grow properly. Her mouth is plenty big though. I once watched her shut down a Year Eleven girl with just one sentence. The girl was chatting about my hair, so I guess she deserved it.

'Okay, where is it then?' Cheyenne's dark eyes scan the small room until she spots the swimming cap. 'Well, of course it won't fit,' she says. 'It's on the floor, you doughnut.'

Cheyenne is older than me, but she likes to act as if it's by years not months. She picks up the cap and her eyes widen in understanding. 'Rah, is your mum having a laugh?'

'I wish,' I reply. 'She thinks it's cute.' I flatten the *u* into an *oo* sound in imitation of Mum's strong Nigerian accent. Cheyenne smiles in instant recognition, her downturned eyes sparkling with glee.

I don't smile back. My eyes are fixed on the shiny swimming cap dangling from Cheyenne's middle finger. The bright white latex is covered in fire-engine-red spots.

Cheyenne's face is twitching, like she's trying to keep it straight. 'You know what you're gonna look like with all your hair crammed into that, don't ya?'

'Shut up,' I groan. Of course I know. It's all I've been thinking about today. I'm going to look like Toad from that classic Super Mario Bros game.

Her eyes shift to my head and the tangle of curls, coils and kinks sitting on top. It springs straight out of my head in an impressive riot that Mum finds overwhelming, so I rarely leave it loose. My hair has broken more combs, trashed more hairdryers and made more hairstylists cry than I can count . . . so maybe Mum has a point.

Straightening it doesn't work, braids won't stay in for long and the only time Mum cut it, the strands grew back bigger and thicker. Now the longest bits that don't stick straight up or out, hang down my back almost to my bum. It always feels dry, no matter what I put in it, which doesn't help. The colour is cool though. A black so deep that when the light hits my hair just right, you can see bolts of blue fire shooting through it.

Cheyenne is proper laughing now. 'It's a-me, Mario!' she hollers with glee.

I wish I could laugh back, but I'm too stressed. It was

hard enough getting permission to even come swimming in the first place. Now that it's the school holidays, I'm either at Cheyenne's house or I have to stay at the salon so Mum can keep an eye on me. I left it until the last possible minute and waited until she was distracted with one of her clients before asking.

'Mum, can I leave early today please?' I asked.

Her hands stilled and silence descended on the salon. All conversation stopped as eager ears waited to hear Mum's reply.

'Why?' she finally said.

'Chey's having a pool party for her birthday,' I replied, not bothering to mention it was a party of two. At the sound of Cheyenne's name, Mum smiled, and I tried not to get my hopes up. 'Please, Mum,' I begged in a loud voice. 'You never let me go anywhere.'

'There you go again, always exaggerating,' Mum replied. 'Don't you go to school? Am I imagining your presence beside me at church on Sundays?'

I've learned not to answer questions like that. There *is* no right answer, so I remained silent.

'Why do you two want to go swimming anyway when Cheyenne gets all those ear infections?' she continued. 'You can't even swim very well.'

I ignored the bit about my rubbish swimming skills because she was right and I'd already told Cheyenne as much.

Mum was also right about the ear infections. Cheyenne gets them a lot because of the Turner's syndrome.

'It's been ages since Chey had one,' I replied instead. 'Besides, her mum said it was okay.'

Mum kissed her teeth at me. 'I do not want you out and about with so many strangers. You're not like everyone else.'

Not this again!

'Doesn't seem to bother you when I'm at the salon,' I muttered under my breath. 'There are always random people here!'

'What was that, Onyekachi?'

I plastered an innocent smile on my face. Mum is the only person who uses my full name and it's usually when I'm in trouble.

'Come on, Tọ́pẹ́, let the child have some fun,' Mrs Mataka said as she passed us on her way to the sink.

Hushed whispers spread across the salon and an annoyed look settled on Mum's face. She hates standing out almost as much as she hates me standing out. Then her face evened out suddenly, just before she gave in to the peer pressure she's always warning me about.

