



The Liberty Cap

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Chapter One

Dancing flowers rippled, stretched and merged, dripping like melted wax into the dirty browns and greens of the branch he reached out for. When he touched it, the branch slithered and hissed at him. His heart stopped and his fingers uncurled. Vines moved, wrapping themselves around his limbs. Green mambas and tree vipers snapped at him from the end of every branch and every vine. He flailed wildly, warding off the serpents, the realization that he had let go of the tree dawning on him a little too late. His back arched when he hit the hard ground with a loud thump and the snakes disappeared with a poof.

He looked up to see the tree move. Animated by his fear it lunged towards him, branches turning to clawed three finger hands, reaching out to grab him. There was a sadistic, mocking cruelty to its movements, as the rustling of its leaves amplified, morphing into a deep hollow sardonic laugh.

He scrambled to his feet and the ground heaved, tossing him forward towards the sloping banks of the water hole. Seconds later, gasping for air, he emerged from the shallow, murky waters, bracing his aching limbs to begin the slow, painful wade out. The moment of clarity the quick soak had granted him exploded into blotches of black and yellow static. He started to sway when the humid savanna air thickened, slivers of thick white perspiration floated from

the ground, the water and the trees, spinning around him in a crazed whirl.

A loud thunder like rumble accompanied the tremors in the earth. In the distance, a lion roared, and a hyena laughed in a slow blurred tone.

Run!

His knees buckled underneath him leaving him to the mercy of gravity and he slipped back into the water. Pushing away the Nile cabbages and algae coating the water hole, he heaved forward, willing to ignore the dark forms slithering towards him.

Come on! Move!

Another rumble reached his ears. Taking advantage of the adrenaline rush invigorating his failing body, he jolted upright and ran toward the thicket. He ran because he knew even though he couldn't see as the world danced and swirled around him, somewhere in that direction was a crevice large enough to crawl into. Somewhere, he could lay low and ride out the remainder of the hallucinations with no interference from the rebels and soldiers.

Sharp needle like pain pierced his body and his skin bruised when he forced himself through the crevice, just in time to escape the convoy of military tracks that drove past a few minutes later.

Relieved, Chaiwe gripped the crystal around his neck tightly, chanting a prayer of thanks.

“Damn refugees.”

Ruth cringed, a numbing sensation coursed through her body robbing her joints of their strength. At the bottom of

her sinking feeling, her heart started pounding as a wave of indignation rose up inside her quietly. She bit her lower lip and swiped up the patient chart, staring at measurements she had already been through.

“I’ll go handle this,” Dr Kruger took a sharp turn, pointing himself towards the sound of frantic wailing. Her head zinged. She reached out to stop him but retrieved her hand. “It just their way of grieving,” she stammered, lowering her face to avoid his boorish gaze.

“Well, this isn’t whatever hole they crawled up from. This is civilization.” He stormed out.

She slumped in the chair holding the chart to her chest. Slowly, the wailing and Dr Kruger’s angry words dissolved into the low swooshing of the fan. Her eyes traced the pattern of light and the room blurred.

“What I’d give to send them all back!” Ruth jerked and jumped from the chair to come face to face with a red faced Kruger. Her throat constricted, the burn in her eyes seared deeper and yet she still couldn’t blink.

“What’s wrong with you girl?” he frowned.

“Um,” she gulped, “nothing. Just um,” she whirled around to the patient, “are we done with this patient doctor?”

His voice was quieter over the pounding in her ears and the pulsing sensation in her forehead. “Yes, we’re done here. And I’m going as far away from these refugees as possible.” Ruth relaxed and stared at the doors long after they closed behind him. She wanted to believe so badly that he wasn’t as bad as he came out.

Throbbing appeared in her joints and muscles as hours of

work finally enveloped her, smothering her with a heavy determination. She willed to just sit there and let the exhaustion take over, and though the comatose patient wouldn't mind, life and responsibility beckoned.

Her head instinctively lowered when she stepped out into the busy corridors. She'd come to learn at an early age that no one would bother her, let alone try to get to know her if she kept a low profile and avoided eye contact. Enough days had been spent in tears and regret when she attempted to socialize. A nod and smile, an occasional good morning were all people needed to spare her their animosity and keep their curiosity at bay. It worked like a charm.

She thanked the messenger for the letter and even laughed at his joke before skipping down the hall in anticipation.

