

Lagoon

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It's up to a famous rapper, a biologist, and a rogue soldier to handle humanity's first contact with an alien ambassador-and prevent mass extinction-in this novel that blends magical realism with high-stakes action.

After word gets out on the Internet that aliens have landed in the waters outside of the world's fifth most populous city, chaos ensues. Soon the military, religious leaders, thieves, and crackpots are trying to control the message on YouTube and on the streets. Meanwhile, the earth's political superpowers are considering a preemptive nuclear launch to eradicate the intruders. All that stands between seventeen million anarchic residents and death is an alien ambassador, a biologist, a rapper, a soldier, and a myth that may be the size of a giant spider, or a god revealed.

Nnedi Okorafor is an award-winning novelist of African-based science fiction, fantasy, and magical realism. Born in the US to Nigerian immigrant parents, Okorafor is known for weaving African cultures into creative settings and memorable characters. Her book, *Who Fears Death* has been optioned by HBO, with *Game of Thrones'* George R.R. Martin as executive producer. Okorafor is a full-time professor at the University at Buffalo, New York (SUNY).

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CHAPTER 1

FIST

It was an eerie moment as Adaora and the two strange men arrived at that spot, right before it happened. Exactly three yards from the water at exactly 11:55 p.m., 8 January 2010. Adaora came from the north side of the beach. The tall veiled man came from the east. The bloodied man wearing army fatigues from the west. They ambled in their general directions, eyeing each other as it became clear that their paths would intersect.

Only Adaora hesitated. Then, like the others, she pressed on. She was a born-and-raised Lagosian, and she was wearing nicely fitted jeans and a sensible blouse. She'd spent more time walking this beach than probably both of these men combined.

She wiped the tears from her cheeks and trained her eyes straight ahead. About a quarter of a mile away was open water where the Atlantic overflowed its banks. When bad things happened, her feet always brought her here, to Lagos's Bar Beach.

In many ways, Bar Beach was a perfect sample of Nigerian society. It was a place of mixing. The ocean mixed with the land, and the wealthy mixed with the poor. Bar Beach attracted drug dealers, squatters, various accents and languages, seagulls, garbage, biting flies, tourists, all kinds of religious zealots, hawkers, prostitutes, johns, water-loving children, and their careless parents. The beachside bars and small restaurants were the most popular hangout spots. Bar Beach's waters were too wild for any serious swimming. Even the best swimmers risked a watery death by its many rip currents.

Adaora had removed her sandals. It was deep night, and this was probably a bad idea. So far, however, she hadn't stepped on any pieces of wood, rusty nails, broken glass, or sharp stones. Her need to feel the cool sand between her toes at this moment outweighed the risk. Despite its trash, there was still something sacred about Bar Beach.

On 12 June 1993, the day of the most democratic election in Nigeria's history, she'd come here with her father and watched him shed tears of joy. On 23 June, her mother brought her here because her father and uncles were at home cursing and shouting over the military annulling those same elections.

She came here to escape the reality that her best friend was sleeping with her biology professor to earn a passing grade. On the day she received her PhD in marine biology from the University of Lagos, she came here to thank the Powers That Be for helping her stay sane enough to finish her degree (and for the fact that she hadn't had to sleep with anyone to earn it).

Last year, she'd come here to weep when her father was killed along with thirty others during a botched robbery of a luxury bus on the Lagos-Benin Expressway, one of Nigeria's many, many, many dangerous roads. The thieves had demanded that all the passengers get off the bus and lie in the momentarily empty road. In their stupidity, the thieves hadn't anticipated the truck (speeding to avoid armed robbers) that would run over everyone including the thieves.

And now Adaora was here at Bar Beach because her loving perfect husband of ten years had hit her. Slapped her really hard. All because of a hip-hop concert and a priest. At first, she'd stood there stunned and hurt, cupping her cheek, praying the children hadn't heard. Then she'd brought her hand up and slapped him right back. Shocked into rage, her husband leaped on her. But Adaora had been ready for him. By this time, she wasn't thinking about the children.

She didn't know how long she and her husband had scuffled like wild dogs on the floor. And the way the fight had ended, it wasn't . . . normal. One minute they'd been brawling, and then the next, her husband was mysteriously stuck to the floor, his wrists and ankles held down as though by powerful magnets. As he'd screamed and twisted, Adaora had got up, grabbed her keys, and run out of the house. Thankfully, their Victoria Island home was only minutes from Bar Beach.

She rubbed her swollen cheek. Even on her dark skin, the redness would be visible. She set her jaw, and tried to ignore the two men coming from her right and left as she walked toward the ocean. After what she'd just dealt with, she wasn't about to let any man get in her way. Still, as she got closer, she ventured a glance at the two of them.

She frowned.

