

Blowout

Wole Talabi

Folake Adeyemi was slowly digging her index finger into the base of her afro and staring at the row of remote subsurface exploration monitoring screens when she heard the explosion.

She'd let her mind wander for a few moments, subconsciously clenching her jaw as she thought about what she'd say to Femi when he finally got back to the orbital station. And then it came. A thunderous boom over the open communications line that startled her, followed by the low, tinny crackling of static. She knew instantly, even before the data flooded in and the alarms started blaring, that something had just gone very wrong down on the surface of Mars.

Femi!

She slammed her palm onto the transmission switch on the monitoring panel and shouted into the surface communications microphone, "N-12, this is Nerio Station! Report! What just happened?"

For a moment that felt elastic enough to have been an hour, her words hung in the void with nothing but the steady drone of cosmic background noise coming back in response. There was less than a half-second surface-to-orbit delay in their transmissions, so when she didn't get any reply for more than half a minute, a chill ran down her spine. Surface crews always maintained an open line with the station on an active mission. That was protocol. There was no way they would choose not to respond. Not unless they couldn't. Not unless something had happened to the communications array, or worse, to them. She shuddered and tried again. Louder this time.

"N-12. Come in. Anyone? Femi? Natukunda? Oumarou? Bibata? Are you guys there?" and then, "Femi? Talk to me please. Are you guys okay?"

Nothing.

Her heart sank. For a second, she was unsure what to do next, but then her training kicked in: *Analyze. Inform. Act.*

She focused on the monitoring screens, taking in the rush of rapidly changing data. They'd lost visual on the surface drill rig—two screens displayed disheartening grey static like electric rainclouds. The remaining screens showed a kaleidoscope of bright numbers, logs, graphs, and bold red warning text that all indicated what had happened: the drill bit had hit an over-pressured formation about two kilometers below the surface. She let out a gasp.

Formation kick.

The numbers continued to stream across the screens, some of them frozen and flickering

with the break in direct data transmission, others flashing with error symbols as the anomalous data that had come through was analyzed, forcing correlations and equations to be extrapolated beyond their range of validity. It was all overwhelming, like looking at a street artist creating wild mathematics-themed graffiti with light.

Folake activated the manual control on the input panel, reached for the screens, and pulled the display projection from the active ones forward with a turn of her wrist and a curl of her finger. She swiped quickly to select and zoom in on important data points and push back others, flicking her fingers expertly as she tried to narrow down the flood of information to its most useful elements—which she could interpret. The drill bit and attached logging tools were lost; a final massive pressure reading that went off the charts was their final recorded transmission. The pressure had shot so far beyond the normal hydrostatic gradient that the mostly vertical pre-test pressure log reading now looked like two perpendicular lines, a bizarre ‘L.’ She’d never seen anything like it in all her years working and supervising drilling operations. The downhole temperature had spiked too, and the interpretation AI had already matched that to a Joule-Thompson heating effect, although it was possible that the unusual formation had contained some hot fluid. Folake kept swiping and flicking.

Other electromagnetic and radiation data was harder to interpret. But everything she could make out from the mess of numbers indicated that this wasn’t just any kind of formation kick—those were common enough on Earth due to compaction, osmosis, gas generation, tectonics, half a dozen other possible causes that the planning team had considered in the risk analysis. No, this was massive. Ridiculously so. It was over two orders of magnitude higher than their probabilistic models had indicated as the *unlikely* scenario with 99 percent confidence. Perhaps more. It had to be the effect of some new phenomenon, some previously unforeseen mechanism at work deep in the planet’s subsurface.

For half a moment, a flash of the excitement of discovery shot to her head. It was intoxicating, like the fresh palm wine her father used to buy whenever they went back to the village, in Ijebu-ode, to see their grandmother. And then she crashed back to the reality of the situation, hard.

There were four people down there on the N-12 surface exploration crew, and all of them had been at, or close to, the rig. Including her brother. She didn’t know what had happened to them, but she knew that they were in danger, unable to communicate, and probably needed help.

