

**THE
RETRIBUTION**

PART III of the TOTOBOAN TRILOGY

MAGGIE ALLEN

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The Retribution
Part III of the Totoboan Trilogy
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For Balance

You cannot separate the just from the unjust
and the good from the wicked;
For they stand together before the face of the sun
even as the black thread and the white are woven together.

-The Prophet

Part I

The Departure

Prologue

They arrived on ships like the others, without permission or grace. Yet neither white man nor African remembered their stories. Forgotten in between worlds, we were unaware of their presence.

Even I couldn't sense it until the destruction was too vast to control. Although I hardly even knew him, he made his imprint, like they all did. Like we all did.

They all craved power and resources, but who could blame them? Robbed of humanity, all you are left with is greed. And greed coupled with immortality is a dangerous combination indeed.

The Scramble for Africa was a shameful period in human history, but at least those who caused the destruction are dead and gone. At least, that is what we thought. It wasn't until the world lost its balance when the true darkness unearthed itself to prove that greed does not need immortality; it already lives forever.

The Deal

Looking ahead at the busy market, I sensed a newfound frivolity in the air. I walked toward a pay phone in the middle of the orange dust and dialed my parents' home. I couldn't remember the last time I talked to them; I just figured it would be polite at this time to remind them that I was alive and still in Totoba.

"No, Mom, I'm not quite sure when I'll be home now. I have to go find Nick...no, he's not missing...I just need him...for my internship, Mom, what do you think?" I said, "No, I haven't seen him yet, that's why I need to go find him...no, it's not dangerous, why would you think that?...no, I'm sure it won't take that long; I'm just not exactly sure where he is...yeah, he's definitely not in that neighborhood...because I've looked there, that's why...okay, Mom, I love you too. Goodbye."

"So you are looking for a man named Nick, are you?" someone with a British accent asked. A tall chest blocked the view between me and the rest of the world.

I looked up. Two men's faces shielded the red sun.

The man who spoke was nearly balding and had a slight beer belly, but he did not look a day past forty. His eyes were deep and dark, and he smelled like a wet dog. His large, hairy arms were crossed around his wide chest. His sloppy, yellow polo hung messily over his blue jeans. The other man was a little skinnier, and he seemed paranoid by the way he looked at his surroundings. He held a Coke in his right hand, and he wore golden bracelets and necklaces. His teeth were slightly crooked, but he was neater than the bigger man.

"You were listening to my conversation?" I asked.

“We only heard a few words,” the same man said. “Funny, that you should be looking for Nick.”

“And why is that?”

“We are looking for him too, or at least, you could say that.”

“What makes you think I’m looking for the same Nick you are?”

“I am fairly positive that there is only one Nick worth searching for here. Don’t worry, we have heard.”

“Heard what?”

“Oh, don’t act like you don’t know what we’re talking about. We have heard rumors.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t help you. I need to talk to someone.” I tried to scoot past them, but they blockaded my path.

“No one will help you like us,” the man said and gently pushed me backwards.

I looked hastily around for some sort of aid, but all of the tourists and locals swam swiftly past, all preoccupied with their own duties.

“And who do you think you are? I’ll call the cops...let me go.”

“They will not help you either. We are your only hope to find Nick.”

I looked up into their eyes, each of them smiling wickedly.

“You know where Nick is?”

“Ah, so we *are* talking about the same person then.”

“No, I mean...I don’t know...are we?”

“Let’s just say we have inside information about where he is being kept.”

“You can’t know that...you’re human.”

My stomach sank.

Shit, I blew it.

“Ah, so you know, then. You know that this place is not what it seems.”

“How can you possibly help me?”

“See, it’s funny that we should run into each other, because we are looking for someone too, and we think that our friends are in the

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same place. If Nick means as much to you as Adam does to us, then we figure you want him back.”

“Who’s Adam?”

“Our friend.”

“Well, where is he?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

“But Nick is! I want him back, and you’re not telling me where he is.”

“You don’t need to worry about this. Do you want our help or not?”

“I don’t even know you.”

“You don’t need to. We are bound by the same desire. How important is Nick to you?”

“I want him to get back to his family. If you help me, will you promise that he leaves the country?”

The two men glanced at each other and smirked.

“Of course.”

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“You have no choice but to trust us. You will get your Nick back, and we will get our man back. It’s a win-win situation.”

“So why do you need me?”

“We have heard that you have...been there recently, yes?”

“Where is that?”

“Don’t play stupid with us. We see more than any other humans here. We have connections with the other world, trying to get him back. And because you have spent recent time there, we need you in our plan.”

“I don’t know about this,” I said, trying to sound as calm as possible, attempting to hide the suspicion that boiled deep in my stomach.

“What other choice do you have? Those fools that work at the tourism office cannot help you. No one can except for us.”

