

Dear Reader,

I'm so excited to share *War Girls* with you. With fresh, vivid world-building, breakneck pacing, and a heartrending bond between sisters, this novel grabbed me from the very first page and never let go.

War Girls transports us to the year 2172 and to a post-apocalyptic Nigeria. High-speed trains that look like souped-up Range Rovers roam through the jungle, people undergo radical augmentations—replacing their limbs and organs with bionic ones in order to survive in the harsh climate—and battles are fought using giant humanoid robots. The tech is cool, but the reason for it is anything but. A civil war is wreaking havoc on Nigeria and survival is the *only* way of life.

Sixteen-year-old Onyii and her brilliant little sister, Ify, live in a technologically advanced camp that serves as a refuge from the fighting and political unrest. But when the camp is attacked by enemy soldiers, the girls are ripped apart and forced onto opposite sides of the civil war. Now they must fight their way back to each other against all odds.

You may know our acclaimed author, Tochi Onyebuchi, from his first two novels, *Beasts Made of Night* and *Crown of Thunder*. Much like the *Beasts* duology, *War Girls* explores powerful themes of family, justice, and belonging and is set in a lush, fully realized world. What struck me most about this new novel, though, is how personal this story is for Tochi. *War Girls* is inspired by Tochi's mother, who was a young child during the Nigerian Civil War. Much like Onyii and Ify's, Tochi's mother's childhood was marked by violence, fear, and an intense desire for peace. When writing this book, Tochi said he dreamt of his mother and "also of giant robots and fighter pilots and the types of war stories that often leave people like my mother out of them. That's where *War Girls* came from."

This is the story Tochi has been longing to tell, and it shows through every unique setting detail, shocking plot twist, and breathless battle. I hope you love it as much as I do.

All my best,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jess Harriton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Jess Harriton

Assistant Editor, Razorbill



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ISBN: 9780451481672

Trim: 5.5 x 8.25

On Sale: 10/15/2019

Ages/Grades: 14 and Up / 9 and Up

464 pages

\$17.99 USA / \$23.99 CAN

Rights: World



An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York

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PenguinTeen.com





WAR GIRLS



WAR GIRLS

TOCHI ONYEBUCHI





An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



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First published in the United States of America by Razorbill,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2019

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA IS AVAILABLE

ISBN: 9780451481672

Printed in the United States of America

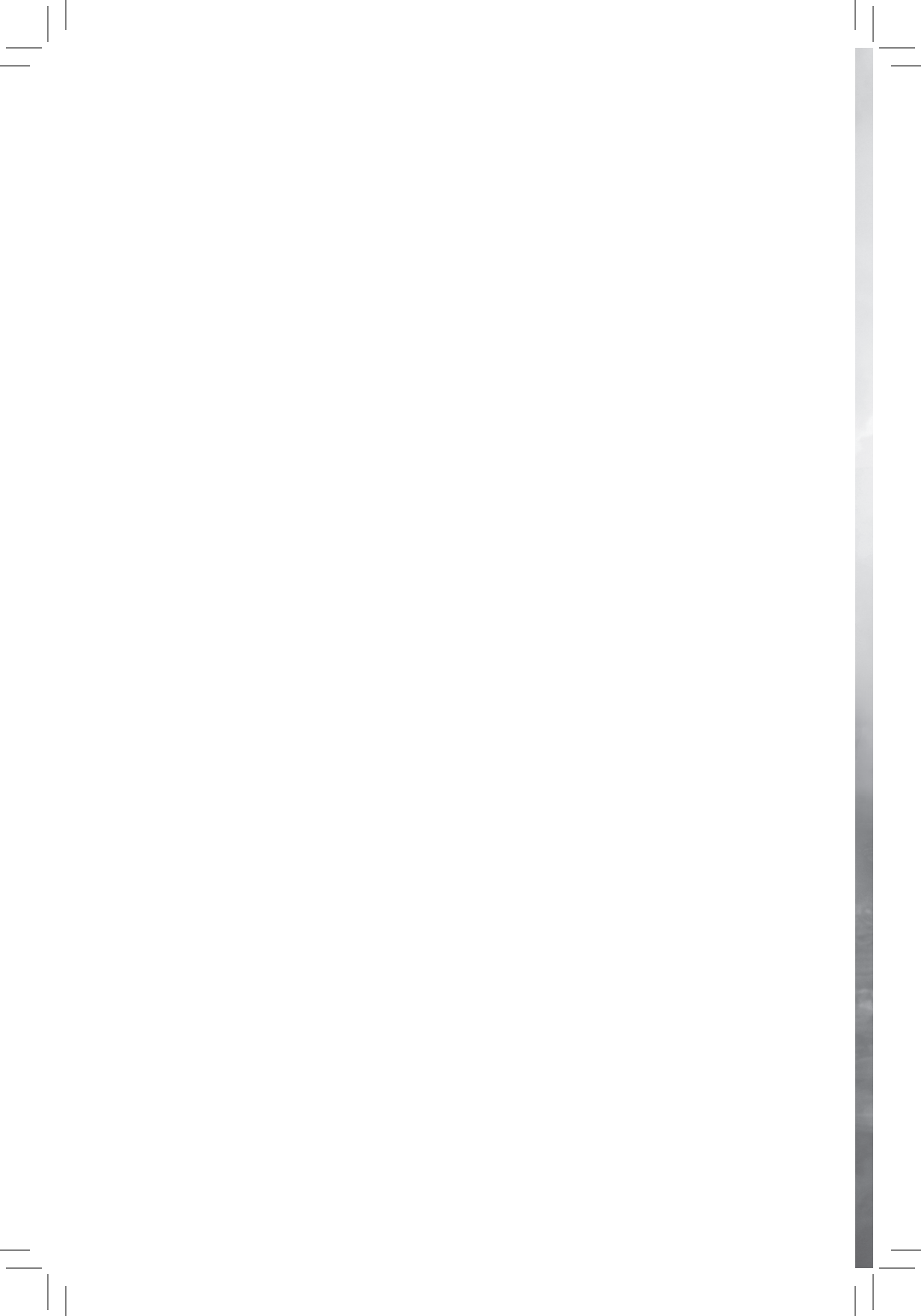
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Design by Tony Sahara.