'Fine,' Mum finally said, and stunned relief filled me. I was fully ready for her to say no.

'But you must wear a swimming cap,' she added, and the relief melted away. 'I don't have time to wash and blow dry your hair today.'

Then Mum fully pulled out a swimming cap from one of her styling drawers. *Who has a swimming cap just hanging around?*

So here I am, trying to fit the ugly thing over my hair, and all Cheyenne can do is laugh. She finally stops spluttering long enough for me to get a word in.

'What am I going to do?' I ask.

'Sorry, fam, but you're gonna have to pack it up . . . '

My mouth twists and her voice trails off. Cheyenne meets my gaze again, but there's no curiosity or pity. Not like I get from others. To Cheyenne, my hair is just another part of me, like the gap between my front teeth and my massive size-eight feet. The same way I see her love of furry fox ears and marmite. It's the way I wish the world would see both of us, instead of only focusing on the things that make us different. It's what drew Cheyenne and me together in the first place.

That, and the fact she's the only other Nigerian I know. Mum never talks about Nigeria or why we left, so the little I know about how it became so rich and powerful comes from history class. It's been this way for as long as I can remember.

Before she found work in the salon, Mum cleaned toilets in one of the local primary schools. She was so thin then, her second-hand clothes hanging off her. She doesn't think I remember, but I do. I also remember how long it took for

her to find a salon willing to ignore the fact she doesn't have a British passport and also willing to pay in cash.

'Everyone is going to be looking at me,' I tell Cheyenne with a sigh.

Cheyenne shrugs. 'Does it matter?'

She's right, it shouldn't. But it does to me.

I grab the swimming cap from her roughly and scrunch it up into a ball.

'Yes,' I reply.

Cheyenne hesitates for a moment, then pulls it from my clenched fist. 'I don't know why you let what other people think bother you so much,' she says, smoothing it out. She reaches towards me, the cap resting between her small fingers. 'We don't need to fit in.'

But I do, I want to scream. *I need to feel like I belong somewhere.*

I don't though. Instead, I push the frustration back down to join all the other feelings I'm not allowed to have, like curiosity about my father and happiness at school. And the scariest one of all . . . hope that things will be different.

'Look,' says Cheyenne after a short pause. 'It's my birthday and your mum finally let you do something other than go to church. I'm not letting you waste it by acting moist in here.'

My eyebrows lift at her tone, but she's right, and I don't want to mess up her special day. I snatch the ugly cap from her.

‘You’re the one who’s moist,’ I reply with a small smile.

‘Sorry,’ Cheyenne shoots right back. ‘I can’t hear you past your mushroom head.’

CHAPTER TWO

We quickly make our way poolside – a brightly lit, rectangular space that is even warmer than the changing room. The swimming cap tightens even more around my head.

In the middle of the space sits a large pool with people scattered everywhere. It's mostly kids, enjoying their summer holidays. Some are in the water, playing in lazy boredom, while the better swimmers zoom past them. The rest hang around the edge of the pool, chatting in small groups.

I feel the eyes and hear the sniggers following my bulbous head as we pass. A girl nudges past me with a wide-eyed look of wonder and I grit my teeth so I don't react. It's always the same and I've heard *all* the jokes. From how I look like a yeti to the *hilarious* one about using a rake to comb my hair.

Even adults, who should know better, can't help themselves. Every time we go to the hair shop to get products, Mum is

always surrounded by people offering to do my hair, like it's so unbelievable that I would *choose* to walk around looking the way I do.

The worst part is watching Mum try to ignore them, her worry a constant blanket surrounding both of us. Mum says I shouldn't get angry or let it bother me when people chat rubbish. But when I see how sad it makes her and think about how she has to deal with it alone, I can't help but get angry. That's always when I wish my father was around. Mum says he felt things too deeply and his emotions would take over, just like mine. It's why he came up with the Fibonacci number sequence Mum then taught me – to stop his feelings overwhelming him.

