

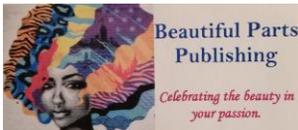


DAUGHTERS OF THE SOIL

Udara Crime Series



Youkay Ohanenye



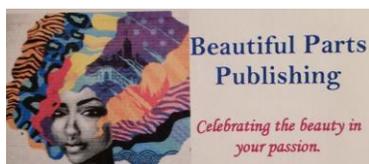
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Sample Chapter

Chapter 1 David Summons Goliath

“Get the police!”

David takes off like a sneeze. The spindles that serve as his legs barely support his frail frame. His open and torn shirt billows like a diamond kite ripped into by a merciless wind. Air whizzes by his street-trained ears. He forgets to fear for his bones that might splinter and defeat this most unappointed mission of his young life. David has raced to many missions for family and neighbors, but he has never run to fetch the police.

The adults looking at the body refused to disentangle themselves in order to engage in that civic duty. Among them was the woman whose plaintive voice slashed the morning air. It befalls seven-year-old David, the only child brazen enough to wind his curiosity between previously-respected adult legs and peek into the cause. His face, long and lean, saves him from being a true replica of the famous stick person children draw for want of artistic skill. Plug in eyes too big for his face, an almost flat bridge connecting flaring nostrils, and two fixed-width semi-circles that meet to form a mouth, and David would be plastered on paper as a stick person, save for the long face.

In response to the woman’s repeated complaints, and in his own merited preoccupation, David forgets his malnutrition-damaged ribs which now expose themselves without shame. He zips through shocked and pitying looks, street vendors perplexed to see a stick moving with incredible firmness of purpose. He meanders through crowded and desperate junctions where ill-tempered workers fight each other not only to open doors, but to be

the one who claims the last seat inside the taxi with triumphant smirks. David dodges speeding vehicles, the ones lucky enough to pull back or to pull out their necks from the unceasing traffic bottlenecks. The confluence of different colors of taxis: yellow, red, black, green, cream, tan, and other hues, confound him. It appears to him that the colors of the taxis contradict what he sees on the television of far flung lands where taxis have only one color. This observation confounds him every morning as he runs errands for his mother and for any other relative who needs his help. He knows New York has only one color, deep yellow, but where New York is, David has no bearing of it.

The electronic stores are very early risers and are generous with their television shows, and as David carries out his chore in a mindless sort of way, he cannot but be bewitched by the images on the television screens. Now he fights to keep moving toward the destination. His curious eyes scan the open space and settle on the television screen that brings him to a standstill. Sitting with confidence outside the entrance of an electronic store is the biggest television David has ever seen. It is as big as his bedroom. It must be ten times his size if he were to place his deficient self within its enormous size. David wonders who could afford to buy such a thing. No numbers come to his intellect to equate what the owner of the store would demand for such a gigantic object. His parents do not own a television. Such a luxury would never touch him.

David's head moves in an unnatural way to the façade of the television. Something on the surface makes him want to cry, to run for a different reason this time, to run and hide. He freezes. The scene parading itself on the screen seems eerily familiar. He recognizes several objects in his immediate environment. His head doubles in fear, and he wonders

how what he is seeing could be possible. The screen drags him to it, and he zooms in on the images. He recognizes himself and tears of fear sting his eyeballs but do not create enough momentum to cascade. Fear holds him on the spot; the screen makes him feel spied on, helpless, and he needs someone to help him understand what he is doing on television. No one invited or asked him to enter the television. He did not even know if the thing has a door, and he is not celebrated like the feelings he imagined those who went there felt or should feel, wherever there is. They must be celebrated. He is watching himself. His right hand waves without his approval, and the image waves back. His eyes release tears again. He is unsure why fear always bring him tears.

He steps backwards gingerly and with dread uncertain of his own body, his own image, still mesmerized by the colossal television. His mind is at war between leaving the presence of the oracular television and trying to think through the course he is supposed to take. He must hustle through the whirlwind of morning frenzy. His barraged mind wants to turn his body around as if in sequence, but his body does not obey. What his mind failed to do, the gripping smell of frying *akara* does and delivers the command that forces him to recollect his purpose. The akara turns his body in slow-motion, side by side, frame by frame, toward it, the akara, more powerful than the television. He salivates as his mind brings the golden-brown bean balls to him. He would do anything for just one, two. No one ever eats just one akara, not in his entire life has he seen or heard of such a thing.

“Moi-moi!” A little boy’s desperation carries through to David and forces him to turn his head. David knows that desperation, the urgency to get rid of food before it cools and

is rejected by the mass en route to work or school. The bean pudding fails to drag David forward, but a lie does. He searches the milieu for the audacious person.

“Bay-read! Come and get your hot bay-read.” A small boy a little older chants the desire to get rid of loaves of bread before they mold. David does not smell the bread, which makes him conclude that the seller is lying. Hot bread, lie-lie. Besides, hot bread would sear the plastic used to house it. Hot bread, lie-lie, he fumes again.