She took three quick, deep breaths, expanded her palm to send the projections back to their places in the display monitors, then unstrapped herself. Pushing down on her seat, she drifted up and out of it. She kicked against the panel and thrust herself into the octagonal corridor that connected the subsurface exploration monitoring and control module to the rest of Nerio station with a singular thought on her mind.

I am not going to let Femi die on Mars.

* * *

Femi was born exactly five days before Folake’s ninth birthday. Her parents never told her why they’d waited so long to try for another child but when she was fifteen, she found a birth certificate for an older sibling she had never met in her mother’s room. There was a death certificate in the same name in the same drawer. The latter was dated just two days after the former. The birth certificate was dated almost exactly five years before she’d been born.

Her mother came from the outskirts of what used to be Oyo state in western Nigeria, the seventh of nine children and the second of three girls. Her father was from the East but was also the second of five in his own large family. When she was nineteen and she had her first pregnancy scare, Folake spent long hours wondering if her parents had wanted a big family like the ones they grew up in and if those certificates she found had influenced their eventual decision to have just the two of them. Her and Femi.

Despite the age difference between them, they’d been close until the day he joined DeepCarbon. Then the tensions started. She’d helped change his diapers, carried him on her back, rocked him to sleep in her arms, helped her parents feed him, and she’d even argued with him

when he was old enough to argue back. Femi was a part of almost every important moment in her life. But Femi wasn't there the first time someone told her that her mother was a hero.

Folake remembers the day in vivid detail for three reasons: one, because it was raining heavily; two, because the words had come from the lips of her father; and three, because it was the first time that she saw her mother after the accident.

That day, she'd been roused from her light slumber by the sounds of rain hitting the open garage door and gravel being crunched beneath slowly decelerating tires. Those sounds meant that the navigation AI was parking her father's sprightly silver *Neo Futura* in the driveway of their bungalow. Everything about that *Neo Futura* was familiar. Her father had bought it second-hand from a German colleague two years before she was born, and while it was old, he had built and installed his own self-driving module. He'd even converted it to an electric-hydrogen hybrid and had let her help assemble some of the parts. She had been hearing the sound of it parking every day since she was born and that was why she knew it had arrived four hours earlier than usual.

Folake rubbed what was left of sleep from her eyes with her knuckles and excitedly made her way to the living room. She was alone at home; Femi was being taken care of by her grandmother, and her footsteps echoed through the house. She walked into the living room just as her father was entering from the front door, his back turned to her as he carefully pulled in the wheelchair. When he heard her, he froze in place.

"Daddy welcome home! When is Mummy coming back?" She asked.

"Folake," he started before turning his head to look at her, "I need you to know something. Your mother is a hero. You should never forget that."

There was something like pride, but also fear, ringing in his voice.

"Daddy?"

And then he spun around, turning the wheelchair with him, and she saw her mother in a sky-blue shirt and red Ankara wrapped around her waist, propped up in the chair, two white and grey metal appendages where her legs used to be. She was smiling weakly.

Tears began to stream down Folake's face.

Her mother worked as a drilling supervisor on an offshore gas production site off the Angolan coast, and even back then she knew two things about her mother's job: one, it could be dangerous, and two, it paid well. They'd both given her *the talk* several times since she was five and old enough to understand some of what it meant to drill a hole into the subsurface and extract energy resources. They'd even bought her a model offshore drilling rig to play with, one of the new ones with a carbon capture unit attached that she had to assemble herself following the instruction manual, but they'd also assured her that the job was relatively safe, that accidents were rare. Increasingly so. And that she shouldn't worry, her mother would always come home fine. And so, she hadn't worried, hadn't ever been afraid. Until that day when she saw her mother that way.

Her father wheeled the chair with her mother's thin, sleeping bulk over to the couch, stepped on the pedals behind the rear wheels to lock it in place and then lifted her up into the air like he used to when she was much younger, "Hey. Hey. Big girl. Don't cry, Mummy will be fine. Your mother is a hero. She saved twenty-seven people even though it cost her. You see?" He pointed down at the bionic legs.

Hero.