Text set in Fairfield LT Std.

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A grayscale photograph of a destroyed landscape. In the foreground, there is a large pile of rubble, including twisted metal and debris. A flag is planted in the rubble, waving in the wind. The background shows a hazy, overcast sky with some faint structures visible in the distance. Overlaid on the center of the image is a circular graphic consisting of concentric, slightly offset lines, creating a tunnel-like effect. The text 'PART I' is centered within this graphic.

PART
I



CHAPTER

1

Southeastern Nigeria,
April 21 72

The first thing Onyii does every morning is take off her arm. Other War Girls have gotten used to sleeping without their arms or their legs. But Onyii's phantom limb haunts her in her sleep. In her dreams, she has all her arms and legs and can run. She can run far and fast and away from whatever is chasing her. She can hold her rifle, and she can aim, and she can feel her face with all of her fingers. But then she'd wake up and try to touch her body with a right arm that wasn't there anymore. She never got accustomed to waking up without all of her body there, so now she sleeps with her arm attached, even though sometimes she accidentally crushes and bends some of the machinery. Even though the sweat from her night terrors rusts some of the more delicate circuitry. Even though she wakes every morning with the imprint of metal plates on her cheek. Which is why she gets up earlier than the rest of the camp and spends the quiet morning hours at her bedside station, oiling the gears and tinkering with the chips. In the darkness, the sparks from the metal as she works are the only light in her tent.

Ify sleeps through all of it.

Onyii takes a moment to listen to Ify snore. The birds outside

have just started their chirping, but they're still quiet enough that Onyii can hear Ify's patterns. Two smooth snores, then a hiccup. Onyii's dreams are a blur of chaos and blood and screaming. Flashes of gunfire. Rain falling hard but never hard enough to wash the tears from her face. Ify's face is serene in slumber, the tribal scars soft ridges on her cheeks. Her lips turn up at the edges. For almost her entire life, the child has only known peace.

When Onyii finishes, she disconnects her arm from its station and places it against the spot where her shoulder ends. She'd left that battle long ago with a stump. But the doctors had had to cut away the rest of the arm, because it had gotten infected. Now, there is only mesh wiring over the opening, so that her socket is more like a power outlet than anything else. Nanobots buzz out of the metal arm socket, trailing wires. The threading then attaches the metal to her flesh. Electricity shocks through her body—a small burst like scraping feet against carpet then touching a doorknob. Then she's able to flex her fingers. She tries out her elbow joints, bends the arm, swings it slowly back and forth, rotating the shoulder, then stretches and lets out a massive yawn. She waits until she's outside the tent to let out her gas.

The world is green and wet with recent rain. The dew hasn't yet dried from the grass. Leaves bend on their tree branches overhead.

Wind whips about her. Engines scream overhead, and Onyii looks up just in time to see aerial mechs, massive humanoid robots, with green and white stripes painted on their shoulders screech through the sky, as they've been doing for the past year. Shoulder cannons and thrusters attached to their compact

bodies. State-of-the-art nav systems. Yet they can't detect the rebel Biafran camp right under their noses. As long as the signal dampener they rigged to hide this outpost from the Nigerian authorities is up and running, they're safe. The government forces can't even see the rebel flag waving right below them. A blue background with half of a yellow sun at its bottom, golden rays radiating outward like lightning bolts.

Onyii stretches her flesh-and-blood arm and shoulder, arches her back and listens to the cracks ripple up her spine, then shakes herself loose. She's still wearing only her bedclothes—a compression bra and athletic shorts that stick to her in the heavy Delta humidity—but it's comfortable enough for a morning run.

She makes her usual circuit of the camp. First, she heads to the camp's periphery, past the school for the little ones and one of the few auto-body shelters—a place where faulty robotics can be tinkered with, where arms and legs can be made. Where the girls can become Augments, given limbs or organs more powerful than what they were born with. Sometimes, it's a place where medical operations happen and people are given new eyes or the bleeding in their brain is stopped and a braincase has to be installed. Onyii knows some of the others sneer at the place, like people only go there to come out less than human, but some of those who look sideways at the people working in there and getting worked on have never seen war. Half-limbs only become half-limbs because they're trying to make someone whole. An Augment is not an ugly thing.

She hangs a left and spots the orchard and the fruit trees that line it. Beyond the orchard, a vegetable garden sits encased in a greenhouse large enough for a few people to enter and roam about in. Rotating spigots programmed to automatically spray

water on the plants hang from the ceiling, and artificial light panels line the walls. The camp hasn't needed them for some time, but when the nights get long—too long—they can't let the food suffer.

Onyii spirals outward on her run and passes the mess hall—usually empty this early in the morning. But as Onyii runs by she spots a girl in jungle fatigues with her jacket unbuttoned and draped loose over her shoulders as she leans on her rifle, dozing. Chike. At the sound of Onyii's feet brushing the grass, Chike starts awake and straightens. It's a wonder she doesn't hoist her assault rifle and aim it right at Onyii; she's so jittery. When Chike realizes where she is, she settles back, and her posture relaxes.

It's only me, Onyii thinks, who will pafuka your head when your commanding officer finds out you've been sleeping on your watch!

Onyii ambles past. These morning runs double as patrol surveillance. Backup for those on watch. The outpost may be hidden from radars and scanners, but what's to keep a Green-and-White from walking right through their perimeter? At fifteen, Onyii is among the oldest in the camp. The younger ones—some of them new to living on their own and some of them just learning how to be people again after having grown feral in the jungles—have trouble adjusting, staying awake during patrols, concentrating during school, not screaming in their sleep. In some of them, their guns are bigger than they are. But they're slowly turning into steel, turning into the type of girls who can be depended on during an attack, the type of girls Onyii would be happy to have at her side in a fight. Proud, even.

