

Extract – The Weight of Skin

He meets his handler on the southbound platform of the Bakerloo line. Ahead of Kitara, when he steps onto the platform, his footsteps echoing, is an advert for a mobile phone. He turns left, and at the far end of the platform, sitting at a desk lit by a single lamp, is his contact, a man called Smith, though he doubts this is his real name.

The man does not look up until Kitara is a few metres away.

‘Kitara.’ He says this not by way of greeting but simply as a statement of fact, and then looks back down at his papers, pen in hand.

There is no chair in front of the desk so Kitara remains standing.

‘Report.’

The words just come out. ‘There is no change.’ He had not thought about his answer till now but knows that he was not going to tell.

‘No change?’ Smith stops writing and looks up. ‘No one in the past two weeks?’

Kitara remembers the policeman. If he reported the incident then they will know.

He answers, ‘There are few of us left. You have done a good job.’ He does not know why he lies, why he takes the chance. For what, a single word on a piece of paper that could have come from anywhere?

Smith looks down again. ‘You had two males last time, and one female. They are still there?’

‘Yes. They will be released next week.’

‘The usual time, of course.’

It is not phrased as a question and Kitara does not respond.

‘And what have they told you?’

‘Nothing. One mentioned a hideout on Boscobel Street but he says it was months ago that he was there and he was the last of them anyway. They are loners. They do not have knowledge of others.’

‘You are sure of this?’

‘I have done everything I can.’

Smith puts his pen on the table, gets up and walks around to Kitara.

‘You have brought us very little recently.’

‘As I say, you appear to have rounded up everyone.’

Smith says nothing but turns and sits down again.

‘What are you doing with them?’

‘You know what we are doing.’

‘Humour me. How do I know you are keeping your end of the bargain? You do not tell me what goes on in these camps.’

‘Do you wish to make a complaint?’

Kitara remains silent.

‘There are forms you can fill in. You may do so if you wish.’ Smith shifts some papers on his desk, looking for something, and after a few moments holds up a form and waves it at Kitara. ‘But I should tell you, we struggle to process a complaint of the sort you may want to make. Each is processed equally and we require the same set of information. If you wish to complain about the treatment of a person or persons, you have to state their names and their nationalities, and you have neither.’

‘They are citizens of my country; of your country too, some of them.’

‘Your country? No. You require a state to be recognised by the host state for an individual to claim that nationality. Your government appears to have ceased to function, so the basis for that recognition has disappeared. And without a nationality, without the anchor of a state, we can say an individual does not in fact have statehood, and therefore has no legal basis for existence. And if a person does not exist, they cannot be mistreated. There is also no complaint, nothing to file, no paperwork to process. We cannot act in or against a vacuum.’ He throws up his hands. ‘The law is

clear. Your country no longer exists, Mr Kitara. The people in these camps are stateless. As such, they are no longer entitled to succour from our nation.'

'Many of these people were English citizens. Some have married English spouses and had children.'

'Spouses of immigrants have the option for a quick divorce, in which case they regain the rights of an English citizen, or they can choose to remain with the immigrant and their children and accept the removal of their English citizenship. Children born in England to at least one immigrant parent are considered immigrants too. *Their* children, though, will be allowed to remain.'

'Statehood does not cease in times of war. A nation does not cease to exist because there is a change in government.'

'No. But as a nation, we have the right to recognise the legality of a country, and we choose not to recognise those where there is no rule of law, where one group terrorises another, where there are ongoing genocidal practices. Israel exists because we choose for it to exist. Your republic does not because we choose for it not to exist. But, Mr Kitara, you know all this. You do not need me to tell you this. Are you wavering? Can we still trust you?'

Kitara cannot find the words to respond. Instead he says, 'I want to be taken to a camp.'

Smith stares at him, half a smile on his face. 'Do you? Are you sure?'

'I want to see for myself.'

Smith shakes his head, the smile disappearing. 'It is a bit late for that, isn't it?' Then, 'Mr Kitara, do not concern yourself. You have chosen the right path, the path of light, if I may describe it as such. You may yet be returned to your homeland a powerful leader, ready to heal, to reconcile your people following in your wake.'

'May?'

Smith shrugs. 'It is not my decision. I am simply a messenger. I will say, though – and I say this for your own good – your usefulness has dropped off recently. You must try harder. There is still a war to win.'

'A war? A war on your own people?'