Folake would hear that word so often, she would come to hate it. Hero. Why did her mother need to lose her legs to be one? Were heroes only created through loss? Did heroes always need to lose something, to suffer, to be broken?

"Sometimes good things require sacrifice, do you understand?"

Folake didn't really understand what her father was saying then, but he seemed more hurt by her tears than by her mother's condition, so she nodded and wiped away the tears from her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt.

"Good girl. She'll be fine. The new legs will take time to get used to, but she'll be fine. Good as new. Maybe even better. She put the lives of others above her own—that's the mark of a great

person. She's a true hero. I'm very proud of her. And I'm very proud of you too, eh, omo mummy?"

Folake looked down and saw the faint smile still lingering on her mother's lips, and so she smiled too. That made her father laugh, and even though she didn't really know why back then, she thought that there was something incomplete about the laugh, something hollow in its sound and something dimmed in his eyes.

She never heard her father laugh the way he used to again.

* * *

Folake could almost hear her own blood pulsing in her head when the subsurface exploration monitoring and control unit doors irised open with a sharp hiss as the isolation control vented.

She moved quickly through the wide white and grey space, using her hands and feet to propel herself toward the central control room. She didn't even pause to so much as glance at the transparent display ports that lined it to catch a view of the dull red orb that had brought her there, so far away from home or even the wispy green and blue dot that was home on the other side; the place where she'd been born and where her argument with Femi had begun.

Nerio station was relatively new, with the bright red, white, and green symbol of the African Space Agency still emblazoned clearly everywhere. It was essentially a long monolithic tube with collapsible solar arrays placed at each end. A circular ring was attached at an angle to a sphere at its center by corridors, like spokes on a giant wheel. The subsurface exploration monitoring and control unit was housed in one sector of the ring, just like the twelve other mission units dedicated to other surface activities. Central control would have been apprised of the situation by now and would know if any other crew or remote units were close enough to investigate. Perhaps even know enough to help her figure out what to do next.

When she reached the central unit, Mengistu, the mission commander, was sitting in the middle of the spherical room, surrounded by display screens not unlike the ones at SEMC, but there were more, and they were all curved in an arc to match the room's shape, their foci at Mengistu's position. His long hair was braided tight to his scalp, and his shoulders were hunched as he swiped rapidly at a small cluster of bright red in the screen array in front of him, like an electric tumor.

"What the hell just happened down there?" he asked when he saw her enter.

She pushed off the door and came closer to him, "Unexpected massive overpressure. I think it might have been a blowout."

Mengistu blinked rapidly, thinking. "Blowout? Don't we have devices down there to prevent that?"

"If the readings we got are right, this was far beyond anything we designed for. We need to help the guys on N-12." Mengistu was usually quite stoic, but she thought she saw a flash of emotion in the brown of his eyes. "Did you get any additional information from the other crews?"

"I contacted Paul Bryant on N-4, and Mohale on N-7; they're the closest, but it will take them a while to ramp down and mobilize."

"What about the rovers?"

He spun around and gestured to one of the screens that wasn't flashing red with a long thin finger. "All N-12 support rover communications are down. I've reassigned the nearest three autonomous rovers to investigate but they're old and slow. You know that. It may take a while."

She exhaled. "So, there's no way we can help them right now?"

"I don't know. We don't even know what condition they are in, but if this really is as bad as you say then we may not get to them in time. We need to be prepared for the worst."

Him saying it seemed to suddenly make the prospect of Femi and the other members of the crew dying even more real. The thought brought bile and the metallic taste of regret to her throat. She choked them both back down and grabbed onto a railing to tether herself near Mengistu. She was trying not to let the panic flooding her body get all the way to her brain where it could cloud her thoughts or her judgement.

Think. Think. There must be another way. Femi needs me to think quickly.

There was a brief pause. And then . . .

“What about the *Ibeji*?”

Mengitsu spun back around, the ends of his braids floating up like tentacles. “What about it?”

“It has its own fully independent on-board systems, and it was designed for the team to use in investigating unknown and potentially dangerous local environments, right? So, it’s tough. Very tough. Might have survived whatever knocked out their comms. Try to ping it on the emergency frequency and see if it’s online.”