Grim faces and the heavy shuffle of the downtrodden threatened to crush his recently inflated ego. Years of indifference and still his conscience butted in when he least needed it. Not that he ever needed the interfering ranting of voices of authority and morality long ignored.

He paused at the door of consultation room one, instinctively rapping gently on the door. A weak blister covered hand reached out to him. He recoiled, his stomach retching and glared down at the invalid woman lying on a stretcher on the floor. Her eyes were so alive bulging somewhat cartoonishly from her sockets. A dirty, simple, *chitenge* material wrapper covered her raisin like withered body. She open and shut her mouth a number of times like a fish out of water, probably too weak to formulate a sentence. His gaze moved from her to the younger woman attending

to her, still as poorly dressed, her dirty brown hair made up in days old cornrows. She glared at him clearly displeased at him cutting the line.

“No need to scowl,” he snuffed the cigarette out between his thumb and forefinger, “she’s old enough to die anyway.”

He chuckled when the younger woman, apparently not ignorant in the English language, raptured into a torrent of curses in a foreign language. Tipping his hat to her he stepped into the now open consultation room, when a patient walked out.

“I haven’t said next yet!” Dr Kruger’s impatient voice hit him.

McCormick laughed loudly for a moment, stopped by a faint hint of nostalgia, “these refugees giving you a hard time Jon?”

Kruger’s face lit up with recognition, “what brings you to these parts?”

One quick sweep of the room out of habit, and he tipped a chair swinging it to him as he sat. He shrugged, “you know me. I’m an opportunist.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you Ken, but this place is where dreams come to die and nightmares are born. No opportunities here.”

“Man!” McCormick exclaimed in disbelief. “How did you get so negative?”

“One year in this forgotten place and you’ll be cursing the morning sun.” Kruger spat bitterly.

Age lines creased when he frowned. Age lines. In the thirteen months McCormick hadn’t seen him, Kruger had

aged about ten years. *Work will do that to a man*, he mused. “Well, then. I’ve come to save you.”

His shoulders heaved when he laughed, “I’m sorry friend. I can’t be saved. That little altercation with the medical board was real serious.”

McCormick exploded in laughter, wiping away the tears after a full two minutes of laughing, “see. Only you can call a crime an ‘altercation’,” his breathing stabilized and he stretched his back twisting his waist to release the pressure build up. “You’re a trouble maker. Hospital work doesn’t suit you at all.”

“It doesn’t matter. We all need to make a living,” he turned the picture frame on his desk toward McCormick, tapping on the pictures of his wife and kids. “They suck me dry.”

“Why did you have to go and get tied down?” “What are you talking about? I was already married when we met.” He scowled playfully, “what you should be asking is why I am still married.” McCormick chuckled, “why are you?”

“I have no idea.” He placed the picture frame face down on the desk. “So what brings you to the gutters? Last time I heard you were migrating to some posh European country.” *Spain*. It had sounded like a good idea at the time. The prospect of large luxurious Villa’s, beautiful women and amazing wine. Six months and he had blown through his money like wildfire. “You know, home is where the heart is.” He shrugged.

“Argh! It isn’t home anymore, what with these dirty refugees piling in by the hundreds. Three quarters of my patients are ‘Island immigrants,’ he added air quotes to Island

immigrants.

His animosity towards the Kaminai Republic's many war refugees was obvious. Shallow, selfish, and inhumane maybe but his fears were founded. While abroad McCormick had followed the surge of Kamino refugees into South Africa, and seen his country overwhelmed by the thousands that docked at South Africa's ports and begged for asylum. Conscience dictated that helping them was the right thing to do, but he had learnt over the years that conscience keeps a man down.

It was therefore with absolute relish and satisfaction that he presented his case to Kruger, "you'll be thrilled to know that this job is about Kaminai."

"Kaminai?" he raised a brow.

"Royal treasure." He paused expecting Kruger's face to light up but continued when he saw nothing. "In the confusion that led to the instability in Kaminani, the people forgot about Kaminai's royal treasury. Gold and jewels, billions of dollars in cultural artifacts. In value historians estimate it to be about the same as King Tuts tomb."

Uncertainty swept Kruger's face, but curiosity lingered. He leaned forward, "and why hasn't anyone gone looking for it?"

"Well, with political unrest,"

"Civil war."