Last year, Megan Gold said I tripped her on purpose. I didn't. The Velcro on her bag got caught in my hair. Ms Mason, our head teacher, didn't believe me and I got so upset I almost forgot to use my numbers. By the time I remembered, the prickles had spread from my scalp to my neck.

I wish my father were here so I could ask him how he dealt with his feelings. I'm sure Mum would be happier if he were here. I clutch the necklace round my neck. A single, white cowrie shell hanging from a thin, leather cord. It belonged to my father and it's the only physical connection I have to him.

Cheyenne coughs loudly, pulling me from my thoughts.

'Let's go,' she calls. 'My birthday only lasts for a day.'

I follow, silently. There are too many people and not

enough places to hide. Cheyenne and I usually just hang out in one of our bedrooms, watching our favourite anime. I love all the characters. In that world, being different is cool.

'There's a spot over there,' Cheyenne says, pointing to an empty space near the shallow end.

'Chey, I'm not sure about this,' I say, but she's already moving off and I rush to keep up.

'Ugh, will you just chill, Yeka,' she calls back, shortening my name, even though she knows I don't like it. 'You'll be fine once you get in.'

I catch up with her just as she reaches the edge of the water. 'But we're rubbish at swimming.'

'Shut up, I can totally swim,' Cheyenne says with a grin.

Cheyenne only just got her five-metre certificate. I know she's super proud and stuff, but I still don't understand why she thinks a pool party is a good idea.

Before I can say anything more, she steps into the pool and pushes forward until her body is fully submerged. *She makes it look so easy.*

I touch my head with nervous fingers and the stiff latex of the cap greets me. At least Mum will be happy. Then, with a deep breath, I follow Cheyenne into the pool.

The cold water is a shock, and my breath leaves my body in a sharp rush. How come no one else looks like they're swimming in a bowl of ice? I wade forward with gritted teeth until I'm waist deep in the water.

Cheyenne pulls an evil smile that proves she didn't warn me on purpose. The need for revenge takes over and, with a laugh, I splash towards her, giving her a shove.

Cheyenne stumbles backwards, surprised.

'I'm gonna get you for that,' she crows gleefully.

Before I know it, I'm fully underwater, Cheyenne's hands resting heavily on my shoulders. I struggle against her hold, pushing upwards until my head clears the surface.

Cheyenne gasps and her expression freezes. 'Rah, Yeka, I'm really sorry.'

Thick strands of hair now rest heavily on my shoulders, the ends swirling in the water around me. *So that's why the tight feeling around my head is missing.*

My chest pounds as heads turn in my direction while I search frantically for my swimming cap. By the time I spot it, it's well on its way to the deep end, weaving an impressive path between the thrashing bodies.

My eyes move back to Cheyenne's guilty-looking face, and I know she's seen it too. An uncomfortable silence stretches between us like a worn elastic band. Then something in Cheyenne's face changes and I see her eyes flick towards my cap.

'Chey, wait,' I call.

But I'm too late. Before I can stop her, Cheyenne turns, pushing towards it. Her body moves awkwardly through the water. But she can't keep up, and for every stroke she

takes towards the cap, the swell of the moving water pushes it further away.

I want to yell at her to stop, to come back, but the thought of drawing more attention to myself freezes the words in my throat.

Then Cheyenne does stop, and a long shudder runs through her body. She starts flapping her arms frantically, as if she's in trouble. I swivel around to see if anyone else has noticed, but the world is still moving, totally oblivious. I turn back to Cheyenne in time to see her jerk once, before silently slipping under the water. The ripples go still. A second passes, then another, as my heart pounds a frantic rhythm in my chest.

Come on, Chey. Where are you?

Then something floats to the surface of the water. Something thin and red. Cheyenne's headband bobs up and down and I realize this is really happening.

'No, no, no,' I breathe out as panic snakes through me.