WAR GIRLS

Her route takes her farther out to the practice grounds where weapons training happens. Jungle trees with their broad, heavy leaves hide the girls from above, and there's enough foliage here to absorb most of the noise they make as they shoot toward the shoreline. She gets to the cliff, and below her lies the beach. Melee combat happens here too, when it's scheduled, but during the warm seasons, Onyii will occasionally arrive on her morning runs to see some of the girls already laid out, naked beneath the sun, giggling or roughhousing, and she's reminded that many of them are still just kids. And the sun for them is still a gentle, loving thing. Some of them have never looked up into a clear blue sky, at an out-of-place twinkling, and recognized a drone ready to drop a bomb on their homes. Maybe some of them have seen it and still don't care. Those ones always turn out to be good fighters. Reckless, but good.

In the distance is the water, still more black than blue this early in the morning. Onyii hears the faint sound of metal banging, of water sloshing against steel, and what she sees as specks or small shapes along the horizon, she knows to be the mineral derricks. Old and rusted but still capable of leeching resources from the Delta. Their resources. The blue minerals buried beneath Onyii's feet and, farther out, beneath the ocean floor. This is what the Nigerians are killing Biafrans for. Not a morning passes that Onyii doesn't think about setting charges to those things and blowing them into coral debris. It's been said that the minerals are the divine right of the Igbo, their blessing from Chukwu, the supreme being whose energy powers all of existence. But the minerals are just dust to Onyii. Powerful, important dust, but nothing more. She was never very religious.

Other than the Nigerian mechs that streak overhead from time to time, the derricks provide Onyii's only glimpse of the outside world. *There are more people out there than us and our enemies.* Every time she sees the derricks, she aims an invisible gun at them with a still-human hand.

She doubles back and passes the hangar where the mobile suits are stored. Rust spots their armor; they're smaller than the Nigerian mechs that screech through the sky overhead and closer to the shape of actual humans, and Onyii knows there isn't enough lubricant around for all the gears that need it. But the beat-up suits—stocked with ammo for their guns and equipped with night vision and a neural adapting system—are enough to get by. Then, there are the skinsuits. Depending on how old or how big you are, they either fit tightly enough to suffocate or they hang off you like hand-me-downs, even after you press the button on your wrist to compress them. The skinsuits are supposed to collapse to fit like a second layer of flesh for journeys out past the camp, where the radiation gets so thick that skin peels almost instantly.

The ammo crates all have Mandarin characters written on their sides in fluorescent blue ink. But the girls know by looking which containers hold the 7.62 mm bullets and which hold the ammo for the shoulder cannons on the mobile suit mechs. They know which hold the bullets for their assault rifles and which hold the knives for when the bullets run out.

It never seems like enough, the smuggled arms. But orphans never steal enough bread for a feast, only enough to last the day.

Onyii continues towards the Obelisk. But even before she gets to it, she can see sparks arcing out of its base. It looks

like a mini mineral derrick, microscopic by comparison, driven into the ground. Beneath Onyii's feet, fiber-optic cables run throughout the camp and beyond, buzzing the earth constantly with charges, zapping the soil over and over to release the water soaked into it. The water is then purified and made available for washing and cooking and cleaning. It also collects the minerals that power nearly every electronic device in the camp.

Today, it's busted somehow.

Onyii crouches at the base and sees a blackened stretch of tech running along one of the cables, ending right before it pierces the grass patch. She didn't build this, so she doesn't know it as intimately as the others in the camp do, but she's fixed things before.

She takes a long time squinting at the mechanical carnage before a flash of movement changes the air around her. Suddenly, Chinelo's at her side, all long, gangly limbs. Still, somehow, she manages not to make a sound. The opposite of clumsy. In fact, Onyii remembers the first time she saw Chinelo—tall even as a child—move with a grace she'd never seen before. Covered in ash and soot and blood, Chinelo had moved with the confidence of a general.

Now, Chinelo wears a jungle-colored compression bra over her small chest and pants with many deep pockets. A green, patterned bandana holds back her locks. Ancient, obsolete "cell phones"—relics of a different era—hang from her necklace, clacking together to make some weird music Onyii doesn't particularly like.

"You want to break our water, is that it?" Chinelo jokes.

She jokes like that from time to time. Dark jokes about how

all the girls here are, for some reason, not made of the type of material to create children. Onyii heard one time that when your water breaks, you are near to birthing a child.

But looking at Chinelo now, the sheen on her skin a glowing mix of night sweat and morning dew, Onyii sees a girl who only knows how to laugh.

“Hurry up now, before we are all stinking, and the Green-and-Whites smell us,” Onyii shoots back, smiling.

Chinelo smirks, then her bees buzz out from her hair. Tiny robotic insects that tell Chinelo the temperature and the water density in the air and the amount of radiation in each drop of rain that lands on them from the tree leaves overhead. They tell her how warm Onyii is next to her, and they tell her the state of Onyii’s prosthetic arm. As Onyii watches, the bees descend onto the well to tell Chinelo what needs to be repaired. Then they go to work.

Onyii remains crouched on her haunches, a position of battle-readiness. Chinelo sits back in the grass while the robotic bees do their job.

“We need to make a run,” Chinelo says like she is telling Onyii to bathe more often. Her Augments are more internal. A braincase for her brain, ways of having data transmitted directly to her, even some metal where bones should be. On the outside, she is as human as anyone. But finely tuned machinery ticks and hums inside her. Still, even with a body that can connect on its own to the camp’s network, she is more human than machine. Cyberized, but still, she bleeds red blood.

“And what will we find in the forest that we can’t find here?” Onyii stares at the well as light spreads along the once-blackened portion of circuitry.

“That’s the thing. You never know. Our tools are rusted, and our guns need ammunition, and just the other day, one of the lights in the greenhouse went out. The nights are getting longer, and our generators won’t last.”

Onyii wants to tell Chinelo that they’ve lasted at this outpost for years, that they’ve made more with less, but it’s a conversation they’ve had a million times before. “And what if there are Green-and-Whites on patrol?”