He nodded, reached for a display below, and gestured to pull it up and close, swiping quickly as he did. He was far more practiced with lightscreens than she was, and his fingers were thin, so his movements were smooth and effortless, like he was conducting an incredibly fast electric orchestra. She could barely even see what he was doing. There was another pause, and then he said, “It’s online.”

“Good. We can use it to see what the situation is on the ground.”

“Yes,” he nodded, “but the *Ibeji* is not autonomous. It’s not a rover. It’s designed for full sensory exploration and data acquisition with minimal risk. We’ll have to control it using haptic feedback from here. If it’s been hit by something or is in the middle of a fire, or anything like that, you’ll be in a lot of pain.”

“I know that. I took the same training you did.”

“Fine. I’m sorry. I just wanted to make sure we both clearly understand what you are planning to do.”

She looked him in the eyes with confidence she didn’t really feel. “We do.”

Am I trying to be a hero like my mother?

“Okay. Then do it.” Mengitsu pointed to the end of the room where the suits were stored. “Put on the suit. I’ll set up the link.”

“Thank you. And see if you can dampen the tactile feedback signal and increase visual and sound.”

“Sure.”

Mengitsu swiped at another display as she pushed off to the edge of the room where both the bulky extravehicular activity suits and the much smaller haptic feedback suits were secured. They were skintight and looked like full SCUBA bodysuits with a hood that was covered in thin wire mesh—the neural interface receiver nodes. The suits were designed to give the user full sensory perception and control of the emergency high-risk environment exploration robot down on the surface. Tactile. Visual. Aural. Hence the name *Ibeji Twins*. She pressed the release and snatched one of them without checking the size. Comfort really didn’t matter. Only time did. She writhed her way into it awkwardly as Mengitsu called out to her, “ready to link you up whenever you’re ready.”

She pulled the hood over her eyes and was swallowed by a silent darkness.

She gave Mengitsu a thumbs-up to indicate she was ready.

Hold on Femi, I’m coming.

* * *

Folake was forty-one when Femi told her he was applying to be an offworld drilling engineer.

Folake remembers the day in vivid detail for three reasons: one, because the weather was unusually cool for that time of year; two, because she was wearing the black sweater her mother had knitted for her; and three, because it was the last time she had seen Femi in person.

He was sitting on the couch across from her in her Benin city apartment with an appearance of apprehension plastered across his face. He carefully sipped the hot ginger tea she’d made for him, blowing wispy trails of steam from the surface. Cool harmattan air streamed in through the window behind him, over his cleanly shaved head and onto her face. When he put his mug down, she was reminded just how disproportionately long his arms were, like their mother’s had been. It was a trait that had made him good at sports when he was in school and good at tinkering with things like he liked to when he got older. That was something he had in common with their father. His skin was lustrous and plump; he’d been eating well.

He hadn’t said much since he’d arrived at her place for their usual monthly visit to catch up

and play board games and reminisce about the past—a tradition they had developed since their parents had died. Folake could tell that he was weighing and arranging his words, so she already knew he was going to say something heavy and jagged before he leaned forward and said it.

“I have to tell you something, but I need you to know this is not about Mum,” he said, “or you.”

“Okay . . .” she responded cautiously.

“I just got an offer from AfSA,” he announced as he put his hand to his chin and stroked the line of his trimmed beard. “They need managed pressure drillers for a five-year Mars mission.”

Folake’s cheeks went hot, and a sheen of sweat began to form on her forehead. Memories of that day all those years ago when their mother had come home with her eyes barely open, a thin smile cut across her pale face, and two metal appendages where her legs used to be, flooded her mind.

“It’s a very good offer,” he added when he saw the look of horror evolving across her face. “Fantastic actually. I ran the numbers and once I get back, I just need to work in the office as a consultant for another three years and I can retire early.”

“They pay well because it’s dangerous. It’s Mars, Femi. There have only been what, eight or nine missions with subsurface drilling crews there. Didn’t one of them end in disaster, a casing failure?”

