

BLOOD AND MILK

Mphangela Valerie Sakala (Zambia)



Their new interstellar home was a lot like Earth in some ways and nothing like it in many other ways. It was in everything. The slight blue tinge to the grass and leaves, the slight green tinge to the sky, the two extra limbs of the animals. It was one of the few planets that Zambia had secured as a member of the New Federation and was the one closest in resemblance to the savannah that most were familiar with despite its oddities. So they called it Ongamika.

Twisted. Bent.

She had brought her family to Ongamika in the hope that they could outrun the disease that was tearing through their village. She had heard stories of the people that lived among the stars and thrived. Never going hungry and never sick but with technology you could never believe. So with her eyes fixed firmly upward, Mbaos scraped enough cash from her hunts and pelt-making to bribe the ship steward of the next outward bound space ship. Even when the steward lasciviously told her that the price had gone up and that she would have to pay extra back in his quarters, she kept her eyes upward and thought of her family. She thought of her sisters and her frail mother. She thought of how they wouldn't survive the disease that was blazing through their friends, their cousins and uncles. She thanked her ancestors that the steward had used protection.

Mbao may have been young, still a child by most people's standards at 18, but she was the eldest and when her father passed away from the sickness he gave Mbaos mother, Mbaos was forced to grow up and grow up quickly. She knew that the world wasn't kind to girls unless they opened up their legs. She knew that she would always be helpless and weak in most people's eyes and that she would need to be savage and cold to protect and provide for her family. Mbaos also knew when to choose her battles.

And so the ship steward she had bribed with her body had told her firmly to get dressed and be at the launch pad early the next morning before the sun rose.

Mbaos rushed home to tell her family the good news and bursting through the doorway of their hut, her words died on her tongue when she saw the downcast gazes of her sisters, Kasuba and Nama. They wordlessly handed her twin slips from the nearby clinic and the ground slid from under Mbaos feet.

Mbaos knew her sisters were prone to flights of fancy and couldn't resist the urge to flutter their eyelashes at the village boys. Mbaos sometimes wished that she had the same luxury. But she thought that they would at least have the common sense to...

It didn't matter. Not anymore.

As de facto matriarch, Mbaos tried not to break any skin when she took her father's cracked leather belt to her sisters. She tried not to put too much rage behind her swings and she grit her teeth against the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes.

Mbao only managed to feel bad when they were all safely sequestered in the cargo bay of the ship. It wasn't the end of the world. There may be new tech, new medicine out there. New magic even.

Mbao's mother had been a diligent student of the missionaries and thought that magic was an affront to God. And in some ways it was. If God was benevolent and giving, then magic was ambivalent and always got what it was owed at the end. It always bit back.

And so, once they were established on this strange rock floating in space, Mbao ventured out to hunt. She had procured a pair of heat signature goggles that helped her spot the animals that had adapted to remain hidden in the bright moonlight and a plasma-edged spear. She had also secretly performed the right charms and rituals to protect herself from any apex predators hoping that the ancestors would see her so many light years away. As always, she kept her charms small and perfunctory in an effort to make sure that she owed her magic as little as possible. For the first time in years, she was nervous before a hunt.

Mbao would have held off on the hunt longer but they needed food. Her sisters had their medication but it was no good if they had no food. Why had they fled their home world to avoid wasting away from the disease just to waste away from hunger on this backwards and backwoods planet? The government provided rations for the colonists – a word Mbao hated, especially when used in reference to her – but it wasn't enough. Lord knows that everyone was too afraid to hunt and too entitled to learn how to farm the alien terra firma.

The irony was the transplantation of a Hunter's Guild. A large group of young, strapping men that had dedicated themselves to the craft, the art of hunting. They believed only in brute strength

and savagery, the very epitome of hot-blooded males. They strutted around the village like they had subdued Ongamika in its strange fullness and were the kings thereof. When in reality they'd never ventured into the bush, insisting that they were training and growing strong for a bountiful hunt. But they were just as scared as everyone else. Mbao hated them.

She remembered approaching the Guild's hut in the centre of the village. The hut was the biggest in the village, all roads leading to it like veins to a fat and malignant tumour. Mbao had stared at the building that seemed to loom over her threateningly. She had hoped to join the Guild.

Mbao had no interest in the feigned prestige of the Guild. She wanted to join purely for the practical reason of it being safer to hunt in groups. She had briefly considered that they might have something to teach her. But once she stepped into the hut and saw the muscle-bound forms of the men, no, boys, reclining as they luxuriously knocked back *munkoyo*, Mbao figured that they could probably learn more from her in five minutes than they had in the year they'd been on their new celestial home.

"I want to join you," Mbao said, her chin tilted up defiantly at Muna, leader of the Guild and self-appointed chief of the settlers. He was no chief, he was a glorified school bully and nothing more.

