

Chapter 1: Awaken, Nalo's Destiny

The sun's warm, eerie orange glow peeked through the curtains; gently brushing Nalo awake as her iPhone alarm rang out. With a burst of energy, she hopped out of bed, her braided hair hanging calmly, teasing her face.

Upon close inspection through her eyes, she noticed that her room was still crammed with cardboard boxes. These boxes not only contained the remnants of her memories from New York City but also served as a reminder of her new life in California. The air was different here in the Oakland Bay Area, a long haul from the hustle and bustle of New York City.

As the alarm persisted with its discordant ring, Nalo hurriedly navigated through the sea of taped boxes to silence the unrelenting ringtone. She wandered around the room, unplugged the phone and iPad, and stuck them in the backpack, continuing to observe how they presented themselves to her like a puzzle to solve, brimming with zeal and hope for a new start.

Today was no ordinary day for Nalo—she was going on a school field trip to the Caves. A small smile formed on her face as she lost herself in thoughts about the trip, extending her arm towards her jacket.

The jacket she grabbed bore the badge of her old school in New York. The familiar piece sent a wave of nostalgia through her as she processed the new surroundings.

With her backpack slung over one shoulder, Nalo hurried to the bathroom, tucking her freshly braided hair behind her ears, eager to catch a quick look at herself in the mirror. The reflection staring back at her wore the enthusiasm and liveliness of a twelve-year-old Mandinka girl, all geared up for the day's adventure. And that was when a bizarre revelation occurred to her: Nalo had slept with her school clothes on—a clear indication of her eagerness for the day.

Nalo ran a final hand through her braids, which framed her face before she sprinted down the stairs. On her way, she was met with a delicious aroma that led her to the very heart of the home—the kitchen.

There sat her father, Jaloo Kouyaté, a 34-year-old music teacher who greeted Nalo with a warm smile.

"Good morning, Baaba," Nalo said, giving her father a quick, tight hug.

Jaloo's tall 6'3" frame moved gracefully in the vibrant dashiki and black pants he wore for work. His dark skin bathed in the soft morning light, and his thin physique carried a quiet strength and toughness. Dreadlocks outlined his face, adding a touch of cultural poise to his demeanor.

"Rise and shine! Good morning, my nna kaloo," Jalo responded in a similar spirit, using an affectionate Mandinka term that echoed their love of family ties. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled, and his voice—a soothing mix of authority and compassion—filled the kitchen like a sweet-toned jingle.

While Jaloo sat comfortably at the table, taking long sips of his morning tea, his eyes glimmered with the joy of a man deeply immersed in both family and music. The notes of a soft, melodic Mandinka tune lingered in the air around him, a distinct reminder of his passion for teaching the fine art of music to young minds.

The kitchen had become a haven of morning rituals, a place where the whiff of freshly made corn cakes mixed with the warmth of family intimacy.

As Nalo made her way around the breakfast table, she turned to her younger brother, Kaati.

"Wake up, sleepy head! Today is going to be amazing. Imagine the wonders waiting for me at the Cave," she exclaimed enthusiastically, envisioning the adventure ahead as she disheveled her brother's hair.

"What's up, sis?" Kaati managed to blurt a response through his mouth full.

Kaati, a ten-year-old with dark skin and dreaded hair, was a testament to his Mandinka heritage. He sat drowsily at the table, immersing himself in a plate loaded with corn cakes. Despite being 5'4", his young stature held a promise of growth and boundless energy.

Upon being jolted from his slumber, his eyes sparkled with curiosity as he took in the breakfast table in front of him, still rousing to the day's possibilities.

Observing the frisky exchange between his children, Jaloo chuckled. "Indeed, today holds the promise of a new day—of something special. "But first, let's fuel up for the day," he said, motioning towards the breakfast spread.

He served Kaati a plate piled high with corn cakes, a smile forming on his lips upon witnessing his family come alive in the morning light, and the consistent Mandinka music in the background. Evidently, the morning buzz in the Kouyaté household followed a familiar rhythm.

Ashley, Nalo's mom, walked into the kitchen, dressed in neat RN scrubs, an absolute depiction of her role at the local hospital. She was an African American and carried compassion and warmth that engulfed the family into its folds.

