

PROLOGUE - SHADOW OF THE CONJURER

A.D. 1830 - Niger, Africa - The Sub Saharan

Despite being caged by the sounds and screams of pain and outrage surrounding the little village of Mande Faro, Jikindi had courage from the old traditions.

The old woman's dark eyes surveyed the scene. She reached around her fat thighs and tore off the loose material of her skirt loincloth, the nagba in Mande, the language of the Malinke or Mandingo people. She looked quickly for the easiest route of escape, knowing she had little time to react. Too much was at stake. Only her favorite grandchild, Nika, could be helped. Sadly, leaving the rest of Jikindi's family to fend for themselves was not a path the old woman would have chosen in any other situation.

Hunkering down in an awkward squat, she held Nika's face in a firm grip, turning the young girl's eyes to her own.

"Granddaughter, we must save ourselves," said Jikindi. The young girl whimpered softly, and Jikindi let her momentarily rest on her shoulder. "We cannot afford to be afraid, my Nika."

In quick staccato words Jikindi calmed her ten-year-old granddaughter. "Do what I tell you. Listen carefully to me and nothing else."

Nika nodded, drying her eyes with a fast swipe of her hand.

"We must not attract attention. But if we do, run toward the jungle away from the river. Do you understand? Away from the river."

"Yes, my mamaw. Away from the river."

Jikindi's face leaned into Nika's. "I am fat and old. You are young and fast. If I fall, if I falter, run as fast as your young legs will carry you. Do not wait for me."

Nika's eyes arched in concern. She shook her head, knowing she could not do that. Could not be alone. Her grandmother taught her everything.

Jikindi bit her lip. Then she slapped the young girl sharply, something she had never done. She shook her finger and raised her voice in desperation. "You know everything that you can know. You will survive. My spirit will not allow you to die...to be alone!"

The girl started to cry again, but the old woman wiped her eyes herself this time. "I love you, Nika. You will survive."

Nika nodded.

Jikindi looked out the window of the hut. "Let us run like the antelope that escapes the hyenas. Stay close."

Jikindi and Nika emerged from the mud and straw-thatched hut. The village was dotted with buildings that looked like the tops of Chinese rockets stuck in the ground, the thatch woven tightly at the top of the circular buildings, mud applied directly to the woven tree branches of their sides.

Some of the huts were on fire. Smoke was everywhere, blurring directions and making breathing difficult. Jikindi hugged the side of the hut and dashed quickly to the next structure a good forty feet away, her granddaughter grabbing her left arm, Jikindi's right arm bracing her body against the hot dried mud. Around them people raced in groups of two or three, usually a mother with children or a single male or female, sometimes an elder. In almost all cases, the children were crying, or the elderly were wailing. Nika hugged her grandmother tighter in fear. Jikindi forced the little girl's arm away and began running again. She plowed through thick smoke. They coughed uncomfortably, the sweat of their bodies now combining with the thick smoke to dribble darkly in streaks down their faces, arms, and thighs.

Jikindi and Nika slowly worked their way toward the village edge. They stopped near a burning hut. Their heads were drawn to the smoky room where streaks of sun fell through a roof made patchy by fire. The back of an adult man, approximately fifty and painted gray by soot, was exposed. His grunts played in the air along with the smoke. But only for a moment.

The man turned as if he knew who was behind him. The spin to his audience was slow and deliberate. Jikindi and Nika first saw his jaw outlined by the yellow and black of decaying teeth. Then the eyes, the white of the first, the right eye, standing out in stark contrast to the lines of blood zigzagging through the sclera and the iris. He was mad. And he was thrilled in recognition of his madness. The man held a small child in his partially outstretched hands. It was a girl, maybe three years old. The hands were around the girl's neck, squeezing the last drop of life, the mouth grunting satisfaction in his deadly chore.

Nika screamed and grabbed her grandmother's legs.

Jikindi shrieked at the ghoulish man. "Baaku, your granddaughter! No!"

The man's eyes widened. "She is mine to take! Not theirs. Suffering at the call of Allah? Bah! Maybe these cattle; but you, Jikindi, you should know that we do not bow to anyone other than Mangala and the twins."

Baaku Bandeh's eyes switched to the dead girl's neck as he squeezed a last time and dropped the body to the dusty floor of the hut. The corpse splayed in unwelcome acknowledgment of vitality's extinction, landing cross-legged in contact with the dirt before slowly slouching to the side, the small head thumping to the floor, but with wide-eyed shock at the end.