“I’d like to discuss this somewhere else, rather than here in the middle of the street.”

“Ah, wonderful, so would we. Come, let’s go grab a bite to eat.”

The two men turned to walk toward an outdoor café across the street, but I stayed still.

The men turned around.

“We will pay for you,” the heavy one said.

I hesitated but eventually followed them out of the sun, figuring a free meal wouldn’t hurt. We entered a café across the street and sat under an umbrella next to the crowded road.

Vendors marched past, selling jewelry and fried food to innocent tourists. People walked aimlessly on the sidewalks, looking up at street signs and places to eat or shop. The sun began to pass over the buildings, and a shadow grew over the streets.

I ordered a coffee and a sandwich. I folded my hands nervously over the table and looked at the two men who sat across from me. The silent one lit a cigarette and tapped his fingers against the table. The other one leaned forward and grinned. His golden tooth glistened off of his silver watch.

“Why don’t you tell us what you know?”

“I really shouldn’t do that,” I said.

“Do you want Nick back or not?”

“They took him. I don’t know where he is, but apparently he is being punished for what he’s done.”

“Yes, yes, we know that. Just like Adam. It’s all Assa. He thinks he just can take our leaders and put them in the darkness.”

“So you *do* know where he is?”

“Of course we do,” the heavy man said. “We want Adam, and we will do anything it takes to release him from that awful prison.”

“I just want Nick to be a human again. I want his family to see him again, and I want to...”

I knew I had said too much. The skinny, quiet one blew smoke in my face and leaned toward me.

“You love that little bastard, don’t you?” he said.

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“I mean, I...”

“So you were more than friends with him. We don’t care what your relationship with him is, girl,” the other one said, “But obviously he means the world to you, so what do you care what we do with the others?”

“Others, what others?”

“Look,” he said, “if there is not a Black Force ruling this land, there will be chaos. Look around you. These people know that He is gone. They have nothing to fear. There is only light, and there always must be darkness. There must be fear. Without fear, without rules, there is chaos. The Blue Force is not strong enough to control human sin. They know this. Do you feel it? Do you feel the temptation?”

People were walking quicker out on the streets. There was more laughter, more smiles. A woman in a short skirt flirted with one of the vendors, and the man squeezed her behind and whispered into her ear.

“There needs to be a yin to every yang,” the large man said, lighting a cigarette.

I gulped. “Will people...get hurt?”

“Look, people are always getting hurt, but there needs to be balance, my friend.”

“She’s not going to help us, Charlie,” the skinny one spat in his faded British accent, “I think we need to take more extreme measures to get this bitch to comply.”

My coffee shook in my hands.

“Please, don’t talk to me like that,” I stuttered. “I’ll call for help. You’ll be caught.”

“You really think people will help you?” the skinny one asked.

“Relax, Michael,” Charlie said, “Don’t worry about my partner here. But do you realize what I am saying to you?”

“So what do I need to do?” I asked.

“Just outside of here, there is a small diner. It was set up by some greedy Americans, Not many locals apply to work there, not because

they don't want the money, but because they know what those fools built on. The government let them because well, one, I suppose, they never truthfully thought anything would go wrong, and two, they were bitter about white people taking away local workers, so the government let them build there, hoping that some retribution would come for them."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, growing tired of not finding out what was going on.

"The American couple, they died two years ago, so it doesn't matter, but it's still owned by Americans, and they serve American food, and I don't know why but tourists love it there."

"Okay, I don't care that it's not Totoboan! I don't care!" In fact, it sounded quite tempting...a hamburger, a milkshake, perhaps, a place where I could blend into a crowd.

"Calm down, girl," Charlie said, lowering his voice as he leaned into me, "Most people here know that land is sacred, but few know exactly why. You see, right underneath the diner is the prison where your love is being kept. We have heard rumors that he told you the password to that place. See, only the Black and Blue Forces know the password, but we thought...we almost knew, that he let it slip to you."

"I'm sorry," I said, "I don't know what you're talking about. He never told me about a password."

"Think back," Charlie said. He leaned back and bit on his fingernails, "We know you have had your share of...times with him, but I'm sure in one of those moments, when he thought that one day he might need you, he let something slip."

Our nights and days spent together in bed were blurred together. Time had been irrelevant. I hardly remembered being hungry or using the bathroom. I focused on the past, to our conversations. It all seemed so surreal, his body on top of mine, my hands scratching his back, out of breath and covered in sweat.

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But then I remembered. It was just one of the many conversations we would have as we cuddled in bed together, before I knew any of this. At that moment, we were naked with the sheets pulled up to our hips, my arm was draped over his chest and I was curled up next to him. He was stroking my hair and looking up at the ceiling, and I was smiling with my eyes closed.

“This may not last forever,” Nick said sadly.

“What do you mean?” I looked up at him.