Chinelo elbows Onyii. “They have not found us yet. Why would they find us now?”

“Because neither of us has bathed in a week.” Onyii tries to say it with a straight face, but a smile curls her lips, and she can’t hold back anymore, and their laughter echoes into the trees.

Chinelo rolls around in the wet grass, clutching her stomach, as the bees fly back into her hair. Onyii wants to tell her to be quiet, to stop laughing before they alert whatever Nigerian patrols may be nearby. But the sound of Chinelo’s laugh warms her too much.

“Let me say goodbye to the little one at least,” Onyii says. She pushes herself upright and hauls Chinelo to her feet.

“And maybe we can find some napkins too,” Chinelo says, looking at the repaired well to see if it’s properly working again. “Some of the girls are bleeding.”



How many years has it been? Even after all this time, it still moves Onyii to see Ify sleep so peacefully. The ratty, coarse blanket rises and falls, rises and falls. Sometimes, Onyii wishes

the two of them had ports, rounded outlets at the backs of their necks that some half-limbs have, so that she could plug a wire in and connect it to Ify and see what the little girl dreamed. Maybe dancing and a cool breeze and a pretty dress. No mosquitoes.

Onyii shuffles to Ify's side. The inside of the tent is still awash in blue from a morning that has not yet fully arrived. And she knows Ify will try to resist being woken up so early before her classes, but the girl can stand to learn a little industriousness. So, Onyii sits on a crate by Ify's bed and gently shakes her awake.

The little girl's eyes open a little, then grow wide for a second before settling. Even in the darkness, Onyii can see the purple of her irises, flecked with jagged shards of gold, and her breath catches in her throat at the beauty of it.

"Hey, little one," Onyii whispers.

Chinelo waits at the tent's entrance, and Onyii can feel her impatience, but Onyii has made it her mission to spend as much time with Ify as she can. You never know when you might lose a loved one in war or even who that loved one might be. Her days as a child soldier are still fresh in her mind. Too fresh. So Onyii spends several long seconds running her hand along Ify's bald head before Ify turns and pulls the blanket over her entire body.

"Hey." Onyii shakes her, more roughly this time.

"It's too early," Ify whines.

"I have to go on a run."

At this, Ify turns. The girl is learning toughness, Onyii can tell, but there's still a pleading look in the purple and gold of her eyes.

"We have to look for some more supplies. Chinelo is coming

with me, so don't worry. I have a buddy. And Enyemaka can keep you company."

"While I do what?"

Onyii frowns. *Is that spice in your voice, Ify?* "While you go over your lessons." Onyii pulls a tablet from a shelf and powers it on. The screen flickers, and Onyii slaps it against her knee, a little too hard, before it casts its light over the inside of their dwelling.

"But, Onyii, I already get high marks. Let me sleep-oh!"

"Fine." Onyii puts the tablet back on the bedside table. "Don't study. And in class, when the teacher is teaching, if you like, don't listen. Don't pay attention. Be on your tablet. Play your games. Talk. Chaw-chaw-chaw-chaw-chaw." Her voice rises. "But if you come back to this tent with anything less than first position"—a pause for dramatic effect—"we shall see."

Ify spends one last, brief moment under the covers before she throws off the blanket and swings her legs around.

Onyii gets up and turns before Ify has a chance to see her smile. Chinelo stifles a chuckle.

In the corner, Enyemaka stands, hunched over and powered off. If someone wanted to be charitable, they would say her multicolored armor gives her character. The faded purple metal of one forearm, the pitted orange of one breastplate, the patchwork of green and red and yellow and orange and blue wires that make up her ribs. They'd say it was like a dress sewn out of choice fabric and made into this beautiful gown. A riot of color. But, really, it's just a droid made out of whatever tech Onyii and the others stumbled across on previous runs and during skirmishes with the Green-and-Whites. The metal plates on her legs are rusted at the corners. The sockets for her

eyes are dark with grime. Moss runs along her backside, and other parts are fuzzy with fungus.

Onyii stands on her toes, inhales deeply to unlock a series of chambers and valves in her artificial internal organs, and spits a mucus-encased stream of nanobots into Enyemaka's ear. When Ify used to ask how Enyemaka came to life, Chinelo would joke that it was like a wireless connection with Onyii as the droid's router. Enyemaka's eyes light up. Her gears hum, and she stands upright, squares her shoulders back, and scans the room.

"Watch her while I'm gone," Onyii commands.

"Yes, Mama," Enyemaka says back. As she powers all the way up, her voice sounds like two voices at once. Then she walks over to Ify. "So, little one. Mathematics." When she says that part, Enyemaka sounds too much like Onyii for her own comfort.

Onyii grabs her pack from by the tent's entrance and hefts her rifle with her prosthetic arm. "And make sure she shaves," she calls over her shoulder. "Clean. I don't want to see any missed spots on her head! We have a heat wave coming." Then Onyii is out into the chilly morning.

CHAPTER 2

Ify waits until Onyii leaves the tent before reaching under her pillow and fumbling around for her Accent. The tiny piece of tech, a ball small enough to fit on the end of an ear swab, has nestled itself in the folds of her bedsheet. When she finds it, a grin splits her face. Enyemaka hovers over her, and Ify instinctively turns her back while she fiddles with the Accent, then fits it inside her ear.

The darkness of the little hut evaporates. Peels away like the skin of rotten fruit to reveal the series of lines and nodes of net connectivity that bind everything—and everyone—together. Her pillow sprouts a series of pulsing blue dots. The metal beams supporting her roof glow with aquamarine lines. Enyemaka turns into a forest of nodes and vectors. Ify can see inside her and watch the gears turn and the core in her head thrum. She can see how her movements are enabled by the wireless connection from the Terminal that helps power the camp. Enyemaka's rustier parts glow a shade of red that worries Ify, but the rest of her is a healthy blue. With her Accent, Ify can see all of this. All these things happening in the camp's closed network. Bright as ocean water under the sun. Data.

