12

Pula e ntle

Thandiwe Gaobepe

Before time, there was the Word. And the Word was God. It is written in soil, in stars, in stone.

The first thing Naledi noticed was the smell. Earth after rain, sharp and alive, as if the ground had been waiting all night to speak. She stood barefoot at the mouth of the Eye of Kuruman cave, toes pressed into red dust, watching the sky loosen itself. The rain came slowly, not a storm, not yet. Just a steady falling, each drop finding its place. Naledi closed her eyes and breathed in. The scent pulled something loose in her chest.

Seventeen years ago, the same smell had filled the air the morning Nana died. No thunder. No warning. Just rain soaking into the earth while the house held its silence. Naledi had stood on the verandah then, unable to step inside, as if crossing that threshold would make it real. Now, standing here again, she felt that same pause in the world. That same held breath.

They said grief changes the brain. It bends time, stretches it, makes the past feel closer than the present. Naledi had studied it, mapped it, and named it. But knowing had never stopped the ache. Some mornings still arrived heavy, as though something unfinished was waiting for her. Today was one of them.

Behind her, the cave shifted. Naledi opened her eyes. At first, she thought it was the rain playing tricks with light. But the glow

didn't fade. It deepened, spreading along the crystal-lined walls like something waking. She turned slowly. The cave was breathing. Not visibly. Not in any way she could prove. But she felt it, a low vibration, steady and contained, like a pulse beneath skin.

Naledi stepped closer. The air cooled. The scent changed, mineral, damp, ancient. Her heartbeat began to match the rhythm of the rock. Then came the sound. Low. Almost below hearing. A hum that settled in her chest rather than her ears. Naledi froze. The hum thickened, layering into something else. Not quite music. Not quite voice. Something forming. Her breath shortened.

"Hello?" she said, the word small in the widening space.

The sound shifted. Not louder. Clearer. And then, "Return."

Naledi stumbled back. Silence followed. Immediate. Complete. The rain outside continued, soft against the earth, as if nothing had happened. She stared at the cave wall, pulse racing. "No," she whispered, shaking her head. "No, that was …" A trick. Stress. Memory folding in on itself. She stepped back toward the entrance, needing air. The light dimmed. The hum disappeared. Just rock again. Just rain. She stood there for a long moment, breath uneven, trying to settle herself. Then, slowly, she turned away.

That night, she couldn't sleep. The house felt too full. Of memory. Of absence. Naledi stepped outside and sat beneath the mulberry tree, wrapping her jersey tighter around her shoulders. The ground was still damp from the afternoon rain. She opened her journal. For a while, she just stared at the page. Then she wrote:

> *What if grief is not loss, but interruption?*

The pen hovered.

> *What if the dead continue, and we are the ones who lose the ability to hear them?*

Naledi stopped writing. The thought unsettled her. It didn't feel like a theory. It felt like a memory, half-formed. A soft movement caught her eye. A butterfly settled on Nana's rose bush. Its wings

carried deep blues and violets that shifted in the low light, almost like something alive within them. It opened and closed them slowly. Steady. Measured. Naledi's breath fell into rhythm with it before she realised. In. Out. In. Out. The world quieted. Then, faintly—that same hum.

Naledi stiffened. It wasn't coming from the cave. It was everywhere. Or nowhere. She closed her eyes. Listened. And this time, she didn't run.

The next morning, she left for Taung. She didn't tell anyone. Didn't explain it to herself either. She just knew she had to go. The road felt longer than she remembered. Dust lifted behind her car in soft clouds, settling slowly back into the land. The sky stretched wide and pale. She drove with the window open. No music. No voice. Just wind.

Taung gradually emerged. Low buildings. Faded signs. A place that carried time differently. Naledi parked near the ridge and stepped out. The air was dry, almost brittle. She stood for a moment, adjusting, listening. Nothing. No hum. No pull. She exhaled, half relieved, half unsettled. "See?" she muttered. "You're fine." But her feet didn't turn back to the car. They moved forward.

The rock face wasn't marked. No sign. She found it anyway. Something in the shape of the land drew her in, guided her without explanation. The ridge curved inward, forming a shallow hollow. The stone there was darker. Smoother. Older. Naledi stepped closer. At first, she didn't see it. Then the outline shifted. A small face pressed into the rock. Subtle. Watching. Her breath slowed. "That's … it?" No response. Just heat. Stillness. She reached out, paused, then pressed her fingers against the stone.

It happened too fast to comprehend. A sharp current ran through her hand, up her arm, settling hard in her chest. Naledi gasped and stumbled back. The world tilted. Not spinning. Not breaking. Just slipping. For a fraction of a second, something opened. A sound. High. Bright. A child's laughter. Then "… shwening …". The word didn't finish. It dissolved before she could hold it. Naledi blinked. The air snapped back into place. Heat. Dust. Silence. She stared at the rock, pulse racing. "No," she said, shaking her head. "No, that's not …" Her voice faltered. Because it was. She could still feel it. Not

in her ears. In her body. Like something had passed through and left a trace.