'No. Not our war. Yours. I suppose in law the people were once ours but we are giving them back now. Every last one. Only you can lead them back to their homeland, only you can save them.'

Smith takes up his pen and begins writing again.

'There is one in particular. I want to ask about one in particular.'

Smith looks up. 'Your son?' He looks almost apologetic.

Kitara shakes his head and hands over a note with the name and address of Mary's mother. 'I ask only that you tell me where she is, what you have done with her, whether she is alive or dead.'

Smith looks at the note, turns it over. 'Why are you giving me this?'

'I want to know, and I know you can tell me.'

'We treat everyone the same.'

'Look at it. It is the name of the mother of one of my staff. The girl is distraught.'

Smith turns the note back over, shrugs. 'There is nothing on this paper.'

Kitara pauses. 'There is a name. An address. You must have records.'

'I can see nothing on the paper. It is dark in here. Perhaps you imagined a name on there. Or perhaps you handed me the paper thinking it was the right one but without realising that in your haste to get here you had grabbed the wrong paper, a paper with nothing on it.'

Kitara stares at him for a few moments but knows it is pointless to say more. He turns to go, taking back the paper, the name clearly visible.

He is already several paces off when Smith calls out. 'Wait.' His tone is softer.

Kitara turns to see him standing, his face illuminated from below by the lamp.

'I do have another message I have to convey. It is not good news.'

'Well?'

'Your son.'

'What of him?' Kitara starts to hear the same drumbeat as when he found the note on the newcomer, the same beating in his ears.

'We had suspected it for a while but it was confirmed recently. He was one of the leaders, if not the leader, of the opposition forces in the Republic.'

Kitara is still.

'It is hard to find out these things in such times. It used to be much easier. It seems he came out of nowhere. I mean, he had all the credentials, the family connections – his mother, I mean – but he was very young and we had no intelligence on him until very recently.'

Kitara hears the word 'was'. He knows what it means but cannot address it, cannot address its meaning. 'No. Not Joseph. You have the wrong person.'

Smith shakes his head. 'There is more.'

Kitara knows what is coming. He wants the man to be quiet now, to stop, to stop talking.

'Your son is dead.'

He hears water dripping from the roof of the tunnel.

'It happened several weeks ago, though I am unable to tell you where or exactly when.'

'How do you know?' The words come quickly.

'What do you mean?'

'How can you be certain it was him? You were not there.'

He shrugs. 'It takes longer these days. But we get there in the end.'

Kitara turns away, looks up at the ceiling, trying to find the source of the water.

'It appears he was murdered. We believe he was killed because of infighting in the opposition ranks. A struggle over leadership.'

Kitara shakes his head. He has questions, so many questions, but they are unformed: a mass of words.

'This is hard news to bear, Mr Kitara. But the best way of ensuring he did not die in vain is to do what we say. You can save these people, save them in his name if that is what it takes.'

Kitara's legs do not move. The tunnel is silent, save for the drip of water. He now hears only this, the water dripping steadily onto the platform. He wants the noise to stop. He finds he wants to put his hands over his ears, push his thumbs into his earholes until it stops, and push and push until finally he breaks all the little bones inside his skull.

1.

'He too will I take in.' Jacob Kitara hurries out to the man who has appeared on the corner of Chester Street. 'Though he is the very image of a vagabond I will take him in.'

The newcomer slouches at the end of the street, hands almost touching the ground, swaying from side to side. His gait, his bearing, that of a fighter: a fighter, and not a reasonable man, not one for talking. He will need to be careful with this one.

A window on the second floor allows Kitara a view of the street. He spends hours there most days. When he spotted the man he ran from the ledge where he sat to get to him before others did. He needed to hurry. There are others out there still, though fewer now; others who would also be looking for a man like this. But when Kitara reaches the street he sees no one else.

He has become adept at reading injuries: a lean to the left betrays a shallow knife wound, a slump of the shoulders a broken rib. In some, no surface wound at all but the empty look of one who has seen things they do not wish to see. He has read these signs on many, those he encountered on his walks through London and those who appear on Chester Street, asking, sometimes begging, for sanctuary.

He must provide sanctuary, for a time. That is what he must do now, what has been given to him to do.

Those first words begging for assistance are often all Kitara will get from them. Though he presses them for more, for the truth, for tales of how they came to be here, where they are from, whether they left others behind, he receives few answers. He does not take offence. How could he, when he knows what goes on beyond the walls of his building?