“That was the Norwegian crew four years ago, and no one got seriously hurt, Folake. Four years is a long time. This is different. There’s been a lot of progress. We’re pioneering new, better technology. We’ll be using supercritical carbon dioxide from the Martian atmosphere as drilling fluid, a new tensegrity rig structure instead of the old standard stuff, and a few other things they haven’t even explained to me yet—but a lot of it is stuff that’s never been done in the field before.”

She shook her head. “That only makes it *more* dangerous. Mum always used to say, *the bead that is used to break open the coconut will not eat from it.*”

“Yeah, but considering all the patents she and dad filed together, I think her head broke a lot of coconuts, and she ended up being a hero,” Femi replied. Heat flared through Folake, and she fixed him with a look. He leaned back as though the heat from her was singeing him, “Folake, you know this is a big opportunity for me.”

The memories in her mind merged with other memories too; of her mother softly crying alone in front of an open fridge; of her father shouting at her to be careful when she’d accidentally let her grip slip while trying to help her mother walk up a flight of stairs; of her father’s rage and her mother’s tearful resignation after she’d gone to work for DeepCarbon, drilling wells to store carbon dioxide removed from the atmosphere deep underground, in an act of defiance. Folake wondered if that was what Femi was doing. Joining the African Space Agency mission as a way to prove a point. He knew it was a role she’d been invited to apply for two years ago with the first mission cycle, and she’d declined. As though taking up her previous role at DeepCarbon hadn’t been enough.

“Femi, why are you really doing this?”

“Doing what? Taking a good job offer?” His voice had taken on a hard edge.

“There are a million other good jobs you could have used your mechanical engineering degree to pivot to. You chose to focus on drilling. Okay fine. I didn’t say anything. But why did you take that drilling engineer position at DeepCarbon after I left? Why do you want to be an AfSA offworld driller?”

“Because I like it,” he shot back. “I love this job. The theory and the practice of it. Sure, I was exposed to it early because of you and Mum, but I found it exciting. I still do. I made my own choice to follow that path. I know the risks and I made my choice anyway. Why is that so hard for you to understand?”

She shook her head again. “Because it’s not true.”

“And what makes you so sure of that? What makes you think you know my motivations even better than I do? Because your own choices were influenced by what happened? Abeg, I already told you this isn’t about you . . . or Mum.”

“You don’t know what she was like before the accident. What they were both like.”

Femi’s nose flared. “It doesn’t matter!” He sighed. “You’re doing it again. You need to stop trying to protect me from your own trauma. I don’t know what you remember but my childhood was great. I had you. I had Dad. I had Mum. And the Mummy I remember turned out great. There were bad moments, yes, difficult moments. I remember them too; I just don’t dwell on them like you do because they were not all our lives were. There were many good moments. Beautiful moments. Mum was fine, she dealt with it as best she could. Dad too. You’re the only one that never got past it.”

Folake shot to her feet. “If you keep doing this, you’re going to end up like her. Another brave, broken person crying in the darkness when you think no one can see you.”

A flash of fury contorted the lines of Femi’s face so much that for a moment Folake did not recognize him. In that moment the measured and playful man that was her brother disappeared, and that was how she knew she’d gone too far, had scraped open something tender and raw in him.

He threw his hands up in the air. “Goodbye Folake. I’ll call you when I get back.”

There was something hard and sharp in his voice as he left her apartment, his jaw clenched, and his fists balled tight that filled her with fear. He didn’t even look back.

She didn’t speak to Femi again until fourteen months later when she finally arrived on Nerio station with the fourth mission cycle as a remote drilling operations supervisor.

* * *

The darkness receded like a curtain lifting when Mengitsu activated her link to the *Ibeji*. All she saw was a clear sheet of orange-red Martian sky.

Up. She was looking up. She could feel the pressure of something rough beneath her so she knew the tactile sensors were working, but she couldn’t hear anything. Perhaps aural had been damaged in the blowout. The weight of increased planetary gravity settled on her through the sensors.