“Remember, Enyemaka. You promised not to tell Onyii,” Ify says, frowning at her minder with as much sternness as she can muster. Onyii had forbade her from tinkering with any tech that might interfere with the wireless. And after the second time it had disrupted Onyii’s comms while she was on a scouting mission, Onyii had nearly thrashed her senseless. Only at the last moment had Onyii returned to herself. There was a change in her eyes. When she got that angry, a cloud came over them and Ify could tell the storm was coming. But Onyii’s eyes had cleared, and she had given Ify only an extended tongue-lashing.

Ify never meant to disobey Onyii, but she would look around at her life to see nothing but questions. And whenever Ify inserted her Accent into her ear, the world exploded with answers. Almost every piece of tech and even unconnected items like her bed and her pillow and the biomass the scouting parties brought back to make their meals with—all of it was explained to her through the Accent in a way that made sense. And right now, she’s not messing around trying to hack into Chinelo’s comms or into the Obelisk that takes the special minerals from the ground to power the camp. She’s just watching. Surfing the connections. Riding the waves. The Accent also lets her talk to Enyemaka without needing to make a sound.

She remembers where she is and that Onyii is still probably near enough to sense her, and she shifts her jaw to turn her Accent off. Then, shrugging on her shirt, which looks and feels more like a burlap sack than anything a human being is supposed to wear, she takes a seat on the crate before her mirror. Or, rather, shard of mirror.

Okay, Enyemaka, she says cheerfully through her Accent. I’m ready.

There's a little bit of hair on her head, just a small shield of silver fuzz, but it's enough to make her itch in the warm seasons. So she sits as still as she can manage while Enyemaka runs the razor smoothly over Ify's scalp. With each stroke, Enyemaka sprays a small puff of alcohol on the nearly shiny space. Ify winces. Sometimes, Enyemaka isn't as smooth as she'd like, and Ify's left with a cut or two that she has to put adhesive over. Then she has to endure the taunts of her age-mates.

"Ow!"

"You should not have been moving," Enyemaka says in her half-robotic voice. "My reflexes are not fast enough to account for your constant shifting."

Always my fault, Ify thinks to herself. "Ugh, I'm finished," she says, without even having Enyemaka inspect her. "You wait outside the classroom this time when we get to school, okay?" There's an extra bite in her voice today, and all that good cheer she felt upon finding her Accent has left her.

By the time she gathers her tablet and her rucksack, daylight shines through the slit in the tent's opening. She's going to be late for school. Again.



The cooling unit must be broken, because they've retracted the roof on the warehouse where the teachers hold their classes. Ify sneaks in through the back, but sees that the only free seat, of course, is in the front row. The thought runs through her head to turn back and just skip class for the day, but Enyemaka is blocking her path through the side entrance, so she has no choice but to duck her head and hurry to her seat.

Everyone has their tablets out in front of them with holos displayed, but Ify can't tell what page of the downloaded lesson they're on and so has to stumble through image after image after image of nonsense until her holo matches the others. Some of the girls around her snicker, which makes Ify duck her head even more. She's tempted to turn on her Accent and have the secrets of each of these girls revealed to her. The Augmented ones with their stored search histories not yet deleted, showing the sites they visit to look at barely dressed men and boys. Ify can see all of that and expose them with just a turn of her jaw, but Enyemaka's still in the doorway, and there's no doubt that Onyii would find out. And it's not even the beating that Ify fears so much as the look of disappointment in her big sister's eyes. So Ify focuses on the holo, which is a 3-D projection of a parabolic curve on a graph.

The teacher is explaining basic algebra, not even anything useful. Not like the orbital physics in the ancient textbooks and archived sites Ify studies on her own.

She grits her teeth, and suddenly the world explodes with blue. For a panicked moment, Ify sees the gears and wires inside her teacher and can feel the information from other people's tablets run through her head. She senses Enyemaka's distress, and far into the distance, on the periphery of her vision, a familiar signal: Onyii. So fast she hurts herself, she clicks her jaw and shuts off her Accent. She looks around to see if anyone noticed the shadow signal in their devices, the little blip or moment of static in their tablets or in their teched-up bodies. But no one seems to have noticed. She lets out a sigh and listens to the teacher drone on about how algebra originated in Biafra among the Igbo peoples. How the knowledge was stolen by the

Fulani tribe when they invaded from the north centuries ago. Ify wonders what it must have been like to live in a time when humans were beasts, when Nigeria was newly independent and no longer a British colony, when the Igbo lived alongside the Fulani monsters the teacher is talking about. But before she can follow the thought, everyone's tablets buzz, and the lesson's over for today.

The girls stream out already giggling, some of them playing with their tablets and turning them into music boards to play songs they made and recorded. Ify slips her tablet into her sack and shuffles toward Enyemaka. She reaches up to scratch the top of her head when something slams into her from behind, and she topples forward. Enyemaka's gears groan as she moves to try to catch her, but Ify tastes dirt and turns to find several girls standing over her.

"Eh-heh," says one of the girls, with her hair braided in two dark pigtailed coming out the side of her head. The ridges of the tribal scars on her cheeks glisten. "Without her big *sista* around, she is just a skinny *oyinbo*." The others snicker and point at Ify's skin, lighter than theirs, so that mosquito bites show up redder and her bruises take longer to fade. She tries to hide her bare arms in her shirt. Her skin the color of sand, theirs the color of firm ground. She grits her teeth. *Turn on your Accent*, she tells herself. *Hack them. Mess up their systems*. And she could do it. She gives herself a moment to imagine the girls screeching as their tablets explode in their hands or the tech in their braincases short-circuits, making them go blind. Then she pushes herself up to her feet. Whatever she would do to them would get Onyii's attention and, worse, her anger. So she lets it go, just like she does every time.

“She looks like jollof rice gone bad,” another of the girls sings. And that gets the others going. “Maybe she thinks just because she has no *real* family, we are supposed to pity her.”

The girl with the pigtails sucks her teeth. “Just some skinny goat Onyii found in the bush all alone.”