Later, some of them will open up to the carers. Standing outside the ward, Kitara will hear their stories: tales of refuge, betrayal, families left behind; some sharing their tricks, boastful of how they had managed to survive when others had not.

He listens, patches them up, but then they have to go. He cannot keep them here and must throw them out if they do not go willingly. He opens the inner and outer doors at an appointed time, checks the street, sends them on their way. A few say goodbye and give thanks. Most run. Some try to turn back and beg to remain but must be shunned.

They vanish, never to be seen again.

Kitara has a small staff. There are fewer of them than when the building housed the charity they worked for, but he is grateful that what they lack in numbers and medical training, they make up for in the steadfastness of their care.

He knows it would not work without his office manager, Adina. She has a rota for the beds, makes sure meals are served on time, that everyone has water, those who need it get bathed, and dressings are changed regularly.

She wishes he would not do what he does. She wishes he would not receive all these people – she says he plays a dangerous game – but when Kitara asks what else she would have him do, he gets no reply. He tells her, and tells himself, there are times when one must not turn or run away, when one must do the right thing, though it might seem repellent at first.

He has not been more than a few metres from the building for weeks; his colleagues have not left it at all. They sit, they give care, they wait. It is safer here. They will not be touched. He believes this, believes in what he has been told.

They are locked in, shut away from the outside. The building is surrounded by wooden boards on the ground floor, erected a few feet away from the building on the edge of the road, as if it is an abandoned building site. There are more boards across the first-floor windows that face the street. Only the second floor is uncovered. They are used to the dark.

There are clues to their presence, of course. If one looked closely enough, one would see that the door in the wooden boards is padlocked from the inside, the flickering light from behind the upper windows, and an ear to a wall, should one get past the wooden barrier, would hear the breathing of those hidden inside.

He walks quickly up to the visitor. As he gets closer, he sees that the eyes that have appeared to follow him are in fact blank. Blood, still wet, stains the man's shirt below his ribs on the right.

Kitara stands face to face with him now and can smell him. Just for a moment he gets something familiar. Though he cannot quite place it, it makes his heart lurch, whatever it might be. A smell of the old country, perhaps.

He has no time to ponder this as the man falls forward and Kitara has to grab him to stay his fall. He places his arm under the man's and turns back towards the building.

Kitara sees the policeman then. He has been posted for their protection, the English say, though Kitara knows it is for other reasons. The policeman stands, watching the two men, blocking the way to the door.

'Stop. Who is this one?'

At first Kitara remains quiet but the policeman does not move.

'He is an employee. He will not leave again.' He does not know why he says this instead of the truth.

'You are not supposed to leave.'

Kitara straightens, a difficult task when supporting the weight of another; looks the policeman in the eye. The man he sees before him is still a child. Thickset and almost as tall as Kitara

but seems no more than sixteen or seventeen. *They are taking them younger these days*, he thinks. *Anyone will do.*

The policeman appears to relent under Kitara's stare. 'Looks like he got what he deserves.'

Kitara is about to say something but thinks better of it and steps towards the door.

'What is his name?'

'Makana. Sipho Makana.'

Kitara closes his eyes in a slow blink. His second lie. Why that name? It came out of nowhere. It is a mistake but the chances of this child knowing who that is, or was, are slim. He must just hope the policeman doesn't check the name against those of his staff.

The officer snorts but stands aside. 'I will be watching you.'

2.

Kitara turns off the radio, and as he does, hears a faint sound from down the corridor. He thinks it is someone in the kitchen preparing food and walks down the corridor towards the room. It is dark apart from a sliver of light from below the kitchen door.

Hesitating outside, he puts his ear to the door. He hears whispers, the words indistinguishable. He smells tobacco smoke, and over that, potato soup cooking on the stove.

He opens the door. The light is from cigarettes, a ring of fire under the pot, and a single candle in the middle of the table. He makes out the forms of his staff. They turn to him, candlelight on their faces, rendered silent by his entrance. The only sound is the bubbling of the soup.

Adina sits with her arms around someone, a young woman named Mary. Mary is in tears, or was until Kitara entered. She stops crying and stares at him.

'What's the matter?' Kitara approaches, sits on the other side of the woman, and takes her hand. Though she flinches she does not remove it. Kitara notices the candlelight flickering in her eyes. He feels the embarrassment of the situation, the three of them huddled together on the bench, but at the same time feels a warmth, a calmness, and does not want to break the spell.