The surrounding boys laughed uproariously, slapping their thighs and pointing at her mockingly. Mbao spotted a bow nearby that had been improperly strung and she scowled. Yeah. She was the laughing stock.

"I want to hunt," Mbao said firmly, tone flat and unflinching.

“You? Hunt?” Muna asked incredulously. “You’re a girl! A thin, weak one at that.”

“I’m fast and quiet and much stronger than I look,” Mbao said, teeth grinding. “I go unseen at night...”

“Not surprising with skin that dark!” Muna scoffed and he was met with more raucous laughter.

Mbao glared at him.

“Look, I’m not trying to be mean,” Muna said seriously and Mbao stifled a scoff. “I know your family’s situation. You want to provide for your mother and sisters. *Awe*, who am I to begrudge you that? But I’m telling you as an elder, your best choice is to marry a rich young man that can take care of you and your family. I’m sure one of my boys would be willing to do you that favour.”

He said the last part with a slight smirk and Mbao nearly buried her dagger in his smug face.

“Hm,” Mbao huffed in bitter amusement. “Provide? How can any of you provide when you’re too afraid to go into the bush?”

Muna’s face contorted in anger but Mbao was already storming out, almost weightless on the wings of rage.

Mbao didn’t think her parting words would result in anything past the odd dirty look here and there and a happy spinsterhood but she was proven wrong when one of Muna’s boys ventured into the bush, taking Mbao’s words as a personal challenge.

No corpse was ever found. But sometimes, when the night was long and silent, they heard his voice on the wind. But it was ... wrong.

It was distorted and full of static like it was coming from an old radio far, far away.

Mbao, for the first time in years, was afraid.
But she needed to hunt.

Mbao was finally in the tall grass of the savannah her plasma spear humming comfortingly in her hand. The grass was especially blue in the bright moonlight. She slipped her heat signature goggles on and allowed herself to adjust to them before kneeling down and drawing a rune into the soil. It glowed yellow for a moment before Mbao was engulfed in a strange warmth, insurance that she would return to that point. In what condition, she didn't know. So she pressed forward into ominous and bony trees.

Her footfalls were light and her breath was shallow. One wouldn't even know she was there unless they looked closely; part of it being her charms, part of it just being her nature as a huntress. Soon, she heard the snapping of a twig nearby and she turned her head in the direction of the sound. Nothing.

Mbao walked deeper into the trees, fear creeping up her spine at the unrecognisable terrain before her. She remembered why she was doing it, who she was doing it for and kept going. Another branch snapped nearby again and Mbao whipped in the direction of the sound again, her hand tightening on her spear. Her goggles didn't pick up anything but Mbao had the distinct feeling of being watched. Like she was the one being hunted. She still pressed forward.

When another branch snapped nearby, Mbao felt, no she knew, that she was being mocked, being toyed with. The noises were following her and never came from the same direction. Mbao realised this

belatedly and she knew that she would have to cast a pretty powerful spell to find her way back. If she survived.

“Show yourself!” Mbao growled, holding her spear out, the edges glowing a dangerous red in the dim light.

Mbao hadn't expected anything to happen, hoping that her defensive stance would scare away whoever or whatever was toying with her. But her grip on her spear faltered when from behind a thin, bone-white tree, a man stepped out. At least it looked like a man. Mbao's goggles registered no heat from the man and she turned them off to see the person clearly.

The being, the thing, was shaped like a man, had a face like a man but there were several things that were just off. Its eyes were a little too big for its face, its nose flat with slits like a snake. Its fingers were tipped with dangerous claws and the fingers were a little too long. Its skin was pale, bone-white, like the surrounding trees and its thin, tall body made Mbao wonder if she was just looking at a tree and hallucinating. Mbao lunged warningly at the creature.

It didn't flinch.

Mbao was breathing heavily at that point, unsure what this thing in a person suit was. Unsure of what it wanted from her, of why it was toying with her.

“Ru-run,” the creature, croaked. Its voice was a distorted unholy mockery of a human voice. Like it was embellished with static. It sounded like the boy... the boy who'd gone missing.

“What?” Mbao asked incredulously, chest heaving as she panted in fear and confusion.

“*Ruuuun*,” the creature wailed and its body loped forward, more quickly than Mbao thought it could move, limbs weirdly limp and stiff all at once.

And so Mbao turned and ran, her feet flying over leaves and branches, barely even touching them. She didn’t know where she was going and she didn’t know if the creature was right behind her or not. All she knew was that she had to get away.

The night was unnaturally silent and suddenly as dark as the darkest night on earth. She felt claustrophobic.

It was only when her legs started to burn with exertion and her lungs felt like they were bursting did she realise that she couldn’t hear anything behind her. It was only when the sweat was pouring down her skin did she realise that there was no noise besides her own panicked breathing.

And then a cold solid mass crashed into her back, knocking the breath out of her and her body to the ground.