“Sometimes I feel like I don’t know what I’m doing here. I’m an outsider in this place, and I know it. But I try...I’ve tried so hard and I’ve come so far; I’ve proved that you don’t have to be Totoboan to get to where I am. I’ve beaten all the odds, but I’m uneasy. I’m sitting on top of a very rocky platform, if you know what I mean...there are too many out there, people I don’t even know about. I can’t control myself and everything forever...I guess, actually, it’s more me I’m worried about. Every day, I lose myself a little more, and one day I’ll just go. That’s why I need you here, Virginia. With you here, I don’t feel like that as much.”

“You’re not making any sense, Nick.” I brought my head up next to his and stroked his face.

“Just, if anything ever happens to me, if I have to leave, there’s a place that you can go where I’ll be. You just have to go to it and tell them this.”

He whispered a statement in Totoboan and I nodded.

“Okay, but I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“There may be people out there who can take you to where I am. I don’t want you going without them; it will be too dangerous to go by yourself. Promise me you won’t go by yourself.”

“Okay, I won’t.”

“And be careful if that happens. I don’t want everyone...well, I probably shouldn’t have told you that, but I trust you.”

“Thanks, I trust you, and I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Nick turned his head and kissed me on the cheek. I held his neck and kissed his lips, and then he rolled over on top of me.

“Well?” Michael snapped his fingers at me, and I was brought out of my trance back to the café. Michael was leaning toward me angrily, his eyes wide and impatient.

Charlie’s arms were crossed as he studied me.

“You were deep in a memory there,” Charlie said. “I’m impressed. With Nick, especially, that he trusted you enough with that password. Adam wouldn’t even trust us.”

“No,” Michael snapped, “he just thought he would never end up there. He had too much pride.”

“Do not insult him!” Charlie yelled, slamming his fists on the table, his eyes on fire. “You do not dare to speak of him in such a way!”

Michael held up his hands, biting his lip.

“Relax, I meant no offense.”

Charlie rolled his eyes and tugged on his jacket.

“Girl,” he said sternly, “you need to go with us to this place and say the password to the door. We will take you there.”

“You are...the men that he told me about?”

“You’re not going there alone. Now, we will book a room at the hotel across the street. We need one day to prepare, and then we’ll be ready. We will pick you up tomorrow morning at the hotel, at ten AM. Remember the password, and we will meet you tomorrow. Is that a deal?”

Charlie was looking past me now, into the street. I knew his question was rhetorical and that I had no choice at this point. All the same, I knew this was the way to return Nick to his family. The memory reminded me of who Nick really was, that he was still just a human, and that deep down, he was desperate to go back home.

“I’ll see you then,” I confirmed.

I had booked a room at a small hotel across the street from

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the restaurant, above an Internet café. Just after leaving the men, I immediately went up two flights of stairs and walked into room 205. There was a small fan above a blue checkered bed and a small bedside table. A TV hung from the white wall, and a barred window overlooked the main street of the capitol. I closed the shutters on the window, took a quick, cold shower, and sat in the bed, too anxious to do anything else. It wasn't even dark yet, but the only solace I knew I would find was in sleep. I ate a protein bar from my backpack and twitched my fingers, already sweating in the stuffy room. My mind was too full of thoughts and fantasies, worries and fears. I was too paranoid to see anyone around the town, in case they knew who I was or had heard something like Charlie and Michael had.

I was barely existing—sliding away from reality. I hardly even thought about the others—Matt, Derik, or Kagiso. I missed them, and it hurt me to think that they may soon discover that I never made it home, but it was too much to think about all at once. I would be home soon anyway and would help Nick become an American citizen again: a normal, mortal being with a family and a conscience and a stable sex drive.

I tickled my stomach with my fingers, recalling when his hands were moving his way up from my belly button to my lips. I would tease him and kiss his fingers. If I turned around, he would run his fingers down my spine and trace the outline of my hips. I would shiver with ecstasy and bury my face in the pillow to try to control myself. I wanted to restrain my actions and not just throw myself on him; I wanted for him to have his turn to please me because, once his turn was up, there was no way that I could stop. The energy that radiated off of his body was unimaginably intoxicating, and so I would bite the pillow and close my eyes, but I couldn't take my eyes away from his, and the whole world seemed to focus on us, the heat of our bodies playing off of each other like a chorus.

But there were so many who would never again feel these

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sensations. The faceless ones. We didn't even have time to mourn them; the graves of the unknown tourists would remain in their places, silent and without ceremony. But they didn't care now; why would they care that I was about to do this?

The dead were not angry, so there was no reason to be disturbed that they would not return home. But it was the undead, the ones that were stuck between sleep and consciousness that suffered. To not feel anything was inconceivable enough, but to know that you could not feel another person's heartbeat beneath you was another thing entirely.

With these thoughts I fell asleep to the ceiling fan still chasing away the flies.