Ify’s cheeks burn. Tears spring to her eyes. The anger is right there, close enough to touch, and she has to fight against it. But if one of them pushes her, if they even touch her, then Ify will give herself permission to lash out. She will tell Onyii afterward that she had no choice, that she had to defend herself, that she had to be strong like her. And that’s why the girls will be squirming on the ground wondering why they suddenly can’t see or hear or walk.

But the girls relent.

They turn to go, and one of them picks up a stone and flicks it at Ify’s head as their group walks away.

Enyemaka stands before Ify, and that’s when she realizes she’s shaking. Rooted where she stands, hands balled into fists, brow knit into a frown, a soft growl growing in her throat. But the shadow Enyemaka casts over her brings her back to herself, and she takes in a ragged breath.

The android kneels down and raises a hand to Ify’s face. The palm opens up and sprays alcohol on the cut above Ify’s eye.

“Ack!” Ify slaps Enyemaka’s hand away. “Get away from me!” And that’s when the tears come. Suddenly, she’s running and doesn’t care what direction she heads in, as long as it’s away from school, away from camp, away from Enyemaka always hovering over her, away from the girls who keep pointing out how different she is.

She stops when the hum of camp activity grows quiet.

WAR GIRLS

The small patch of forest she ran into opens out onto an outcropping, and, below it, a beach. Waves of blue-green water whisper against the shoreline. A few heavy breaths later, Ify has calmed down. The noise and fog in her head dissipate. She sits in the grass, hugging her knees to her chest, and stares off into the distance. The mineral derricks are black silhouettes on the horizon. With her Accent on again, their shapes glow bright against a darkened blood-red sky. Even the enemy Nigerian mechs that hover over the derricks shine with pulsing blue light. They swim through the sky in widening oval patterns and leave trails of what look to Ify like blue stardust in their wake, but Ify knows it is the pathway that's been programmed into them. She can tell the reach of their comms too, and she knows that she and the camp are just outside their grasp. Invisible.

She fishes her tablet out of her sack and programs her Accent to pirate an enemy connection so that she can access the lessons she's been sneaking in outside of school. The headline reads: ORBITAL PHYSICS. And springing out of the text are holographs of parabolic curves and Space Colonies spinning slowly on their axes. She picks up where she left off: Lagrange points and the spaces between planets and moons where the gravity from both bodies can hold a colony in place. Then there are the mechs and the small, nimble jets that fly through asteroid belts, dipping and rising and twirling. But no matter how hard she zooms in, she can't see the pilots. The resolution gets too bad. She knows they're there. She knows there are people in those cockpits, maybe women like the type she'll grow up to be. And her heart thrills at the idea.

Enyemaka appears at her side and stiffly sits down next to Ify.

Ify waits for Enyemaka to chastise her for hopping onto an

enemy connection, for going behind Onyii's back and using her Accent, but Enyemaka peeks over to examine the holograms that emerge from the tablet. Ify holds it out for Enyemaka to get a better look and smiles at the android.

"You already have a very deep understanding of orbital physics," Enyemaka says in a voice that sounds like two voices in one, echoing over each other. "And yet you do poorly in your mathematics class."

Ify snatches the tablet back. "That's because the algebra we do in class is boring. It's so basic, and they keep wanting me to show my work. So I always get low marks. But in America, they reward you for getting the right answers. That's how you become a pilot."

Enyemaka can't smile. Ify knows this. There's no real face on her head, no lips, and her eyes don't light up to show happiness but to signal that she's been powered up and her battery life is full, but when Ify looks up at Enyemaka, it *feels* like Enyemaka is smiling at her. "Is that what you want? To become a pilot?"

"More than anything," Ify breathes. She has never said it out loud before, and it feels dangerous. But it feels like commitment. She has to do it now that she has said it. And she'll find a way. Maybe when the war ends and there's a free Biafra, they'll get a launch station built, probably somewhere in Enugu or maybe right here where the camp is, and the station will fire shuttles deep into space, where they'll join the rest of the world. Another superpower like America among the Space Colonies.

Enyemaka chirrups. A bell rings inside her. Ify's shoulders sink. Mealtime. But she realizes how hungry she is—she's doesn't remember having eaten anything all day. "We must head back if we are to avoid the end of the line," Enyemaka says.

WAR GIRLS

As they head back through the forest, Enyemaka silent and stoic, Ify looks up at the android. “When Onyii goes through your logs at the end of the day to see what I’ve been doing and where I went, can you erase the part where we went by the beach? If she finds out I skipped afternoon classes . . . I don’t want to make her angry. And I don’t want her to find out about my Accent. Can you, please?”

For a long time, Enyemaka is silent. It seems like she’s sad, almost. She speaks to Ify silently, through her Accent. *You are asking me to erase things that I’ve touched and heard and seen, the data I have accumulated and added to my core.*

Shame rushes through Ify. Her cheeks burn. Enyemaka sounds so much like Onyii sometimes that it’s easy for Ify to forget that, in so many ways, she’s just like a child. Figuring out how things work, gathering experiences, organizing the world around her. Learning.

“Consider it done,” Enyemaka says, then holds Ify’s hand. “That portion of my logs has been erased.”

Ify squeezes Enyemaka’s mechanized hand and brings it to her cheek.

The android doesn’t miss a step.

CHAPTER 3

If Onyii and Chinelo had timed their run for earlier, they could have avoided the mosquitoes. But their bodyskins provide them at least some level of relief. The Geiger counters on their wrists beep, noting the radiation levels around them. Still, the vegetation persists: the fat tree leaves, big, almost like they've mutated; the tall grass that swishes against them, brown and yellow in some places, green in others.

Onyii wasn't alive when the oyinbo went to war with themselves and the Big-Big went off an ocean away and the wind swept red clouds over the entire continent. She wasn't alive when the sky began to bleed. But she's heard stories. Stories of a time before the domed cities and before people started fleeing to colonies in space. A time before the oyinbo—the whites—raced to the stars and built America and Britain and Scandinavia and other places where they were able to—were the *only* ones able to—hide from what human stupidity had done to the planet. A time before Biafra had declared its independence and the war started.