"Good morning, Baamaa," Nalo and Kaati exclaimed in unison, affectionately addressing their mother with the Mandinka term.

Jaloo noticed his wife, clad in her everyday cream-colored attire, before he motioned towards her. As the family gathered around the breakfast table, exchanging hugs and morning greetings, the atmosphere hummed with the energy of a close-knit unit. Nalo and Kaati, the sibling duo, displayed glee about Nalo's upcoming school trip to the Caves.

Ashley darted her eyes around the vibrant breakfast table, enjoying the view of the stack of corn cakes, before she turned towards Jaloo, giving a peck on his cheek.

"Good morning. Gotta Go! Honey, thank you for fixing the breakfast," she acknowledged her husband, expressing gratitude for the morning feast, before rushing towards the door.

However, the joyful mood took an acute turn when Nalo expressed her desire for a special school drop-off by her mom.

"Baamaa, I thought you said you would take me to school today!" Nalo shared, her gleaming eyes filled with a mix of hope and disapproval, the sadness on her face becoming more apparent.

Moved by her daughter's sunken expression, Ashley moved towards Nalo, taking her face in her hands as if collecting the remnants of her motherly love.

"I know, Baamaa is so sorry, Nalo. But I got an urgent call from the hospital and must go to work earlier than I planned," she said, gently tugging Nalo's cheeks. "However, I called Mother Dear, and she will come by to pick you up and take you to school. I hope that's okay, sweetheart."

Ashley's comforting words attempted to take the edge from Nalo's unmet expectations.

Jaloo considered his daughter's disappointment with a nod before escorting Ashley to the door to bid her farewell.

"Bye, honey. Have a good day. You owe me one." Jaloo said playfully, a broad smile forming on his face. He kissed

Ashley goodbye and closely watched her steps as she went through the main door towards her car.

Inside, Nalo, still disappointed by her mother's sudden change of plans, occupied herself with masking her anticipation for her grandmother's arrival. She swiftly sprinted towards the front window to check if Mother Dear had arrived. Her backpack and jacket were left by the door, demonstrating her excitement for the day's adventures.

"Baaba, these corn cakes are fantastic. I love them!" Kaati's enthusiastic voice echoed from the kitchen in the same instant, jolting the father-daughter duo. Jaloo returned to the kitchen and started piling the plates and utensils on the breakfast table.

Caught between the willingness to have some corn cakes for herself and the looming hopefulness for the school drop-off, Nalo wore an ardent expression marked by impatient desire. To calm her restlessness, she focused on her father. Jaloo observed Nalo's discomfort and began shuffling through those cultural relics in front of an antiquated, attractive showcase adorned with all sorts of cultural artifacts and instruments.

Jaloo managed to remove a Kora, a traditional Mali instrument, from its case.

Made from a long wooden neck and leather turning loops, a Kora is a 21-string musical instrument that influences the features of the lute and harp. When played with four fingers, the instrument creates a dazzling, dense musical texture

along with thin, shimmering facades that serve as an exquisite testament to Alkebulan culture and history.

Alkebulans, including Jaloo, regarded their musical instruments as magical and spiritual, given their holistic impact on their lives, including the development of culture and language.

As Jaloo submerged himself, marveling at the sophisticated, handmade musical instrument's musical capabilities and depth, he couldn't help but ponder over its cultural significance.

"So beautiful and melodic," Jaloo commented, gently strumming the delicate instrument's strings.

Upon hearing the soft, melodious beats of the Malian instrument, Nalo felt a drop of temptation, and she sprinted toward her dad with curiosity visible in her eyes.

As the father-daughter duo gaped at the sacred Malian instrument in unison, with Nalo gently running her thumb across the delicately arranged strings, Jaloo pointed to the window, drawing his daughter's attention towards Mother Dear's car pulling up and parking in front of the house.

The car appeared no less than a friendly giant beetle with four round wheels. Painted in a shiny blue color, the antiquated vehicle boasted gigantic windows, serving as eyes that could see everything happening on the road. Upon reaching the Kouyaté family's main front door, it hummed softly as Mother Dear switched off the engine.