The killer raised his hand toward Jikindi and Nika, grinning in mirth. "I come to you next, Nika. Jikindi will not stop me. She prefers the finality of her brother Malinke to these slavers of Allah!"

CHAPTER ONE

"I once knew she loved me, but then I didn't."

Jared McNally's thought was like an old book on a dusty shelf, rarely examined, but simply noted in passing. When it was handled, it was reflected outward like a shimmering mirror

on an island of discontent. Jared prided his stubborn ability to continue. It was, after all, not his responsibility to fix. He took care of continuing as his side of the bargain and suitably forgot the original goals in his life with Melissa, his wife.

Jared's lapse into irritation with his inconvenient accommodation dissolved with the immediacy of flying his model aircraft, a four-foot imitation of the vintage P47 Thunderbolt, a fighter from World War II. Jared had several remote controlled aircraft. However, he preferred the Thunderbolt, having flown and rebuilt the plane several times. Crashes were unavoidable, but with knowledge and experience the damage was usually mitigated by the flyer.

Jared sought the high in seeing an attractive work of art born from a pile of balsa wood, fiber glass, paint and glue, the small engine whining in contentment when wedded to the brilliant colors and festoons of the fuselage and wings. Like the beautiful and structured dance of a male bird courting a ladylove, the flights of Jared's iridescent and capering beauties both excited and relaxed his soul.

It could be said that building and flying such aircraft was his escape from the hubbub and politics of his job. It could also be said it was escape from dealing with the reality of home. Jared McNally was a supervisory radar engineer at the U.S. Army's Multi-Role Radar Project Office, naturally fit without trying very hard, blonde hair tapered and layered of medium length. He was an aloof and controlled man, but able to convey initiative and quiet capability at work. MR2, as it was known in Army circles, was located on Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama along with a multitude of other high technology programs and agencies, such as NASA's Marshall Spaceflight Center. Jared's career in Huntsville spanned over fifteen years. He was thirty-seven; and it was through his job that he met Melissa, who was an intellectual property lawyer for the Army Aviation and Missile Command.

Jared handled the controls as if the audience behind him was invisible and soundless. He smoothly handled the takeoff, rolls, and turns of the aircraft, the slight changes in control of the radio application nearly imperceptible. His heart rate was a soft sixty beats a minute, leaving behind one hundred twenty that followed an argument with Melissa. A slight smile balanced out his concentration as his fingers lightly moved the controls to start another turn.

Jared's peace was broken by the crash of the safety fence separating the parking lot from the well-maintained Arsenal airfield. Two young men staggered from the collision, their car's hood wearing the curled fence like a kilt. Jared's plane took the momentary lapse as an unprepared lover takes a 'Dear John' letter. It nose dived to the manicured field, splintering into a hundred pieces. Jared cursed and threw the transmitter to the ground in disgust. Then he wheeled to storm the car and its unwary occupants.

Jared reached the teenagers as they began removing the fence from their car's grill. He approached the situation incautiously, dealing the fire in his anger with high octane and rasping the boys' embarrassment coarsely. He grabbed the arm of the nearest youth, a spindly sandy-headed kid with freckles, and spun him around, the kid's left hand still locked in the chain links surrounding the Geo.

"What the hell do you boys think you're doing? That P47 took me weeks to put together. All that's left is matchsticks."

The teenager was understandably agitated; but in trying to sort through his agitation and his misunderstanding, the boy's eyes cleared long enough to register surprise. "Huh? Seriously, we didn't mean it. I accidentally hit the gas, but I thought it was in park."

About that time the parents and the crowd reached the kids. Jared's need for quick gratification brought a turn of attention to Adam Ansley, the father of the driver.

"Did you see what happened? That was a wipe out. My plane's a mess. I have five hundred bucks in that model and that doesn't touch the hours I invested."

"Give me a moment to talk to Evan. I'll take care of it, Jared."

McNally saw the concern in Adam's eyes and decided to flush his own fuming since the magic words 'I'll take care of it' were voiced. He moved a small distance away, enough to show consideration, but not so much as to convey the issue was resolved. He placed hands on hips and waited impatiently, his blood pressure spiking again. The respite gave his mind freedom to count the ways this day went wrong, starting with his argument with Melissa.

After talking to his son, Adam stuck his hands in his coat and walked back. He struggled to find the words he hoped would sooth his fellow affiliate. "Jared, Evan is really sorry, and..."