It was heavy on top of her, bearing down relentlessly as it pressed her into the dirt. White coloured the edges of Mbao’s vision. She was panting heavily as she struggled fruitlessly beneath the unnaturally heavy creature.

“*Witch*,” the creature wailed into Mbao’s ear.

“No,” Mbao shouted, hyperventilating. “I’m not! I’m not! *I’m not!*”

Mbao didn’t know why she was pleading with the creature. Fear and the cloying smell of her own mortality was driving her to desperation. She knew in her heart of hearts that this creature was a mere facsimile of humanity. It was a poor imitation of a human

with only one base urge: consumption. It had no morals to appeal to and it would have no remorse when it took her into itself and would only be left with hunger once again.

“Witch... meat,” the creature croaked hungrily. Its breath fanned across her neck, cold as the grave and smelling of it too.

Mbao’s face was wet with tears and sweat, the dirt turning to mud on her face. She thought of her mother; frail and on death’s door, ushered into the next life by the sound of her eldest daughter’s corrupted and distorted voice at night. She thought of her sisters. Her sisters who were too kind and too soft for any world and who would waste away into nothingness. Mbao wept. In anger, in sadness, in fear. She wept.

And through her tears, she saw just to her right, glowing dangerously, her plasma-edged spear. It was just an arm’s reach if she could just get her arm out...

The creature suddenly flipped Mbao onto her back, a bony and cold hand pinning her down by her throat, and its claws digging into the sensitive skin. Mbao clawed at the hand to no avail, her nails chipping against the creature’s thick and hard skin. The creature suddenly straightened slightly where it was crouching over her and tilted its head back before giving a bone-chilling sound that seemed a cross between a croak and a screech.

Mbao felt the sound more than she heard it, deep in her gut, and deep in her bones. It shook her from the inside out until she felt like her teeth were about to rattle out of her skull. It was then that she realised that her body was convulsing, spasming in the creature’s grasp uncontrollably.

And then pain.

Scorching and blinding pain, as though her soul was trying to escape its mortal prison. But instead of her soul escaping her body, it was blood. Blood coming in thick and painful rivulets from her mouth, her eyes and her ears, floating out of her into the creature's gaping maw. The creature gulped it down croaking in satisfaction, closing its too wide eyes.

No!

Convulsing still and almost blind with pain, Mbaio was only aware of the spear and the anger that would allow her to use it. With shaking hands, Mbaio drew a rune in the dirt, her finger wet with her own blood. It was a dangerous rune. A bargaining rune. A rune that said that Mbaio would spill blood itself if only she could live, just one more day.

And then using her own convulsions, Mbaio bucked and darted her arm out to grab her spear, seemingly forgotten in the dirt.

And like any hunter worth their salt, she did not falter, she did not waver. She simply swung her spear, no finesse or skill, and buried her spear in the creature's neck in a flash of bright red light. And the creature lurched away with a screech, its far too human hand stifling the flow of viscous black blood from its neck and failing. The creature fell to its knees and Mbaio understood that as monstrous and corrupt as this creature was, it was still flesh and bone.

Mbaio now weak with blood loss and exhaustion got to her feet. She stumbled slightly but held fast to her spear, her rage flowing freely in the place of blood. Mbaio pressed a pad on the side of her spear to extend the tip into a blade, the sides glowing and humming their signature, dangerous red. Perhaps Mbaio was seeing things as

weak as she was but for a split second, she swore that she saw an expression of fear flash across the creature's face.

Mbao was kind though. She beheaded it quickly, her blade cauterising the wound instantly. The creature's head fell to the forest floor with a soft thud.

She bled the creature dry over her rune and a quiet hum sounded in her mind. Her debt was paid. This time. The hum in her mind telling her that there was more blood to be spilt still, blacker and viler as well.

She dragged its corpse back to the village and stood in the town square, right in front of the Hunter's Guild. In front of Muna and his boys. And she spoke, her voice strong though her body was weak, her meticulously wrapped *chitenge* stained with her own blood and black splatters of the creature's blood.

"This is what waits for you out there," she said, holding up the creature's head. "I know there are more out there and worse. I know they eat our flesh and drink our blood."

Stunned and fearful faces stared back at her, lost for words at the sight of her bloody and exhausted but holding up the creature's head, blankly staring at the ground, like a trophy.

"But I will hunt for you," Mbao intoned. "I will keep you safe."

Relief seemed to pass through the crowd in waves, sighs and 'Praise Gods' floating up amongst the throng.

Mbao knew that better than anyone, better than anyone *should* know. But regardless, the price would feed her family and the price would keep her village safe.

“For a price,” Mbao finished and the crowd became resentful before they became resigned. “Blood or milk, everything comes at a price.”

There was no need or time to negotiate. Mbao would need to rest and grow stronger and faster to outrun the things that dwelt in the pseudo-darkness.

Then it was time to hunt again.