Nalo hurriedly straightened herself, strumming the Kora for one final time, before she dashed towards the front door to pick up her backpack and jacket.

"Feel the magic of the Kora," Jaloo encouraged, keeping his firm hold on the sacred instrument.

With a silent promise to herself of hearing her father play the Kora again, Nalo wasted no time after Mother Dear's arrival. On her way to the front door, Nalo made an impulsive decision, driving her to make a quick trip to the kitchen. Prompted by her impatient desire to take a quick bite of the corn cake, Nalo snatched a paper towel, picked it up, and consumed some before making her way toward the kitchen exit. Jaloo went to the door and waved at Mother Dear, and Nalo hugged Jaloo on her way out the door.

Filled with joy at the prospect of her school trip, she quickly grabbed her belongings and ran out the front door.

Meanwhile, Mother Dear unlocked the car as soon as she saw Nalo sprinting towards her. Nalo grabbed the front door to open it widely. She tossed her backpack on the car floor before jumping in next to Mother Dear.

As the car pulled away from the curb, Nalo enjoyed the last bites of her delicious corn cake, relishing the simple joys amidst the morning's unexpected twists. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and flashed a joyful, toothy smile towards Mother Dear.

The vibrant glow of the morning sun kissed Nalo's cheeks as she approached Mother Dear—a 56-year-old Mandinka

grandmother clad in a vibrant, flowing, wide-sleeved robe, formally known as a Boubou, with a matching head wrap.

With a wave of high-spiritedness, Nalo threw her arms around her grandmother, taking in her soft, floral scent.

"Hello, Mother Dear. Feels so refreshing to see you again," Nalo greeted.

The older woman, wearing a bright yet weary smile, pointed to Nalos' paper towel and demonstrated wiping her mouth and the back of her hand. Then, with warmth and compassion, she cupped Nalo's face with both hands.

"Good morning, Nalo. How are you doing today, my nna kaloo?" Mother Dear inquired, her eyes filled with affection. They appeared to bridge the gap between the disappointment of Nalo's mother leaving early and the exhilaration of what lay ahead.

"We are going on an adventurous field trip today, Mother Dear," Nalo bragged a little, her tone carrying a smidge of pride. She felt as if she was sharing a secluded confession with her grandmother.

"Yes, I know. Your mom told me all about that. I know for a fact that my little nna kaloo is going to learn a lot today," Mother Dear responded encouragingly.

Mother Dear pulled the car onto the main street, adorned with Oakland, California's gleaming cityscapes. The ride to school hummed with the joyous sounds of gospel songs

blended with Afro beats, setting the right tone for a day of adventure.

Soon after, they arrived in front of the school, and Nalo kissed Mother Dear goodbye. She hopped out of the car, swiftly grabbed her backpack, and excitedly ran towards the school entrance to join her study team. Mother Dear, stepping out of the driver's seat to escort Nalo to the school gate, noticed something left behind on the front seat.

"Nalo! You left your jacket," she called out with a smile.

But Nalo was occupied with her study group, turning and waving at her grandmother to signal goodbye while Mother Dear slowly walked towards them, bringing with her the jacket.

Upon reaching them, Mother Dear carefully handed the jacket to Nalo, who clutched it gently while expressing her unfeigned gratitude. "Oh, thank you, Mother Dear. How'd I leave it behind?" she acknowledged, embracing her grandmother in a hug.

The scene under the bright yellow glow of the morning sun radiated warmth and familiarity as Mother Dear clapped her hands gently over Nalo's back.

Nalo's study team witnessed the candid show of love and compassion and couldn't help but comment on Mother Dear's distinct appearance—a stark contrast to how women in the States dressed.

"Oh my, your grandmother is beautiful," Xochitl remarked in awe. Her surprised face changed to a pleasant smile.

Mother Dear waved off the compliment with a chuckle, said farewell to the group, and headed back towards her car.

Meanwhile, the school courtyard buzzed with the energy of the zealous students preparing for the exciting day. Nalo, gripping her jacket tightly across her arm, gravitated towards the rest of the study group, ready to embrace the adventures that awaited them.