The girl begins to cry again, softly, into Adina's shoulder.

Adina speaks. 'It is Mary's mother. She has been taken.'

Kitara hesitates.

'How do you know?'

'She went to her flat but she was not there.'

Kitara is silent for a moment before addressing Mary directly. 'I have forbidden you to go out by yourself. It is not safe.' He speaks gently.

'Jacob, now is not the time.'

'I was careful.' Mary speaks up.

Kitara looks at Adina. 'This must not be allowed.'

Adina returns his look but Kitara cannot decipher her expression.

Mary again: 'The flat was in a state. Plates were broken, furniture upended, and the TV was still on. She would not have gone anywhere without me. They have taken her.'

There are murmurings from behind Kitara.

'Mary, she will be fine. She will have been moved, like the others. There is little we can do.'

'I need to find her, Mr Kitara. She is all I have left. My brother...' She shakes her head. 'I need to find her and bring her here.'

Kitara shakes his head slowly and speaks softly. 'It is not allowed.' Then, 'Why did you wait until now?'

'I asked before but she did not want to come. She is a Highlander.'

Mary seems embarrassed and Kitara too drops his eyes. He looks away from her and at Adina and further in the gloom at the others too.

'Listen to me. These days will pass. You have to believe this.'

‘Not now, Jacob.’

Kitara is annoyed at the way Adina has spoken to him but he tries not to let it show. He carries on. ‘We are stronger if we stay together and if we stay indoors.’

‘We cannot stay here forever. They will come for us. For all of us.’ This from someone in the back that Kitara cannot see. Others murmur their agreement.

Adina has her head bowed, resting on Mary’s.

‘Where would you go? There is nowhere safer.’

‘Anywhere is better than here. We are just waiting to die.’ One of the men steps forward as he says this.

‘I have been given assurances, Themba.’

He seems to spit though Kitara cannot tell whether he is just clearing his throat.

‘I understand you are anxious. These are hard times, unprecedented even. But this building is the safest place for us. We wait, we do not act. That is the best thing for us. If anyone breaks the agreement by going outside, they put us all at risk.’

‘You did not consult us when you made your agreement.’

Kitara peers into the gloom, trying to work out who has spoken. ‘If we leave, what will happen to the men and women downstairs, and the others to come? They are our countryfolk. They have no one to help them. That is for us.’

‘The Butcher too.’

‘Who said that?’ His voice is raised. He looks round the room but no one meets his eye. ‘Speak up.’

‘That is enough, Jacob. Let them be.’ Adina again. ‘Leave us, everyone.’

The staff begin filtering out and no more is said. Soon only Mary, Kitara and Adina remain.

‘What about my mother? You could ask the people you meet, ask them to spare her too. Please.’ Mary holds out a piece of paper to Kitara. ‘Here. Her name and address.’ She begins to cry again and Adina looks away.

Kitara places the paper in his pocket. He does not know what to do, what to say. It angers him but he does understand. He understands though he knows he can do little. When he walked the streets, when he felt safer, even then he felt watched. Though he kept his head down, he felt strangers’ eyes on him, felt the stares of people watching from the buildings around him. Sometimes when he did stop and lift his head, he would be proven right: a man or woman would turn to stare unblinking at him. He was lucky for a while but now the gangs are more vicious, they say, even if fewer in number, and the deserted streets mean they are even more likely to be seen. He does not disagree with his orders: their protection depends on their staying behind these walls.

‘I will try,’ he says.

3

Kitara goes downstairs, into the male ward. The two patients and the newcomer are quiet. Asleep. A hospital ward at night: the darkness, the smell of disinfectant, light breathing, the silence of the wounded.

The two patients are on their backs, blankets draped over their bodies from the neck down. Kitara looks at each in turn, watching for the rise and fall of his chest.

He comes to the last bed on the right. The soldier (he thinks of the newcomer as this) lies there, he alone not under the covers, still dressed and unbathed. Above the smell of disinfectant Kitara now senses a richer smell. He feels the stirrings of anger and closes his eyes for a few seconds, waiting for the feeling to subside. *They cannot be blamed*, he thinks to himself.

The man’s breathing is deep and regular. Kitara reaches out and touches his hand. It is cold.

At the end of the room against the wall is a bucket of water, steam rising from it. Perhaps they meant to clean him after all.