Now, detritus litters the forest floor where they walk. Juice packets, torn clothing, bits of broken tech.

Chinelo stoops at a pile of blackened earth, moves some twigs and brush around with her foot, then spots an ancient smartphone buried beneath it all. She picks it up with her gloved hand, her rifle in the other, and blows away some of the irradiated dust. The dust swirls in a cloud before her visor. For a long time, she stares at it, then slips it into her pocket to be added to the string of broken smartphones she wears around her neck.

Mist hovers in the air around them. Visibility is low. But Chinelo, properly Augmented, can see. The level of moisture in the sky. The dips and grooves in the ground, too tiny for Onyii to see, heat signatures of Agba bears or mutated Wulfu with their two heads and ridged backs.

Leaves swish to their right. Chinelo puts out an arm, stopping Onyii. They crouch, hidden by bush. The noise is organized. Chinelo squints. Onyii follows her gaze.

Slowly, an animal emerges from the fog. Its skin is pink in the light and glows a soft green in places. Its ribs show, but its four legs are thick with meat. Fur ripples along its spine. Its hooves squish in the mud. A shorthorn.

If they were more than just Onyii and Chinelo, they might have tried to capture it to bring it back, cleanse the meat, and cook it. But they can't spare the ammo, and the thing is just as likely to kill them as it is to feed them.

The beast ambles past them, bending fallen tree trunks beneath its weight, drawing the mosquitoes to it to take its radiation-rich blood.

Onyii and Chinelo wait until it is completely out of sight, then a few minutes more, before continuing onward.

In a small clearing, they find more traces of people. Broken

comms devices, more torn cloth, ratty sneakers. The mark of people who left in a hurry.

Chinelo, ever curious, moves to examine the broken and discarded tech. More jewelry to wrap around her neck.

Onyii hisses at her. They're not here for necklaces. They're here for rations.

They continue in silence, pausing briefly as a familiar shriek rips through the air. Mechs streak across the sky. The wind sways the tree branches overhead. Onyii and Chinelo don't stop but crouch even lower as they continue.

"They never think to leave any pads behind," Chinelo sneers.

Onyii doesn't speak for several seconds, then realizes she can't let it go. "Who is 'they'?"

"The refugees, of course. Or whoever leaves all their trash in the forest like this." She doesn't look at the ground, but she manages to step over the upturned roots of a fallen tree. "No, it's just empty Fanta bottles and old mobiles with rusted chips."

"More for your necklace," Onyii says, and allows herself a small chuckle.

"The little ones, if they find us, we can put them to work at least. Give them new lives." Chinelo continues to scan the forest, her head moving left to right, right to left in a steady rhythm. "Teach them how to fix things."

"And the older ones?"

Chinelo shrugs. "If they are women, we send them to Enugu. Maybe Umuhaia. They find some use in the Republic. Maybe they make more children."

"And if they are men?"

Chinelo smirks. "We shoot them."

They both giggle. It feels good to go on a run with a friend.

Most runs pass in silence. They're quick things. Run out, find supplies, run back. Or, more often: run out, find nothing, run back. But when Onyii's out with Chinelo, she lets herself move slower. The more time she can spend with her, the better.

"I would like to see Port Harcourt one day," Onyii says, surprising herself. "I hear it's beautiful. And it's right on the water, and you can't see any of the derricks blocking the way, making all that awful jagga-jagga noise." A smile crosses Onyii's face. "And there are proper hospitals and a women's clinic."

"What would we do in Port Harcourt?" Chinelo jokes. "What is there to build there?"

"Biafra." Onyii knows she sounds dreamy when she says it. And normally she would call this stupid. To believe in something as lofty and invisible as the Republic of Biafra. But when she thinks of Biafra, she thinks of buildings of glass and stone and steel that scrape the sky and paved streets and clean fruit that you can eat straight off the trees. She thinks of a place where there is no rust. Anywhere. Where the radiation-poisoned air doesn't scrape against your lungs as you breathe. In this dream, her arm has a proper skin attached to it instead of the black band she always wears, and every time she looks at it, she doesn't have to be reminded that it is metal and gears and circuitry and maybe she can convince herself that it's proper flesh and blood and bone. In this dream of Biafra, she's fully human.

"Wait."

Chinelo sticks her arm out just in time to stop Onyii from stepping on a mine. Onyii can't see the red light blinking under the mud, but Chinelo probably can. If it's not from the Green-and-Whites, it might be from some other rebel group.

Onyii curses herself. This is what happens when you lose concentration. Likely a sign that they should head back.

“Come on,” Onyii says, turning. “There’s nothing out here. Not today.”

But Chinelo doesn’t move. She crouches until she’s nearly sitting on the ground and peers into the distance. Then she points. “There.”

Onyii tries to follow her gaze.

“There.”

Onyii squints. Then she sees a small cloud of mosquitoes.

“What is it?”

Onyii ruffles through her rucksack and pulls out a small mound of clay. An eto-eto. “Whatever it is, it’s still warm. I’ll look.”

She sits, careful to avoid the mine, and molds the white clay into a something with arms and legs. Then, with a small pin, she pokes two holes in what has become the eto-eto’s face. She twists the limbs out a little more until it looks like more of a starfish than anything human.

“This’ll do.” Then she spits a glob of mucus over the eyeholes on its face. The nanobots in her mucus burrow into the eto-eto’s skin. Like Onyii’s DNA, biomech colonizing the clay, putting pieces of Onyii into it, animating it so that it becomes a thing she can see through. An extension of herself. Like a mobile device connected to Onyii’s neural network by wireless internet.

Its arms and legs wiggle. Then it squirms in her palm like a little baby. It glows blue at its core.

She sets it on the ground, then pats it on its backside, and it waddles forward. What it feels and what it sees and what it

hears echoes in Onyii's brain like a whisper. A voice underneath her own.