Jared McNally wanted blood and gave no quarter. "Sorry? I just want to know how I'm going to replace my Thunderbolt, Adam. Sorry doesn't cut it."

Ansley bit his lip. "Jared, you didn't let me finish. Are you going to shut up long enough to let me explain how we can make this well?"

After a tangible moment Jared nodded in agreement, but began the stare of judgment. He spoke not a word, his anxiety a badge of honor to the victim he felt he was. Ansley waited for McNally calm while Jared felt Melissa was somehow responsible. He needed his wits to combat these soldiers taking up her cause in some satanic twist of fate.

"Look, Evan is a great kid," said Adam. "If he said it was an accident, it was. But because he is a great kid, he offered to pay you out of his own pocket. I won't be helping him. He'll use some money he was saving for a summer trip."

The internal McNally was appeased, but the victim McNally felt he was required something beyond money. "How is that going to take care of the time I spent on the model? That model was my joy."

Ansley shook his head, partly in annoyance, but partly because he thought McNally did not understand. "Evan will pay for it himself, and he'll help you with the plane."

McNally did not budge. His displeasure waited to be painted on canvas in hot colors of emotion, not punctured and deflated like so much air in a balloon. "Evan doesn't know anything about model aircraft. It will look like a flying log of shit."

Ansley's face appeared to puff and mottle irately. A slight sheen of perspiration leached from his brow. He swallowed hard and in a controlled voice said, "If I did what I am thinking, the only flying turd would be Jared McNally. I'm going to lend a hand to my son. See me later. I'll help you, or I'll repair it. That will give me a chance to guilt Evan into learning my hobby."

Jared's antagonism was diffused with the measured response of his friend. He watched as Ansley walked the hundred feet to the small rise where the boys moved the posts from the Geo, scarred as if it was a bright colored beetle pinned down by a gigantic entomologist. Adam turned for a moment to seemingly assess the sanity of his friend.

McNally waved, an acknowledgment to his buddy that the sane Jared was back.

With the return of his good sense, McNally bit his lip in mortification. The temporary shame was helpful in that it turned his thought inward which was often difficult. Like many, Jared sometimes preferred to blame others, including Melissa. It was with more than humiliation that Jared grasped his temper and isolation were part of the problem. McNally admitted that he wanted Melissa to fix her problems, but he would be more successful if he improved to begin with. For now, he had to apologize to Adam.

Apreoccupied Melissa McNally laid down her drink of Jack Daniels and coke, absent-mindedly reaching for her skirt that lay haphazardly over the arm of the cheap armchair in the cheap hotel. The air was musty and wet from the humid moisture pumping from the window stoop's loud air conditioner, a strong tobacco smell perjuring the 'no smoking' sign in the corner.

This was a likely dot on the landscape for Melissa's affair, a stereotype hotel for sexual attachments and people without direction. Though the hotel's façade was acceptably adorned with pleasantries of folksy hellos along the busy Memorial Parkway, its service road in the rear held little traffic to eye her gray Audi whose headlights faced the road, waiting for a quick escape. It was mid-afternoon on a weekend; and many Huntsville residents were watching Alabama play Southern Mississippi on a Sunday afternoon hardwood basketball court, a proper and responsible event for after-church families eating fried chicken and exchanging the latest gossip of Billy or Megan Sue.

Melissa slid the bright skirt over her slip and smoothed away the wrinkles. Tossing her hair behind her shoulders, she turned her face to look for the tell tale sheen of perspiration, a bit of powder placed sparingly for correction. She applied her blush to the apples of her cheeks and followed with a dab of lip-gloss, finishing with a brush of powder over her smooth complexion. A touch here. A caress there. Even after 34 years, make up played only a supporting role in enhancing her natural beauty. She had a small petite frame, skin a lovely pale color. Her hair was not red, but in the right light might appear so, her elongated curls flashing a hint of fire. She had an almond-shaped face with slanting blue eyes, not Asian per se, as she was pure Irish in form and background. Her mirrored face reflected satisfaction with the touchup as she picked up the hairbrush, the result a youthful Jane Seymour appearance of clear skin and elegance coupled with the windblown glow of a 1940s Maureen O'Hara.

Her lover, Blaine Harvey, remained unhurried, folding his hands behind his head. He was clean looking, a robust man of forty who remained twenty at heart. Blaine tried marriage and failed, not because he did not like marriage, but simply because he was not good at it. Blaine felt too many relationships were stamped modern, women grandstanding their ball-busting 'reality show' personalities swathed in alleged injustice from alleged ego-centric boyfriends. That being said, Blaine loved women, especially Melissa, as he had the double satisfaction of a married woman with distance, as well as doing it with the wife of a man he despised. Blaine and Jared had worked together in the past. Their styles were different; but more importantly, they failed to play nice in the sand box.