He takes the water, a sponge, a pair of scissors, disinfectant and bandages back to the bed. *I will do this*, he thinks. *Leave the staff to have their rest. I will do this for him.*

There are no windows in the room and it is lit by a single lamp which Kitara now moves closer to the bed. He begins to cut the man's clothes away. The smell is awful: days without bathing, and a wound open for who knows how long.

He washes the wound. The soldier does not flinch, does not move at all. It takes time to clean the cut properly, and it will need stitching. A trickle of blood begins to seep from it. Around the blood, though, is scabbing and Kitara sees no signs of pus. The wound is a couple of centimetres long, not deep enough to be life-threatening, Kitara thinks, although he knows his medical knowledge is limited. Nevertheless, it must not be allowed to become infected.

A small blade or the tip of a larger one. A blow inflicted by a woman or a dying man. Kitara imagines the scene: a knife battle, an alley just off the Edgware Road, a Plainsman and a Highlander. A thrust, a parry, a counter-thrust. As the other falls – an old tree in an ancient forest – so the soldier looks down at his own wound, unnoticed till that moment.

Kitara washes him all over, hesitantly at first, but he is careful to wash everything. It is a duty of care. For a moment he is reminded of his own child, Joseph, the boy never far from his mind, though whether it is this or some resemblance, some sense of the man before him, that brings the reminder, he does not know. He dabs the cloth over the man's brow and looks more closely at his face. He has lived a harder life and his features are more thickset but he is about the same age as Joseph.

Kitara looks away and down at his feet for a moment, thrown by the reminder. When he looks back he sees Joseph's face in place of the stranger's. It lasts for just a moment but he is shaken by it. It leaves him unsettled, wanting to reach out, reach across the ocean, the continent, and pull aside the curtain of wherever it is his boy sleeps.

He returns to his duty. Once the man is clean, he swabs the wound with disinfectant and, though it is not usually he who does this, stitches it, watching the man's face as the needle pierces his skin. The man lets out a soft moan but still he does not open his eyes. Kitara feels the needle as if it pierces his own skin, as if he and his patient are connected in some way.

He places a blanket over the man's body and, standing up, gathers the clothes to throw away. As he picks up the trousers he feels something he had not noticed before: a piece of paper in the pocket. He removes it, turns it over and, when he sees what is written there, hears a noise in his ears like the drumbeat of jackbooted soldiers running through the building.

The paper is torn as if part of a longer note or letter. On it just a single word, the name 'Kitara'. Nothing else, no address, just that. He should not find it surprising: a man in need given the name of someone known to help others. An address is not required. Many in the community know the building.

But it is not the name, not the word itself. Kitara runs his thumb over the letters, following the familiar shape of them, the way the writer has slanted the 'K' and the 'i', the almost old-fashioned kink in the 'r'. After a while he places it in his pocket for safekeeping, though what there is to keep safe he cannot yet name.

The blood in his ears.

He is still standing there when Adina appears in the entrance to the ward, her face in shadow.

'He had not been bathed.' He does not have the words to tell her what he found.

There is no reply.

'I have done it now. But, Adina, we do not treat them this way.'

'How do we treat them?'

For a moment he is taken aback by the question. 'There could have been infection. We have no proper medicine here, as you know.'

'Do they ask for this? For the type of care we provide? They die one way or another.'

Kitara remains quiet.

'And this man?' she continues. 'You know who he is, what he is?'

'He is a man like me.'

'He would slaughter us in our beds if he had the chance.'

Kitara shakes his head.

'Though perhaps not you, of course. Or you first, who knows?'

The newcomer does not stir.

'You are forgetting what's important, Adina. This man, whoever he is, needs our help. That is all we can do; that is what we have chosen to do, the part we have chosen to play.'

'No. You. That is the part you have chosen. The rest of us may as well not exist.'

He does not answer.

'The staff are not happy, Jacob. You heard them. They continue their talk of leaving. I thought you should know.'

His voice is soft. 'Where will they go? There is nowhere else.'

She turns, says something over her shoulder as she leaves. Kitara does not catch it but thinks it sounds like 'You have brought the war to us'.

Again he does not reply. He cannot. But he thinks to himself, *No, Adina. I keep the war at bay.*

Though it costs everything, and has cost me everything, I keep it at bay, I keep it beyond the walls that surround us, away from all those I care for.