Naledi stepped forward again, slower this time. The fossil was just stone. Still. Lifeless. She didn't touch it again. She left Taung without looking back. The drive home felt shorter. Or maybe she just didn't notice the distance. Her mind kept returning to that moment. Not the shock. The sound. Laughter. And that unfinished word. By the time Kuruman came into view, the sky had started to darken. Naledi tightened her grip on the steering wheel. She already knew where she was going. She tried not to go.

Naledi went home first. Washed her hands. Changed her clothes. Made tea she didn't drink. Normal things. Small things. Things that belonged to a version of the day where nothing had shifted. But the silence in the house pressed in. Not empty. Waiting. Naledi set the cup down. "Fine," she said softly.

The walk to the cave felt different that evening. Closer. As if the distance had shortened without permission. The air carried that same faint charge. Not overwhelming. Just present. Naledi slowed as the cave came into view. And stopped. Someone was standing there. He didn't move when he saw her. Didn't step forward. Didn't speak. He simply stood at the entrance, as if he had always been part of it. Naledi's first instinct was to turn around. She didn't. Instead, she stepped closer.

"Can I help you?"

The man tilted his head slightly. "You heard it." Not a question.

Naledi frowned. "I'm sorry?"

"You went to Taung."

Her chest tightened. "How do you know that?"

He didn't answer. Just watched her.

"Who are you?"

"I am Tufa."

"And what do you want?"

"It has begun."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do."

Naledi let out a short breath. "No. I don't."

Silence stretched.

"You heard it," he repeated. Not pushing. Just stating.

Naledi hesitated. "… I heard something."

Tufa nodded once. Then turned and walked into the cave. Naledi stared after him. "That's it? You're not even going to explain?" No answer. Just darkness. Her heart picked up. This was a bad idea. She followed anyway.

Inside, the temperature dropped. Cool air wrapped around her. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"To listen," Tufa said.

"To what?"

"You will hear."

They moved in deeper than she had gone before, into a wider chamber where the walls were smooth and layered by time. "Here," Tufa said.

"I don't see anything."

"You are not looking."

Naledi exhaled. "Then what am I supposed to do?"

"Sit." She lowered herself to the ground.

"Close your eyes."

"I'd rather not."

"Then you will keep seeing what is not there."

A beat. Naledi closed her eyes. At first, there was nothing. Just her breathing. Then her thoughts rushed in. She let them pass. Slowly. Until something shifted. It started with water. A soft, steady drip. She focused on it. The sound deepened. Carried something beneath it. Then another sound. Movement. Feet through grass. Distant. And then, a voice. Soft. Familiar. Pula e ntle.

Naledi's breath broke. Her eyes flew open. She hadn't realised she was crying until she tasted it.

"I heard her."

Tufa nodded. "She is here."

Naledi shook her head. "That's not possible."

"You heard her."

"It means you are listening."

Naledi looked away. "Why me?"

"It is not given. It is remembered."

"I don't understand."

"You will."

They left before sunrise. The land stretched wide as they walked. Bare earth. Low trees. Wind brushing through dry grass. She felt it now. Faint. But present. Something beneath her feet. Alive. Gwadu rose ahead without warning. Large. Quiet. Watching.

"This place …" she said.

"It listens," Tufa replied.

"That's not comforting."

"It is not meant to be."

A sharp sound cut through the stillness. Naledi turned. Movement flickered at the edge of the trees. A baboon landed in the clearing, its eyes fixed on her. Naledi froze. The animal tilted its head. Then, it shifted. Not violently. Fluidly. Fur loosening into skin. Limbs lengthening. A woman stood where it had been.

"Well," she said lightly, brushing dust from her hands. "Took you long enough."

Naledi stared. "Tufa?"

"Dimakatso," he said.

"Yes," she replied. "I know who I am." Her gaze moved to Naledi. Sharp. Curious.

"So this is her?"

"This is not normal," Naledi said.

Dimakatso laughed softly. "No. It isn't." She stepped closer. Circled once. "You're loud."

"I'm not even speaking."

"Exactly."

A low rumble moved through the ground. Naledi stiffened. The soil shifted. Cracked.

"What is that?"

"Don't fight it," Dimakatso said.

The ground split slightly. Movement beneath. Layers. Naledi's breath caught. For a moment, she saw people. Running. Singing. Falling. Then it was gone. The earth sealed. Silence returned. Naledi dropped to her knees, hands shaking.

"That felt like …"

"Too much?" Dimakatso said.

Naledi nodded.

"What's happening to me?"

"You're starting to hear what never stopped speaking," Dimakatso said.

Fear sat in Naledi's chest. But something else sat beside it. Not courage. Not yet. But willingness. She pushed herself to her feet.

"Then teach me."