She commanded the *Ibeji* to rise with a thought and met resistance. It was still strapped in place. She brought the hands up to her face to make sure the controls were working correctly. The grey and white articulated limbs moved smoothly, if a bit slow. Probably due to Mengitsu damping a portion of the signal. She released the straps and sat the *Ibeji* up to take stock of the situation with a sweeping look across the horizon. Around her, there was only red, dusty desolation and destruction to see.

Ibeji was attached to the emergency supplies cabin, which had been toppled over. Ahead of her, the rig itself lay on its side like a wounded beast. Long lines of thick steel tubing were strewn about the area like bizarre entrails. Charred and broken edges of the tensegrity rig, the compressors, and other assorted equipment jutted out at odd angles, some of them dug into the ground from impact, including what remained of the communications array. There was swirling dust everywhere, but the ground in front of the rig was wet because the site that N-12 had been drilling was now a thick, towering geyser of clear liquid.

And then sound suddenly exploded into her consciousness as the aural signal was reestablished. Folake flinched. The liquid was gushing out with a roar.

She focused on the rig in the distance, and her heart sank when she saw a body just behind it that had been mangled beyond recognition, both arms twisted, and one leg torn off. The suit helmet was cracked open, and the upper torso had caved into a bloody wreck of bones and blood. She was ashamed of her relief when she noticed that the body was too short and stout to be Femi. It was Natukunda, the jovial and maternal Ugandan floorhand who would probably have been closest to the hole when the blowout occurred.

I’m so sorry Natukunda.

She blinked back tears.

I have to find the rest of the crew.

Folake thought the *Ibeji* up to its feet, feeling the vibration from the blowout concentrated beneath. The rate at which the fluids were spewing out suddenly made her worried about how stable the ground beneath them would be if it continued. There could be compaction

and subsidence, and eventually collapse if the subsurface wasn't stable. Their initial surveys had indicated that it was, but they hadn't been expecting a blowout that could accelerate pore collapse. She looked around the geyser of fluid and noticed that most of the equipment fragments it had touched looked different, more greenish-blue than they should.

Is that some strange visual transmission artifact or is that the liquid corrosive?

It all just added to her already heightened sense of urgency. She surveyed the area, noting the white dome of the N-12 base in the distance, and then focused on the rig again, using the *Ibeji's* camera to zoom in on the reinforced rig cabin. She saw motion through the window. Her heart leapt into her throat. It had to be them.

They were trapped inside by fallen casing; a long and thick thirty-two-inch steel cylinder that had been vomited out of the hole by the blowout and now lay across the door. The liquid from the blowout was steadily spreading toward the cabin.

Her resolve crystallized, and she thought the *Ibeji* through a leap down. A dulled throb of pain shot through her feet when it landed, but she didn't stop. She rolled the *Ibeji* through and made for the broken rig, only stumbling once as she danced around the debris and the pooling fluid. She caught herself thinking excitedly again about what it could be, perhaps some new Martian fluid that hadn't been discovered before. But she shook the thought from her head, swivelling the *Ibeji's* in turn. Only the crew mattered now. She needed to get to them before it was too late. She knew she should have paused to give Mengitsu an update, but she was too focused on getting the crew out of there.

I'm coming Femi.

When she reached the rig cabin, she maneuvered the *Ibeji* through a swift climb over its exposed underside and onto the door that had been blocked by the regurgitated casing. The roar of the blowout was deafening up close. She used the *Ibeji* to grab onto the casing, having to embrace it to get a good enough grip across its wide diameter. She tugged, and the strain of the effort saturated the haptic feedback on her body. She continued, as beads of sweat formed along her forehead and were quickly absorbed by the haptic hood, until it finally shifted enough for *Ibeji* to access the door.

She used the *Ibeji's* hands to rip the cabin door away, and there was the rest of the N-12 crew. The three faces looked up and gradually turned from fear to surprise when they saw the bulky outline of the *Ibeji* above them.

"Oh, thank God in heaven. Help is here." Oumarou the Cameroonian logger said through his suit speakers with widened eyes, his dimpled cheeks arched up to a smile.

"Quick. Let's get out of here."