Blaine smiled as he gazed at the ceiling. "You think Jared knows anything yet?"

Melissa stopped in mid-stroke, turning her ire to Blaine. “Why mention Jared? We have some time together, and you seem bound to screw it up.”

“Look, I apologize,” voiced a seemingly too humble Blaine who swung his legs off the utterly awful mixed-vomit bedspread. He appeared playfully contrite.

“Save it, Blaine. I don’t know why I do this. You...”

Blaine’s eyes danced at the rise. “Because you were mad at him, and you feel better getting back at him through me. Don’t throw darts at me. Admit we like the satisfaction.”

Melissa’s nostrils flared in a temporary flush of troubling emotion. Her father, Dillon, would not have approved though he would have suggested something, probably insufficient, but which showed he cared. When her mom abandoned them, Melissa could not remember her father voicing regrets. But Dad was dead. What followed was two decades of pain mixed with success and eventual disappointment.

She had a short span of false hope offered in the early years of her marriage to Jared. Now she escaped with Blaine and avoided action with Jared. Action was hard, the opposite of self-deluded escape to greener pastures. Action caused anxiety. It was one thing to learn to avoid a hot stove when a toddler. However, loneliness pulled more strongly than the smell of pancakes and bacon. Its burns were a more difficult and crusty kind, a selection between a distant husband, a foolish lover, or a life alone.

“Jared and I do have our problems, or I wouldn’t be here. But you’re mistaken if you think you know me, Blaine. Do what I ask. Don’t mention Jared. You and I are not on a level where I can trust a conversation, a discussion about him with you. “

Melissa seemed to stall in mental fatigue, sighing and dropping her eyes to the floor; but before Blaine could take advantage of her indecision, she gained a surge of energy, wagging her finger in a semblance of a parry. “You have given me something I need, but don’t pat yourself on the back as if you know me beyond the physical. You and I escape. That’s all. Let’s keep it at that until we are ready for another step that I’m not sure you’re capable of.”

“Give me some credit, sugar,” purred Blaine smugly.

“Credit for what? You said it yourself, Blaine. You enjoy getting back at Jared, so how will I ever really know if you care for me because of me?”

Blaine rose, confidence oozing from his pores. His pace was slow and assured. His well-tanned and defined body was an oxymoron for a man of forty years. His nakedness brushed her skirt, her arm, and his hand touched her face in a deliberate but light caress. Blaine said nothing at first, except with his eyes, which emphatically asserted he owned her.

“Melissa, let’s not fight. That’s for you and Jared. I care. I make you feel comfortable. Use me for the pleasure you deserve.”

Melissa reached around Blaine’s waist in apparent surrender. With a sudden flip of the brush she smacked viciously at Blaine’s taunt bottom. Blaine jerked in shock. It was Melissa’s turn to smile.

“You never cease to amaze me.”

Blaine rubbed at the red mark on his behind. “And why did you choose me? You should be honest.”

Melissa reasserted her worried stare, her guilty glimpse.

Shadow of The Conjuror

Sensing a bulls-eye, Blaine went too far as if the things that kept him twenty forever also cursed him to repeat his mistakes. “What will you do when you end it between us? Do I need to give you Jared’s enemy list for your next snack?”

Melissa’s anger was immediate. Her reaction swift. Her hand whip-sawed out in a nasty arc. Blaine’s face hammered backward.

“And you’re an arrogant asshole who cannot tell when he’s overplayed his hand!”

Like a little boy with his hand caught in the cookie jar, Blaine replied, this time meaning it. “I’m...I’m sorry. I was just playing.”

Melissa glared, then quickly forced her feet into her sandals, grabbed her purse, and then the doorknob with a grip of fury. “God forgive me, Blaine. Not because I hit you, but because I forget that Jared may be aloof, even an ass sometimes; but he would never be so purposefully hurtful. I don’t care that you act like a kid, but I need a man.”

She shook the glower from her face as she turned from him. She left Blaine naked and worried. Melissa was in control. Not her lover. But she could not connect with victory. Her parting comment left her lips with regret. “But that man, whoever he is, is deserving of someone who tries. I’ll see you at the meeting tomorrow. Try not to look like a lost child around me. Folks might question what is going on.” She slammed the door in his face.