The eto-eto heads toward the mound, then stops and tilts its head, looking it over. At first, it's just leather and torn cloth, but then the eto-eto sees hair. It runs an arm through it, and the hair curls around its white limb. It scurries around and sees that it's a person. A human. And it's breathing.

"She's alive," Onyii says. Before Chinelo can stop her, she's up and racing toward the body. She comes to a stop, drops her pack, and fishes out her aluminum pole stretcher. When she's got it out of the pack on her back, she takes her eto-eto and squeezes it. It makes a soft whirring sound, almost like an exhale, as it powers down. Then she stuffs it back into her rucksack.

Chinelo hesitates for only a moment before helping to lift the woman. Onyii starts, raises her rifle, and peers down her scope into the forest. Something had moved. She spends several moments scanning, though she can barely see through the fog.

"We're safe." Chinelo puts a hand to Onyii's shoulder, and Onyii relaxes. "Help me carry her."

Onyii shoulders her rifle, and the two of them lift the woman and head back to camp.

"You are getting soft, you know. In your old age."

Onyii's in front, but she can feel Chinelo's smirk at her back. "Oh?"

"A year or two ago, you would have left this woman to die."

CHAPTER 4

When Enyemaka and Ify get to the line of stones painted blue in the forest, Ify realizes just how far away from camp she's run. If she flicks on her Accent, she can easily see the mines buried beneath the ground and covered by brush. She can track the paths and where she's free to walk, but she has already spent so much time online that any more would surely give her away to Onyii. It will take too long to go around the mines. By the time they complete the circuit and get back to camp, there'll be no food left, and the rumbling in Ify's stomach tells her she can't afford to miss this meal.

Mist thickens, and what little Ify could see of the ground vanishes. Her heart sinks. Her stomach twists and turns.

"Come on, little one," Enyemaka says and holds her hand out. Her eyes are growing faint, and Ify can tell it's because her battery life is running out. But Ify takes the droid's hand, and Enyemaka hoists the child onto her back. Ify drapes her arms around Enyemaka's neck and squeezes.

Step by assured step, Enyemaka makes her way through, walking what feels like a straight line but what Ify knows to be

a complicated back-and-forth dance to avoid the traps the War Girls have lain for intruders.

Toward the edge of the forest, where it opens out onto the camp, mosquitoes buzz over something lying still among the leaves. Enyemaka stops, and Ify moves to slip off her back, but Enyemaka grips the child behind her and holds her fast.

“Enyemaka, what is it?”

For several seconds Enyemaka doesn't move, and Ify wonders if the droid has powered off completely, which would be a problem because then Ify would be stuck in her grip, practically glued to her back.

Then the telltale hum and whirr of tech turning back on. Enyemaka straightens but doesn't loosen her grip. “A two-fang. It is not yet dead, but it has been poisoned by the air. It has wandered here.”

And that's when Ify sees it. It lies on its side, its flank rising and falling slowly, one head lying on top of the other, both mouths open, gasping for breath. It's as though the mist has cleared to reveal it, and a memory flashes behind Ify's eyes.

She's younger, a baby almost. And the ground is cold under her, and she holds an animal by its neck close to her chest. It's gasping for breath, its chest heaving against Ify's, and she's crying into its fur. Someone has shot it, this animal she cares for, and she has gathered it in her arms while the shooting and the screaming continue outside her room.

Then, she's back.

Enyemaka's shoulder is cold against her cheek, snapping her out of the memory. The droid's fingers press into her bottom, cradling her. The wet air cools her scalp. She shakes her head.

“Let’s go, Enyemaka.” And she prods her heels into Enyemaka’s ribs like she’s seen people in her downloaded movies do when they ride horses in the desert. Enyemaka plays like she’s galloping in place, and Ify giggles.

Before long, they get to the armory, and from there, it’s a short trip to the mess hall for the evening meal.

Between the armory and the mess hall lies the clinic. Ify slips off of Enyemaka’s back when they get near. A crowd of girls gathers outside the tent. Onyii sometimes helps with the women or girls rescued from outside the camp or whenever someone catches an infection because of their tech or when some of the girls’ night terrors keep them awake. Even though she’s scared Onyii will find out about her Accent, she smiles at the thought of seeing her sister again and skips ahead of Enyemaka to the tent’s entrance.

She makes her way to the front of the crowd and takes it all in. A nurse named Nneka is leading a bunch of the others around a table that has a woman on it whose face is scrunched up in pain while she clutches her stomach. Ify looks around, then finds Onyii sitting on a crate by the tent entrance.

“Hey, little one,” she says with a tired smile. “How was school?”

The woman on the table moans. Ify can’t stop staring, as the woman in torn clothes clutches something to her chest. And Ify feels something invisible press against her own chest. The memory of that wounded animal she’d held as a child. And she’s caught, trapped where she stands.

A snapping sound brings her back. Onyii’s face is directly in front of hers.

“Hey!” Onyii says. “Where’s Enyemaka?”

“At her side,” the droid says, lumbering past the gathered crowd. “As always.”

Onyii looks up and smirks, as if to say, *Are you being smart with me?* “Good.” Then Onyii gets up from her crouch. “Well, let’s go. It’s mealtime.”

The three of them head toward the tent’s entrance, but Ify turns and sees that Onyii has stopped and is looking at the ground. She’s got her fists balled at her sides, and it looks as though she’s at war with herself, trying to decide something. The woman on the table whimpers. Then Onyii reaches into her sack and pulls out a piece of clay. An eto-eto!

Swiftly, Onyii forms arms and legs with the clay and a head with something of a face. She turns and brings it to the woman, and the woman stops her squirming and groaning for a moment to stare into Onyii’s eyes.

Ify sees Onyii struggle with being kind from time to time but feels a surge of pride every time she sees Onyii move with love.

The woman grabs Onyii’s wrist and tightens.

A bell rings inside Enyemaka, but the mealtime bell already rang.

The machines the woman is hooked up to start beeping.

Faster. Faster.

“Oh no,” someone whispers.

“Ify!” Onyii screams. “GET OUT! IT’S A BO—”