A part of me wants to run and hide, yet at the same time I know I need to call for a lifeguard. But fear has taken my voice. My gaze returns to Cheyenne's headband and my body makes the decision for me. I push forward, instinct taking over. My legs kick through the water in a clumsy rhythm, as if they have a mind of their own. *Maybe they do*. Maybe they somehow know that they need to get to Cheyenne.

When I reach the headband, I take a deep breath, then plunge downwards. Dark hair billows around me, dancing

through the water, like swirling strings of blue-black ink. As my vision goes blurry, an eerie silence takes over and shafts of light stream into the water. I peer through it, searching for Cheyenne. I don't see anything at first, but then a dark blob at the bottom catches my eye.

I push downwards and wrap an arm around her small body before kicking out, trying to propel us upwards. But I'm too tired, and with the added weight of Cheyenne, it's even harder to move. My body seems to have finally remembered that I can't actually swim that well.

A prickle begins in my head, and my grip on Cheyenne loosens. We're going to die here, at the bottom of a swimming pool, in the middle of Woolwich. Panic fills my chest as prickling pain spreads through my body, and I try to calm down enough to think.

Zero . . . I count in my head.

I work to find a colour and texture, but all I can see is blue and all I feel is wet.

One . . . I try again, but I just can't hold onto it.

Anger courses through me. *I don't want to die. I don't want to leave Mum on her own!*

I kick out hard and try to swim to the surface, but my arms and legs aren't listening. My entire body is burning for oxygen. Then, suddenly, a sharp pain covers my entire scalp. The world around me transforms as my hair curves into a protective bubble, quickly surrounding us. My mouth

opens, unable to believe my eyes, and water rushes in like a tidal wave.

Just as the water starts to slide down my throat, the bubble solidifies around Cheyenne and me, like a giant shield. For a moment, everything is still and strange and beautiful. Then, without warning, we start moving quickly towards the surface, pushed by the shield of hair. As my head clears the water, my hair melts away behind me like a dream, and an arm yanks us up. I gasp in some much-needed air, my chest heaving with the effort, and water streams from my eyes and nose as we are hauled to the side of the pool.

'Oh my God, what happened?'

Through my coughing and spluttering, the frantic voice of a lifeguard above me barely registers. I look over at Cheyenne.

'Chey?' I whisper.

She doesn't move.

'Chey!'

It's a scream this time, one that crawls from somewhere deep inside my belly. Heads turn in our direction, and a deafening silence falls as all activity seems to stop. Like hungry kids outside a chip shop, a crowd gathers around us. There are other lifeguards now, and I watch, numb with fear, as Cheyenne is swallowed by all the bodies. I lose sight of her and the pounding in my chest begins again, but there's also a new queasy tightness in my stomach. A steady beat and a rolling clench that combine into a painful rhythm.

'Are you okay?' I turn to find the lifeguard staring at me in a strange way. 'You all right?' he asks again.

I want to scream at the stupid question. 'Where are they taking her?' I ask instead, my voice hoarse.

He frowns, his eyes glued to my hair.

What's his deal?

'How did you manage to get her out?' he finally asks, ignoring my question.

There's a worrying note of suspicion in his voice, and I swallow hard. I don't know how to answer him because I don't know myself. One minute Cheyenne and I were done for, then suddenly there was all this hair.

My hair!

My stomach tightens and I reach up with a shaking hand. But it's just the usual thick strands. I look back down at the water. A thin, red headband bobs away, not too far from us, and next to it is a white and red swimming cap.

A lump settles in my throat. Cheyenne almost died . . . and so did I. The thought is too horrible, too wrong, and I swallow again, trying to push saliva past the growing lump. I need to think about something else. My mind shifts back to the shield of hair that saved us. But it doesn't make any sense.

It couldn't have happened . . . *could it*?

CHAPTER THREE

The taxi moves off down the road and I stare at my house. In the fading light, it looks exactly as it always does – small and sad, with a dirty, wooden gate surrounding it.

'You all right?'