He turns away from the boy to encounter workers and students who fend off big and little hands grasping for them like those in inferno. Adult and childlike tentacles claw in determined efforts to sell the wares before they get cold or before they rot. Workers and students grasp for doors of vehicles, and when they are lucky to rush in, they are in a daze.

Bam!

Duum!

Fam!

Yank!

Vroom!

Beep-beep!

“Get out!”

“Commot!”

Bam!

Duum!

Fam!

Yank!

Vroom!

Beep-beep!

“I touched the door first!”

The sounds of doors yanked and slammed provide a continuous musical stream. Intermittent honking adds additional cacophony to the production. The kaleidoscope of rushing, hurrying, skipping images accompany the screaming uproar and the frustrated mass racing for taxis. Those lucky to glimpse a familiar car or face run with wide and grateful strides to escape Babel and accept free rides.

“Chin-chin! No too hard and no too soft. Ju-u-s-’ right!” The euphonic voice clashes with the racket around it.

“Iced cold water! Come and get iced cold water to wash down food!”

“Groundnut! Hot and delicious groundnut. Fresh, fresh!”

“Hot a-kamu! I go gi’ you the plastic bowl and spoon for free!”

And on goes the cry to get rid of food, and David’s stomach growls. He places a hand over it as if to shut it up. David realizes that any of those children hard-pressed to sell morning provisions could have been him, but his mother preferred to be the one chanting her wares. All he does is run errands. He recalls himself to his clamorous environ and the haste to clear it and continue with his mission, but the environment is not finished with him. Those who ate before leaving home fling grasping hands away from their bodies or their purse. Those who left home without breakfast snatch the food, throw the money at vendors, and dash for the taxis. Others ride on starved and pray that no one hears the drumming stomachs where hunger rumbles like street fighters.

Fried food makes David's mouth water, and this morning's pervasive aroma calls his attention to the gravity of his hunger and its perpetual situation. He realizes that he is in a vicious cycle, imprisoned by food. The only money in his pants' pocket belongs to his mother, and as starved as he is, he would not dare spend one kobo of it, not that there is anything priced at one kobo, not even ten. He searches for the woman frying the akara on the screen before he zooms in on her with his eye-camera. "There she is," he says aloud, glad to be rid of the television's hold over his senses and the residue of anger against the lying bread seller. He would have volunteered his services and gone to run trips for the fryer of the bean balls. One look at his emaciated form, and the woman would have given him two or three balls even before he goes on the journey on her behalf.

"Good morning, Ma!" He throws the salutation over his head with gentleness and waves in the slow motion that reverence requires. David's hope is that the woman will recognize him in the future. The woman is surprised by the speed, respect, and boniness of her greeter.

"Good morning, my son! Greet your mother for me." The hand that holds the armor of long and hard metal with a round metal mesh at its base, that hand is surprised and is suspended over the steam of popping and raging hot oil. The body is twisted and only catches a receding back. Her voice that reaches David is tinged with honey. Surely, a good woman has raised a boy who, despite being in a huge hurry, waves and calls out that most perfect daybreak greeting.

"Yes, Ma!" But the wind swallows his response.

David sighs audibly, and his growling stomach replies with a rumble. His eyes half-long to return to the television to watch the crown, to identify each motion, each gesture, each hue, and each human, but he realizes that they would be watching him. His legs convince him to try and pick up pace. At first his mind forces his legs into obedience. With determination, the rest of him picks up speed and soon, he is flying with his old phantom swiftness. *The police*, his mind accuses. He hurries and allows nothing to distract him anymore. People shout at him for coming too close, for jumping over their wares, and for breaking mores. Still, he will neither pause nor rest. Instead, he waves hasty apologies above his head to the incensed: drivers who shout at him through their car horns for his reckless meandering and vendors who fear that he may have introduced sand into their food items.

David returns to himself slowly. With immense reluctance, he journeys fast. He feels as if he is betraying himself for re-entering into his previous jolly mind-frame. He allows a ball of warmth to glow and fans it into a glimmer of joyous heat, and it spreads. He is happy and allows gratitude to emerge. He laughs as hands reach out to grab him. He zips through cracks between bodies, elated that no one has been able to grab him and raise his weightless figure off the tarmac and shake caution and self-preservation into him. The sun rises and shines in his eyes. His mother always says he delivers the sun to her with his smile.

His nose opens wide again. Fried plantain! The very soft and very ripe kind. What he would give to get it while it is piping hot, dance the hot-food dance of moving from one leg to another while transferring the food from one hand to another and taking stolen bites inside his refrigerator of a mouth. His mouth could withstand any extreme temperature,

but never his palms. For the love of plantain, his empty mouth collects saliva and forces it down. That desire does not last long. His nose picks up a different overwhelming fragrance of risen and baking wheat dough which would turn into the most delicious bread he ever tasted. If he likes over-ripe plantain, he loves bread!