At the sound of Femi's voice and the sight of his face through the transparent helmet, Folake let out a sigh of relief that would have been a squeal of joy and a hug if the *Ibeji* had any external speakers of its own to transmit her voice or if the local radio frequency was still working. But he didn't even know it was her beneath that grey and white metal mask and frame. She froze for a second as she fought back her instincts.

We don't have time.

Folake motioned for them to climb out and lowered the *Ibeji's* hand.

The two men helped Bibata, the geologist whose right shoulder hung limply like there had been a break or a dislocation, up, into the *Ibeji's* waiting grasp. Thankfully it looked like her suit had not been breached. She took Bibata's other hand and hoisted her out. She was not very heavy in the reduced Martian gravity, but it was more than Folake was expecting because she'd been in orbit for so long. Bibata made her way gingerly off the rig as Folake reached down to get the others.

There was a loud piercing crack as the rig structure suddenly shifted beneath her feet.

Subsidence!

Femi and Oumarou were thrown against each other, bumping their helmets together with a terrifying crack as Folake struggled to keep the *Ibeji* steady, constantly shifting her weight to ride the wave of potential energy. The visual signal from the *Ibeji* blurred as the rig dropped down suddenly and then came to an abrupt halt. The casing rolled back toward the door, but

she caught it just in time, straining with both of *Ibeji's* hands to stop it from rolling over her and blocking the cabin door again.

Got it.

A loose cannister of pressurized carbon dioxide drilling fluid that was still attached to the outside flank of the rig exploded right next to the *Ibeji*. Pieces of shredded metal flew past with a screech like lethal birds. Folake screamed in agony as three of them hit *Ibeji's* frame, sending sharp lances of pain through her that Mengitsu's haptic feedback dampening could not completely dull. One of them had slammed into *Ibeji's* torso. She felt like there was a hot knife cutting through her stomach.

The roar of the blowout seemed to have reduced, but she could still vaguely hear Femi and Oumarou's muffled voices. There was no more color to the visual transmission, and the left leg of the *Ibeji* was completely numb to her—she couldn't move it. She knew something important was damaged. She could feel it. The *Ibeji's* frame would probably survive whatever it was, but she didn't know if its haptic sensor system would.

No, I need to hold on.

"Go. Go now." Femi shouted at Oumarou, his voice crackling through the speaker.

Folake fought to keep holding the casing at bay, as Oumarou and Femi scrambled up toward the *Ibeji*.

Yes, get out Femi. Get out. Get back to the base.

She could barely manage to stay focused as the pain in her belly mounted. The visual transmission flickered.

Folake gritted her teeth and pushed back against both the weight of the casing and the darkness that was invading her consciousness.

She watched as Femi lifted Oumarou up so he could grab the edge of the doorway. A sense of pride filled up her heart. He wanted to help everyone first before helping himself.

Just like Mum.

Oumarou in turn, reached down to help Femi.

Hero. It's not about pain or loss. It's the willingness to risk yourself to help others.

The weight of the casing transmitted waves of pain that pulsed through her shoulders, but she held on. She let out a loud, piercing scream, but she held on. It was only when she felt the brush of his suit against the *Ibeji's* hip as Femi clambered out of the rig cabin that she finally let go.

* * *

The central control room slowly swam back into Folake's view like it was being painted back into her consciousness with an artist's smooth strokes. The large sweeping curve of the metallic walls and screens were comfortably familiar as she mentally adjusted from seeing through the *Ibeji's* visual display.

She saw that she was attached to the railing of Mengitsu's control dock with an orange strap.

He paused when he saw she was awake; he had been talking to someone on the comms. He turned to face her. "You're back with us. Good."

The first thing she said was, "Are they okay?"

"They're fine." Mengitsu said with a smile. "Safely back at the base. And they know it was you piloting the *Ibeji*. Femi wants to talk to you."

Even though a part of her had expected it, she couldn't hide her surprise. Femi hadn't spoken to her since Earth. Not really. When she'd arrived on Nerio station and had her first call with the surface crew, he'd grown even angrier and insisted on addressing her only by her official title. And he had never initiated a conversation.

She pulled herself closer to the railing and swallowed. "Okay."