"Ok civil war. International laws prevent us from carrying out a legal excavation," he took a moment deciding whether or not to add the next statement, "and like Atlantis there is no certain proof it exists."

Kruger shook his head, “it’s not like you to stake on an uncertainty.”

“Yeah but there’s this insane eccentric man who’s paying for everything. And half of a million dollars can be yours if we go as a team.”

Kruger’s jaw dropped and McCormick did a little victory dance,” dollars,” he chocked.

“Think it over. I’m still looking for an Interpreter. Say, do any of your patients speak fluent English and high Kamoi?”

Kruger shrugged, “I don’t interest myself in Kaminai dealings. Feel free to stick around and interview them. But these people are crazy loyal. How will you convince them to rob their own country?”

“Leave that to me.”

“I will have your answer later. My shift here is almost over and I have a ward round.”

He left the room on a daunting mission to find an Interpreter. Out of curiosity, he checked on the old woman and her companion.

Her lizard skin closed over her bulging eyeballs. The younger woman leaped forward, frantically trying to revive her. Even before he saw her lifeless response. McCormick knew she was dead, “well, like I said,” he sneered at the angry woman,” she lived her life. Look on the bright side, she spared you hospital expenses.” Without a doubt she understood what he said. She was shaking her fist at him, her loud wailing punctuated by angry curses.

McCormick headed right, down the hall, deeper into the hospital. Somewhere in this hospital, there would be some-

one willing to take the place of Professor Takashi, linguist, treasure hunter and mad man, chained behind bars in some high security prison in Russia. Now, that was the one person money couldn't get him.

“*Amama*” The aching in her body disappeared completely at the sight of her mother sitting up in bed for the first time in a long time. “You look better,” the old chair creaked when she sat.

“I feel fine.” She slapped Ruth’s hands and pulled herself up. “What do you have there?”

Slightly giddy, Ruth tore the envelope open, pulling out the letter with trembling hands. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Whispering a prayer, she unfolded it.

The words jumped from the paper and slapped her in the face, stunning her. A momentary black out, then static, and words started to appear one by one. Each word stabbing her worse than the first until at the last period, weak, limp hands let the paper go and dazed eyes watched it flutter to the floor.

Most of her wanted to scream. In fact she had screamed in her mind already. Filled her lungs and screamed at the darkness around her. Then that scared little girl she still was appeared, sobbing in the center of the darkness. A low whimper managed to escape and she turned away to quickly wipe the tear that was already sliding out of her eye.

“Lute! Lute!”

A frail hand shook her. She smiled when she looked up at her mother’s wide eyed face, perfectly framed even in

sickness by that beautiful head of gray and white streaked black hair, an attribute she unfortunately hadn't inherited from her mother. Her own stubborn kinky afro had been the source of many tears growing up.

"Yes *ma*," she smiled again, sniffing involuntarily.

"Don't you hide it away with that crocodile smile," mother scolded. "I can see something bothered you in that letter. What is it?"

Handing her the letter and letting her see it for herself would have been easier, not for mother but for Ruth. Unfortunately mother's education was very basic and reading English wasn't in her skill set. Bracing herself, she looked into her eyes. "It's the insurance company. They've denied our request."

A warm hand cupped her own but though she wanted to, Ruth couldn't cry. Not in front of mother sitting in that hospital bed, not when she was the only one left. "Don't worry my child. We'll find a way. We always find a way." An overwhelming rage consumed her, "no *ma*. we won't. This was our last hope. We can't afford your treatment without that grant. Father has been working 20 hours just to put food on the table. This *ma*? this isn't going to get better."

"Lute," there was disappointment in her voice.

Yeah! Disappointment. That completed the equation; she had failed. "The crystal."

"No!"

Ruth frowned, "its our last hope. We should have sold it years ago. Someone will pay good money for it, I'm sure."

“No Lute,” she shook her head vigorously, a bewildered look on her face. “That crystal is important. To us, to you, to the fatherland.”

Disgusted, Ruth turned away, “loyalty to a regime that took everything from you.”

“Dear Lute. Soon, you will understand. When the fighting stops and the dust settles, you will know why that crystal can not be passed on. It’s yours yes, but not to sell or give away. One day you will remember.” Her face glowed as she spoke. a contentment and peace Ruth hadn’t seen on her face in a while.

“The war will never end *ma*. Never! And that crystal is only good for money.”

“Don’t break my heart. It’s all I have left.”