Mrs Campbell's voice snaps me out of my daze and I turn to find her clutching a trolley and staring at me. She lives three doors down from us, and her faded brown eyes twinkle with curiosity beneath bright white hair that's always perfectly curled.

I open my mouth to reply, but something in her face stops me. I must look proper odd, standing in the middle of the street, my hair hanging in heavy, wet ropes. I try again, but she cuts me off.

'Heard 'bout your mouthy likkle friend from my niece who works at the pool,' she says. Mrs C was born in Jamaica,

and when she's being extra nosy, you can really hear it. 'Hope she's okay.'

Mrs C's expression says she hopes the opposite, and the sick feeling in my stomach gets worse. Cheyenne's been in Mrs C's bad books ever since Chey called her a nosy old bat and Mrs C overheard her. Then a thought hits me. If Mrs C knows about Cheyenne, there's no way Mum doesn't. I ignore the sweat building in my palms and give Mrs C a tight smile.

'Chey's fine,' I croak, my voice still hoarse from all the water I swallowed. 'She's at the hospital, but her dad texted me to say they'll be releasing her soon.'

'Oh?' Mrs C replies with a frown, which quickly morphs into a sly smile. 'I'll let you finish tinkin' 'bout what you're gonna tell your mama 'bout your hair.' With that, she starts pushing the trolley again, cackling as she shuffles away.

Mrs C fully is a nosy old bat, but she's right. What *am* I going to tell Mum? How do I explain that my hair somehow saved Cheyenne and me from drowning? She'll think I'm bonkers, just like the pool manager did when I told him what happened. I wanted to go with Cheyenne to the hospital but they wouldn't let me, so I took a taxi home. I only agreed because the pool paid for it.

I turn back to my house, the closed curtains and darkness telling me that I beat Mum home, even though it's almost seven. Mum thinks it's unsafe to leave them open when we're out . . . as if we have anything worth stealing. She should

be back by now though. I check my phone, but there's no message. Instead, there's a notification of a new post from my favourite YouTube account.

I force myself to ignore it. CurlyUnicorn02 has the most amazing hair and it's bound to be a new twist-out or wash-and-go tutorial that I'll never be able to rock. I sigh, my wet hair dripping a sad trail down my back. I have *zero* hope of making my hair look smooth or sleek like her curls, especially now that shrinkage has set in and my coils are a tangled mess.

The hallway is quiet as I enter the house. I flip the switch that lights the long corridor leading to the kitchen and living room. On the floor is a pile of letters and a newspaper. The word 'Nigeria' in the newspaper headline catches my attention and I pick it up. Mum usually doesn't let me read stuff like this.

Nigeria announced today that their decade-long effort to slow down the erosion of farmland in the Northern Provinces is proving successful. Using a variety of re-greening programs, such as water harvesting and tree conservation, they have managed to restore vital pasture lands.

It is good environmental news for the powerful nation after ten years of work cleaning up the trarium contamination of

local water supplies across the nation. News of this first leaked in 2010, though no one truly knows how long it had been going on for. As the largest producers of solar energy in the world, the environmental disaster has long been a source of embarrassment for Nigeria's ruling Councils—

I stop reading. I don't understand half of it and I'm running out of time to sort out my hair. If I'm lucky, I might be able to pull it into a messy bun before Mum gets home. All my buns are messy to be honest.

'Mum?' I call out, just to be on the safe side.

My voice echoes down the empty hallway, but there's no answer. As I climb the stairs, my eyes are drawn to the bare, white wall opposite. There aren't any pictures, not like Cheyenne's house where every available space is crammed with one family photo after another. She hates them, but I think they're nice. They're much better than our empty walls.

I often imagine what the wall would be like, filled with pictures of me and Mum. Or even the old, faded one of my father that I'm not supposed to know about. You know how vampires never look in mirrors so no one discovers their reflection is missing? I think Mum is worried if we put up our family photos, someone will see we're missing something too.