"I'll connect you."

Mengitsu switched the communications line open and drifted away toward the exit. He was pretending like he had something to do, but she knew he was really just giving her some privacy.

There was a click. And then one of the screens flickered to reveal Femi, bright blue light

reflected on the dome of his clean-shaven head.

“Folake, are you okay?” The earnestness in his eyes and honest emotion in his voice alone was enough to make her own eyes brim with tears. It had been so long since they’d just . . . talked.

“I’m fine.” She slid a finger along her hairline, pushing it into the base of her afro. “How’s Bibata?”

“She’s fine too. Resting and healing. Oumarou is making her a cake. We’re all still processing what happened. And thinking about Natukunda.”

“I feel terrible. We have to inform her family.”

“Yeah.”

There was a brief silence.

“Mengitsu told me it was you. In the *Ibeji*. Thank you.”

She shook her head. “You don’t need to thank me.”

“Yes, I do.” Femi shifted his chair, so he was closer to the screen. “For a long time, I hated you for trying to stop me from taking this job. I hated you for insinuating that the choices I made in life were entirely because of you and Mum. I hated you for thinking I was just being reckless. I hated you for coming here to watch over me from orbit like some bloody mother hen. You made me feel so small, like I was a delicate child needing your protection. I hated you for so long that I almost forgot that I love you. I love you very much. And right now, I’m just super grateful that you’re my sister and that you were up there watching out for me.”

He’d caught her off guard, distilling their years-long silence into a few perfect words. She held back tears with effort.

“I love you too, Femi,” she replied, pulling herself closer to the microphone as though it would bring her closer to him. “I always have. And I always will. I never meant to make you feel like small or less than you are. I only wanted what was best for you. But I realize now that I was projecting my own issues onto you. I was focused on the wrong things, on the bad moments. You were right all along. You are a great engineer, you love to build, investigate, create, solve. I’m the one that went into this line of work to prove a point, and I spent every moment of it being afraid that I would end up like Mum. That’s why I quit fieldwork at DeepCarbon and took an office position. And when you started following in my footsteps, I . . . panicked. I transferred all that fear to you. I kept thinking I had to protect you from yourself. But I know now that I didn’t have to.”

She paused to let out a long breath, relieved to see that Femi was smiling at her. She smiled back, “You know, I was going to tell you all this when you got back after this drill shift,” she said, “I had a whole speech planned.”

He managed a chuckle. “I guess Mars had its own plan.”

“I guess so. This planet *get as e be*.”

Femi laughed. “Yeah. A real tough coconut.”

She laughed too.

He rubbed his head. “I’m just happy I can talk to my big sister again. Even if it *is* a bit embarrassing that I needed you to save me in the end.”

She shook her head. “You didn’t *need* me. There would have been someone else. But I’m glad I could be there for you when you needed help.”

He leaned in close to the camera so that his “So come now, what are we going to do about that blowout?” he asked.

“You’re the one on the ground, what do you think we should do?”

He nodded, and she could tell that it was an acknowledgement of what she was doing, treating him like she would any other colleague, like an equal. He said, “I think we should take stock of what we lost. Discuss with the other surface teams and the planning team back on Earth.” He looked at her with resolve, “And then we take samples of the fluid. Retrieve any data that survived the impact, and then, we do what we came here to do, we study it, and we figure out what happened so we can make sure it never happens again.”

“Sounds like a good plan to me,” Folake said and wished for a moment that she was back in the *Ibeji* so she could hug her planetbound brother from the orbit of Mars.

Wole Talabi is an engineer, writer, and editor from Nigeria. He's bopped around the planet quite a bit, but right now he lives in Malaysia. His stories have appeared in Asimov's, Light-speed, F&SF, Clarkesworld, and several other places. He has edited three anthologies and been a finalist for several awards including the Caine Prize, the Locus Award, and the Nommo Award. His work has been translated into Spanish, Norwegian, Chinese, Italian, Bengali, and French. His collection Incomplete Solutions (2019), is published by Luna Press and my debut novel Shigidi, will be published by DAW books in fall, 2023.