

Glen Vecchione

THE DREAM BOX

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For Nina Zottoli

PART I.
THE FRAMES

1.

OMOO PADDED through the grassy plain beyond the Frames. He knew better than to journey so far from safety, to descend alone into the green concavity riddled with glacial melts. But he lamped forward on his large feet that spread and gripped the ground. Amaa had warned that hostile beasts might water out here, starved and weakened predators that would follow him with needy eyes. But it hardly mattered. Omoo craved the unexpected and the plain looked beautiful in its scrubby desolation. *Look up*, went the thought, and the radii along the crown of his head opened to a glittering pink sky with a long yellow cloud, smooth as a cuttlebone, tipped to the horizon. It was early spring, and a morning frost still whitened the grass. The Great Arc slowly evaporated as the eastern light grew stronger and the world was naturally revealed. But the harsh sun would soon follow.

He rested under the pink canopy of a flute tree. The air buzzed. Then he glanced up and saw it—a flicker-fly! It scribbled against the yellow cloud in soft angularities, full of strangeness. Carefully, he extended his long finger to draw it down to him, watched it protest before it surrendered to his opened palm, wings stretched in paralyzed splendor. He would tell Amaa about this, or maybe even bring the captured creature to her—*no, too dangerous.*

After a few moments he stepped out again, the chromatophores of his shoulders and back spreading in anticipation of the sun's radiation. He thought to remove his leg chutes, but to keep them on felt more deferential, a gesture of respect to those early explorers who'd trod here long before him. He enjoyed wearing their old style of clothing, and he'd collected many specimens over the last century: leg chutes with strings and bands, oddly configured with envelopes and strange openings; chest shrouds with fasteners, slotted for arms; small bags that sealed off the feet, pinching them. Most puzzling of all were the delicate coverings to be pulled over the midsection before leg-chutes. He certainly had no use for those, but kept them as a curiosity.

As the early light grew stronger, dew steamed from the leaf-tips. He walked southwest towards a ridge of mountains, and when he reached them, began to climb. The rhythm of his steps rang in his head. Short bursts of air charged his joints to absorb the shock of sharp gravel. His heart pumped slowly, precisely, each pulse followed by a rising and falling whine that filled his ears and blanched, momentarily, the view ahead. But each stroke replenished him. How strange to feel such sensations in what remained of his body; a beating heart, controlled by microprocessors, pushing through his veins a fluid that no longer resembled blood (since hemoglobin could no longer ablate the poisons), but which infused him, nonetheless, with a feeling of vigor and well-being, even—if he might allow the idea—with a

feeling of *health*, as one might've felt *healthy* in the old days. Health—the body safely breathing, the exquisite ache in the muscles, the slickness of skin and stench from one's own chemistry—something not quite remembered but not entirely forgotten, either. Sometimes, next to Amaa in the dark, he wondered if this feeling of health was something she remembered as well. But he couldn't speak a word of it to her because to say it would mean to miss it and they could never return to it. Ever.

He reached a wind-bitten shelf of the ridge with a clear view to a second ridge. Two ridges of mountains now, southeast and southwest, stretched into the distance like two runs of a fence not quite joined at the corner. Two ridges gleamed white with glaciers that had begun to shrink as the season turned. Frigid water trickled down the mountainsides and collected in the melts of the grassy plain. But the retreat of the glaciers exposed a high terrain pulverized to powder, and the rising winds of spring meant a rising dust.

The dust blew only lightly this morning, and Omoo looked back beyond the grassy plain towards the measured plexus of the Frames. He imagined Amaa inside their dome gathering purewater. The eastern sky glowed as if a low flame burned just beyond the ridge, a rising color that brought to mind something Omoo had never actually seen, but that had once been described to him by Old Vohl, who called it—the sound forming in his mouth—*dawn*.

He spoke the sound, softly, as he visored his eyes against the

first beacon of sunlight and took in the world that stretched before him. His world: the ridges, the plain, the Frames, and the dome where his companion lived. Where they all lived, the others of his kind. And who were the others of his kind? The thought encircled him again and then vanished, as usual.

He began to descend as light spread across the plain and glinted off some distant prominence. The funnel. Bristling with antennae and protected by rings of electrified weir, the gleaming immensity of it thrust up like an enormous silver spike. For as long as he could remember, the funnel pumped purewater from a once voluminous aquifer beneath the plain, now depleted and collapsed into this depression of grass and wind-battered shrubbery. The funnel was the lynchpin around which his world revolved. It was survival.