Dimakatso smiled. "Careful. That's not a small request."

Naledi met her gaze. "I know." A pause. Then Dimakatso nodded. "Good."

The first lesson was not what Naledi had expected. There were no instructions. No rituals. No clear beginning. Dimakatso simply turned and walked. Naledi hesitated, then followed. Tufa stayed behind. She felt it before she noticed it, his stillness. Like a weight settling into the ground. Like something choosing not to move. Naledi glanced back. He was watching her. Not stopping her. Not guiding. Just allowing. That unsettled her more than anything.

Dimakatso led her along a narrow path that cut between stone and scrub. The mountain pressed close here, the air cooler, thinner.

"Where are we going?" Naledi asked.

Dimakatso didn't slow. "Not yet."

Naledi frowned. "I just want to understand what I'm doing."

"No," Dimakatso paused briefly. "You want to control it."

Naledi opened her mouth, then closed it. That landed too close to home. They walked in silence after that. The ground shifted underfoot, from dry dust to compact stone. The sound of their steps changed with it, sharper now, more defined. Naledi noticed it. Each step had a tone. Not loud. Not obvious. But distinct.

She slowed slightly. Dimakatso glanced back. "You hear it."

Naledi nodded, unsure.

"Good," Dimakatso said. "Then stop thinking about it."

They reached a narrow opening in the rock, barely visible unless you were looking for it. Dimakatso stepped inside without hesitation. Naledi followed. The space within was smaller than the

cave at Kuruman. Lower. Tighter. The walls curved inward, holding sound differently.

"Stand there," Dimakatso said, gesturing to the centre. Naledi complied.

"What now?"

"Now you listen."

Naledi exhaled. "That's all you keep saying."

"And you keep not doing it."

"I am listening."

Dimakatso shook her head. "You're waiting."

"For what?" Naledi asked.

"For something to happen to you."

Naledi frowned. Dimakatso's gaze sharpened. "Nothing is happening to you. You are happening inside of it."

The words settled heavily. Naledi didn't respond. She closed her eyes. At first, nothing changed. Her breathing. The faint echo of movement. The distant wind outside. Then her thoughts started again. Too loud. Too fast. She tried to quiet them. That made it worse.

"You're forcing it," Dimakatso said.

Naledi let out a breath. "Then what am I supposed to do?"

"Fall back."

Naledi opened her eyes. "What does that even mean?"

Dimakatso pushed off the wall and stepped closer. "It means stop holding yourself at the front. You're standing between yourself and what you're trying to hear."

Naledi stared at her. "I don't know how to do that."

Dimakatso shrugged slightly. "Then you learn."

Naledi closed her eyes again. This time, she didn't try to reach for anything. She let the thoughts come. Let them pass. Didn't follow them. Didn't resist them. Slowly, something shifted. Not outside. Inside. It felt like stepping back from a doorway she hadn't realised she was blocking.

The sounds returned. But different now. Closer. Layered. The scrape of stone. A breath that wasn't hers. Naledi's brow furrowed. Then, a word. Not spoken. Not heard. Known. She inhaled sharply.

Her eyes opened.

"What was that?" she asked.

Dimakatso watched her carefully. "What did you hear?"

Naledi hesitated. "It wasn't a sound," she said slowly. "It was … meaning."

Dimakatso smiled faintly, approvingly. "Yes."

Naledi's pulse quickened. "So what does that mean?"

"It means you've stopped listening with your ears."

They returned to the clearing at dusk. The air had shifted again, heavier now, like something gathering. Tufa was where they had left him. Unmoved.

Naledi approached slowly. "Were you here this whole time?"

Tufa nodded once. "Why?"

He looked at her as if the answer were obvious: "To hold the silence."

Naledi didn't know what that meant. Before she could ask, the ground stirred again. Not as sharply as before. But deeper. More sustained. Naledi tensed. Dimakatso stepped beside her. "This time, don't step back."

Naledi's instinct flared. "That doesn't feel safe."

"It isn't," Dimakatso said calmly. "Safety isn't what you're learning."

The ground shifted. Cracked. Opened wider than before. Naledi forced herself to stay. Her hands trembled. The movement beneath the earth grew clearer. Not just flashes now. Patterns. Moments folding over each other.

"Don't try to see everything," Dimakatso said. "Choose."

"Choose what?"

"What you stay with."

Naledi focused. The rushing images threatened to pull her under. She anchored herself. One moment. A woman grinding grain. The rhythm steady. Grounded. Naledi held onto it. The noise around it softened. The chaos eased. Her breathing slowed.

"There," Dimakatso said quietly. "That's how you don't disappear."

The ground sealed. Naledi exhaled, legs weak.

“That felt … different,” she said.

“You stayed,” Tufa replied.

Naledi looked at him. “It didn’t feel like staying. It felt like not drowning.”

Tufa inclined his head. “For now, that is the same thing.”