I hurry up the remaining stairs and into my bedroom. An unmade single bed rests against another bare wall and next to it is a wooden chest of drawers, a broken lamp and a wide, full-length mirror. My gaze shifts to the dressing table opposite and the plastic tub packed with hair products. I have at least three shampoos, four deep conditioners, a ton of leave-ins, butters, custards, soufflés and even an edge brûlée. I still haven't figured out why or how you brûlée your edges.

Every few months, Mum gives me a new miracle product that promises to tame or fix my hair. I don't think my hair needs fixing. Yeah, it's a lot, but it's the way everyone else reacts to it that really bothers me. The way I see it, the only person winning in Mum's war against my hair is the local hair shop.

My gaze moves to one of the soufflés and I reach for it, just as the bedroom door swings open with a loud BANG.

'Onyekachi Adéyẹmí Adérìnọ́lá!'

I nearly jump out of my skin at the sound of Mum's voice. She used *all* of my names too. I turn to find her in the doorway. Her lace front wig is crooked, the middle parting sitting at a funny angle.

Her frantic, brown eyes glare at me from a face so dark it's like staring into the night sky . . . if the night sky looked angry and tired. She marches towards me, hard hands grabbing me roughly by the shoulders.

'Kí ló ṣẹlẹ̀?' *What happened,* she asks. She shakes me so hard my head snaps back.

'Mum, stop. You're hurting me,' I say in a small voice.

She releases me immediately and takes a step back.

'I knew I shouldn't have let you go.'

I lower my eyes but stay silent. Maybe I can still finesse my way out of this.

'I couldn't believe it when Mrs Campbell called me,' Mum continues. 'I had to leave the salon early and I've been searching everywhere for you.' Mum circles me, inspecting every strand in painful detail. 'Look at your hair. Please, o, tell me you did not traipse through Woolwich looking like a ragamuffin?'

I look up then. I don't even *know* what a ragamuffin is. 'Chey got in trouble in the water,' I say quietly.

She hesitates then, but only to gather enough saliva to kiss her teeth at me.

'Are you a water guard?'

I roll my eyes. 'It's lifeguard, Mum.'

'That's what I said.' She circles me again, inspecting my body this time. 'Are you hurt? Is Cheyenne okay?' Her voice sharpens and I almost smile. When Mum is scared, she sounds angry. Most people can't tell the difference, but I can. It sounds like love to me.

'I'm fine, Mum,' I reply.

A soft sigh escapes her lips. 'How many times do I have to

tell you? You're not like everyone else. You have to be careful.'

She pauses, then reaches for me. The warm weight of her hand cradles my face gently, but it's not enough to erase the sting of her words. My hands tighten into hard fists at my sides as it washes over me.

'Yeah, I know,' I reply, suddenly tired.

Between Mum's overprotectiveness and the way people react to my hair, I've got the message loud and clear. You'd think I was made of candyfloss the way Mum is always going on. The thing is, her messages are so mixed up it gives me whiplash. It's like with one hand she'll push me away, then with the other pull me back so hard and so close I can barely breathe.

'Kí ló ṣẹlẹ̀?' she asks again in a soft voice.

A hard knot grows in my belly as I try to find the words to explain something I don't even understand. None come, so I give up.

'Chey needed help,' I finally reply with a shrug. 'So that's what I did.'

'But how?' she presses. 'You can barely swim.'

'My hair . . .' I begin, but my voice fades away into a thin whisper.

The hand on my face drops and a gruff sound leaves Mum's lips. 'What about it?'

It's her tone that does it. I've heard it a million times before. Annoyance, sadness and a strange fear all rolled into

one horrible sound. I don't know if it's a tone she's always had or if it came after my father left.

'Why do you hate my hair so much?' I ask her bluntly. I don't even try to hide the hurt in my voice.

Mum's eyes widen. 'I . . . I don't hate it,' she stutters. 'It just makes it harder for us to fit in here.'

I sniff at her answer. I can't help it. 'Then why don't we just go back to Nigeria?'