The climbing sun made short shadows by the time he returned to his dome. Entering, he puzzled at the darkness and quiet. A cistern at the center of the nutrient space stood silent and dull. Where was the purewater? Had Amaa returned from her shift? He noticed that the east quadrant of the dome was dimmed almost to blackness. It was strange, but not unusual enough for his gaze to linger there, and he was about to turn away when a motion caught his eye. At first he saw only shadows, but soon he could make out Amaa rising from the floor with another figure beside her. For a long moment they just stood there. But when they emerged into the light, Omoo saw that they were both naked

and had been interrupted from an entanglement.

Amaa, looking down, stepped forward and wrapped her shroud about her.

“You were away only a short time,” she said flatly, moving to the cistern.

“I have arrests to make,” he replied.

They spoke in a language that was both inside and out, a kind of thought bubble that glimmered above each when communicating with the other. There were “words,” the abbreviated utterances, the tonal risings and fallings that one vocalized and heard, and there were *thunes*—quanta of invisible data that flew behind words and nuanced their meanings, communicated complexities and abstractions and intentions disambiguated from the primitive dispersion of sounds.

Omoo watched his partner’s slender arms working the apparatus that queried the central cistern for the week’s purewater ration. As she crouched, her breasts slid softly from the shroud and she made no attempt to cover them.

“Do you need help with the purewater?”

She didn’t reply, but turned vaguely to the figure, still standing motionless in the half-light. “Leave,” she said.

Omoo still desired his partner. He was always pleased by the sight of her body. Her enhancements were particularly intricate and beautiful. Her electrum-sheened skin, when aroused, took on a warm and lambent color, and her turquoise eyes were clear and bright. She brushed her long silver hair aside, as she knew the

water would come at any moment, then she picked up the disk and motioned to him.

“Go outside,” she said, not unkindly.

He removed his hiking costume and walked into a narrow drum, shaded by a parabola. Amaa, holding the disk by its short rod, turned Omoo to face her, so that the purewater, once reconstructed, would cascade over his shoulders. And so it did, first as a froth of particles, and then as a pure and icy stream, reconstituting out of thin air only a short distance from the disk’s center. It was marvelous, still, to have water untethered from pipework, but broadcast like a signal. And the water itself was delicious—cold and sweet and freshly drawn from the earth by the pounding silver funnel that strained in the distance. They had the Bulb to thank for that, as they had the Bulb to thank for many things, including this privilege, accorded to Omoo as an Authority of high standing, to use purewater for something as luxuriant as bathing.

Omoo watched his partner and tried to decode her thunes. But her expression, while attentive to the washing of his body, was blank. “Your guest,” he said finally, “will he return?”

She didn’t answer right away. “Do you think me careless?”

“Promise me he won’t return.”

“I know it.”

This was not a new conversation, and Omoo was sad to revive it.

Amaa stared at him, her turquoise eyes glistening.

“Nothing’s got into me, and if it has, it’s been destroyed.” She smiled lightly and placed her hand against his face. “I’d seed with you, happily, if it were possible, and I’d have our child if it were allowed.”

Omoo was accustomed to this mixture of reason and tenderness, and he chose to savor the tenderness.

“Maybe something will change soon.”

He spoke this with conviction although he was anything but confident that his optimism comforted her. For the past fifteen years, the Bulb had forbidden procreation, even among Authorities. The declaration, presented only as moratorium and not permanent pronouncement, was unexpected and sudden. Omoo and Amaa had missed their opportunity and now Amaa pined for a child.

“No, nothing will change,” she said, walking away.

It was true that they’d tested this, risky as it might be. Of course they had. From time to time, he sensed in her a certain ripeness, as well as his own power and celerity. But nothing happened, reassuringly, since a disallowed child was a transgression and meant punishment of the worst kind. But now her disappointment erupted in promiscuity. She blamed him. They’d waited too long on his insistence. And now he blamed himself.

Amaa interrupted the stream of purewater and went back inside. Omoo heard the cistern filling now, a luscious, ringing sound that was pleasant and musical. He closed his eyes and

remembered a waterfall he'd seen as a small boy, one of the highest ones, only partially frozen. It cascaded from the top of the ice-crust ed escarpment, a thick mist spreading above it like an opened hand.