The man in the military uniform looked like he'd already seen plenty plenty pepper. He reminded Adaora of a whipped lion. Blood dribbled from his nose, and he wasn't bothering

to wipe it away. And half his face was swollen. Yet he had a hard, unshaken look in his eye. The other man was a tall, dark-skinned scarecrow of a fellow wearing a black-and-white veil. Maybe he was a Muslim. He was scrutinizing the approaching beat-up-looking soldier more than he was her.

Each of them walked in their respective straight lines. Each heading toward each other. Adaora squinted at the man in the veil. What is it about him? she thought as she walked toward the sea. Something. But she didn't slow her gait. And so the three of them met. The tall man was the first to speak. "Excuse—"

"Tell me this is a joke." Adaora interrupted as she realized what it was about the man. "Are . . . are you . . . Can I ask you a . . ."

The tall man, looking deeply annoyed, removed his veil and sighed. "I am," he said, cutting her off. "But don't call me Anthony Dey Craze. I'm just out for a post-concert stroll. Tonight, just call me Edgar."

"Na woa!" she exclaimed, laughing, reaching up to touch her throbbing cheek. "You wore that scarf on your album cover, didn't you?" After what had happened at home, it was surprising and felt good to laugh. "I was supposed to be at your concert tonight!"

At some point, her husband Chris had changed his mind about "letting" her go to the Anthony Dey Craze concert with her best friend Yemi because he'd barred her way when she'd tried to leave. "Since when do I need your permission to do anything, anyway?" she'd said to her husband, taken aback. Then came the slap.

"Please," the bloody military man said, snatching his green beret off his smoothly shaven head and squeezing it in his shaking hands. "Do either of you have a mobile phone? I must call my father. I will pay you well."

Adaora barely registered his words; she was now really looking him over. Up close he looked not only injured but in deep, deep distress. The blood running from his nose glistened in the dim mix of street and moonlight. She took her hand from her burning cheek and reached out to him.

"Hey, buddy," Anthony said, looking at the military man with concern. He'd brought out his mobile phone. "You're bleeding, o! Do you need help? Are you all—"

"No!" he snapped. "I'm not all right!"

Adaora jumped back, unconsciously bringing her fists up.

"Do I LOOK all right?" he shouted. He motioned for Anthony's mobile phone. "I need to make this phone call right now! My fam—"

BOOM!

Anthony dropped his mobile phone as all three of them dropped to the ground, their hands over their heads. Adaora found herself looking from the bleeding military man to Anthony in terror. It was not the type of sound one heard on Bar Beach, or in any part of Lagos. On Bar Beach, the loudest thing was typically some woman shouting at a man or someone's old car backfiring on a nearby road. This booming sound was so deep Adaora could feel it in her chest, and it rattled her teeth. It left cotton in her ears. It was so wide that it seemed to have its own physical weight. Adaora glanced around and saw that the noise pushed everything to the ground. A few feet away, two seagulls dropped from the night sky to the sand, stunned. Something black bounced off Anthony's head and fell beside him.

"Bat?" Adaora asked. Everything was muffled, as if she were speaking underwater.

Anthony looked at it closely. The bat was furry-bodied and beady-eyed with black wings. It wiggled a bit, still alive. He scooped up the poor creature and grabbed Adaora's hand. He nudged the military man's shoulder as he cradled the stunned animal.

"Come on!" he shouted. "That came from the water! We should get away from here!"

But something was happening to the ocean. The waves were roiling irregularly. Each time the waves broke on the beach, they reached farther and farther up the sand. Then a four-foot wave rose up. Adaora was so fascinated that she just stood there staring. Anthony stopped pulling her and pushing the military man. Blood ran into the military man's eyes as he tried to focus his gaze on the darkness of the water. The wave was heading right for them. Fast and quiet as a whisper. It was closer to ten feet tall now. Finally, the three of them turned and ran. The fist of water was faster. Adaora grabbed the military man's hand. Anthony threw the bat to what he hoped was safety, leaped, and grabbed Adaora's legs just as the water fell at them.

PLASH!

The salty water stung Adaora's eyes and pulled at her garments as it sucked her toward the sea. Her hands scrambled at the sand as it collapsed beneath her, the pebbles raking at her skin, the sea sucking at her legs. She could still feel the desperate grasp of the military man's hand and Anthony's arms around her legs. She wasn't alone. In the blackness, she could see some of the lights from the bars and the nearby buildings. They were flickering and growing smaller and smaller.

Bubbles tickled her ears as she tried to twist to the surface. But it was as if the ocean had opened its great maw and swallowed her and the two men. She couldn't breathe. She heard bubbles and the roar and rush of water against her ears. And she could feel the tightness of her laboring lungs and the suction of the water. Aman iman, Adaora weakly thought. The phrase meant "water is life" in the Tuareg language of Tamashek. She'd once worked with a Tuareg man on a diving expedition. "Aman iman," had been his answer when Adaora asked how a man of the Sahara Desert had become an expert scuba diver.

Despite the pain in her lungs now and the swallowing darkness, she smiled. Aman Iman.

The three of them grasped each other. Down, down, down, they went.

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