'You do not get to ask me that,' Mum snaps back. 'When you're grown and have to make difficult decisions then you might understand.'

This again? She says this every time I question her. 'Forget it,' I snap back, twisting away from her.

Mum freezes at my tone and her eyes narrow. 'What did you just say?'

I take a step back at the disapproval in her voice and almost trip on the edge of the worn rug.

'You never want to talk about Nigeria,' I croak out, my earlier confidence vanishing like smoke. 'Everything is always a secret, even my own father.'

'Do not exaggerate,' she replies in a stern voice. 'I do talk about him.'

'When?' I say, throwing my hands up. 'It's like he doesn't even exist.'

Her face hardens and the knot in my stomach feels like a rock now.

'You're not being fair, ọ́kọ́ mi.'

I usually love it when Mum uses that pet name, but this time I flinch at the words. I'm probably overreacting, but I can't stop myself. All the fear and panic I felt in the pool crashes over me, and my head starts pounding. My breath locks in my chest, making it difficult to breathe.

'Is that why he left?' I whisper. 'Because you kept so many secrets from him?'

Mum's eyes close as something flashes across her face. It's gone by the time she opens them again.

'Does it matter why he left? He isn't here now,' she says, running a hand across her tired face. 'I am.'

The knot in my stomach loosens like molten lava, burning through me. It boils inside, searching for a way out. I start to count, but something stops me. A small spark I don't recognize. So I let it out and the words pour from me before I can call them back.

'I wish you weren't.'

A pained expression settles over Mum's face and her shoulders drop.

'This is my own fault, I guess, for letting you build this fantasy around your father,' she says in a weak voice. 'I just wanted you to have something. I know how hard you find it here.' Her hand waves around my room. 'With me.'

Mum's voice cracks then, filling me with shame. Mum can be difficult, but I know she loves me, and at least she's here.

My father *is* a fantasy. I have no idea what he would do if he were here. I have no way of knowing if he could fill the great big hole that sits between Mum and me.

A wave of tiredness hits as all the anger drains out of me like dirty water in a sink. But the loud echo of Mum's sadness remains, bouncing silently around us. It's always there, and I'm not enough to make it disappear. It makes me feel lost and helpless.

My vision blurs and my scalp starts prickling, just like in the pool. The air crackles with power as raw energy shoots through my body like an electric current. I am literally buzzing with it.

'Onyeka, are you okay?'

Mum's voice is a distant sound beneath the roaring in my ears. The prickle in my scalp turns into a burn, and as the pain intensifies, so does the power. It's awful – like a million little needles stabbing into my head, over and over again. I bite my cheek, desperately trying to hold back the scream bubbling in my throat. The pain spreads, filling every part of me, clawing for a way out. I realize I'm going to black out as dark spots gather behind my eyes.

Then, suddenly, like someone flipped a switch, the pain stops.

My hair explodes around me in a blue-black cloud, cloaking me like a thick shield. Individual strands drift and dance in mid-air, curling on themselves like playful children.

A strange energy fills the room, and the shield of hair stands to attention, as if it's waiting for me to do something.

'Dear Lord,' Mum breathes, her eyes wide with wonder.

I guess I don't have to explain what happened in the pool after all.

'Mum?' I call out hesitantly.

She doesn't reply, merely points a shaking finger towards my head. I turn to the full-length mirror opposite and my mouth drops as I see my reflection. Coils of hair the colour of blue lightning curl out around me. I reach up to touch them and flinch at the tingle of static electricity that shoots through my hand. My fingers move through the unfamiliar texture. Soft, yet strong, like strands of coarse silk.

I look like a proper badass. But can it move?

Before the thought has even finished, a thick shaft of hair whips out clear across the room, knocking over the bedside lamp.

Mum's gasp is sharp and my gaze swings back to her. She isn't nearly as impressed with the way I look. The terror on her face makes me feel sick and I take a step back.

'This can't be happening,' she whispers, and I freeze. 'I'm not ready.'

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