David accuses the small factory bread maker of wickedness, of extreme wickedness. The bread seems to know that David never has money and is always hungry. The bread sends its gust of perfected aroma to waft stronger and stronger the most sanity-depriving perfume. The smell of baking or fresh baked bread coming at his defenseless stomach almost knocks David off his feet. The impact is that forceful, and he misses a step and almost falls. Invariably, he continues his journey. His agile and fragile frame is a smear to most people. He is gone before they realize that a human, a living thing, has passed them leaving only the blur of a flapping, faded, and torn shirt, a shirt the wind wants to rip into more shreds. His shirt's many tears and holes bless him with the caress of cool air.

He scales two round and tough-looking raffia baskets containing smoked fish at the street corner as he bends his body to enter the next street. The woman's restless eyes follow every motion. David's body flashes like a distortion. The woman's head snaps a second afterwards at a ninety-degree angle. The snap of her hand mirrors her regret of missing David's thin body.

"Who raised you? God punish your mother! I had better not chew sand when I eat my fish. You piece of wood! Who raised you?"

Again, David waves above his head, truly mortified and angry at himself for giving another woman the right to insult his mother. He had not seen the content of the baskets

until his body was in full motion above the fish. His body almost paused in mid-air as his mouth formed an apology. It is wrong, dead wrong, to jump over uncovered food.

He throws a backward glance at the woman.

“Ndo!” he apologizes and continues his mission. His mind casts another apology to his mother who is still watching out and waiting for the list of morning necessities she had given David money to run and fetch before she leaves for her own stall to get rid of her wares. Run and fetch used to work for his mother, but today, a different running and fetching interferes with his mother’s wish. He apologizes again to his mother for his errant ways and for the insult from the fish-woman.

He arrives at the police station unscathed. The exertion doubles him over in front of the door frame. Despite the urgency of his purpose, David gives in to wheezes as he seeks to catch his breath and to collect the remnants of dignity his shirt allows. Short, fast breaths whiz through his street-smart nostrils as he brushes aside a yearning for ice-cold water. His tongue, the Sahara, begs for an oasis, but he pushes that longing aside. He plants his coarse right palm on the sandpaper-like wall at the entrance. The bare, unplastered gray façade of the outside wall is of the same abrasive texture as his palms, matching the coarseness of his childhood. He still bends, still whizzes, and still wishes for that frozen water. He loves how fast his mouth melts ice, turns it back into water faster than flames from the firewood. He loves the sound his mouth makes as it tries to catch up with the melting water. He is fascinated by the manly gulps his throat makes, something his father admires.

Smearing his sweat on the rough-cut wall, David adds his own secretion to the edifice of unintentional graffiti where those who were arrested, injured, or those had any reason to smear the wall, left evidence of their own laboring and of their own injury. Holding on to the façade, David gathers pride about him with his free left hand and passes the only remaining and cracked button through its widened hole. The ill-fitting shirt obeys as best it could and affords him an ounce of future fame.

“Sir, you must come,” says the seven-year-old child with the adequate timbre of respect and with the right stain of urgency. He schools his face and body to adopt the precise amount of calmed affectation. The officer searches the air for the source of the sound. Imagining that it all must have been illusory, he goes back to his task.

A piece of bare lumber serves as a barrier between the officer and David, but David had seen the man seated behind a desk. Because his body does not have the privilege of sound, David walks in without noise and without breathing hard having left both outside. His feet are bare. He fits precisely under the extended and hollow part of the counter.

Recognizing his unintended role in the unplanned hide-and-seek game, David glides without effort under the counter. His swift emergence results in the officer feeling confronted.

“Where the bloody hell did you come from?”

The cuss words fall off David who has heard worse from his own father, but he blinks at the blaze in the eyes and the punch in the anger-laced voice.

“Who sent you?” The officer demands with an air of righteous displeasure.

“No one. I came by myself,” replies the justified messenger with just the right pinch of pride in his accomplishment. He does not want to show too much pride, for he would be considered insolent, conceited, and disrespectful. The officer inspects the ill-dressed boy and files him away as a vagrant.

“All right, run along now.” When David fails to run along but stands there looking unabused, unabashed, and respectful still, the officer exchanges anger for judgment. “Where is your mother? She needs to take better care of you and keep a better eye on you instead of leaving you to run around Udia like an urchin.”

“Sir, you must come,” the child persists with true respectful insistence. He knew he would not be believed when he set out to get the police, but the awareness failed to discourage him. He knew he was lacking good manners at that moment by insisting. Persistence from a child is disrespect from a child, a cardinal sin, but David is beside himself with his own righteous, subdued anger at not being believed.

The crick in his neck grew from being thrown all the way back to gaze at this giant of a man. The discomfort spreads to his shoulders. The officer has risen and now stands in an intimidating posture of military might. Looking at the officer, David imagines himself looking straight into the sky and feeling more crick.

“What people?”

“The people who are looking at the man.”

Disbelief hangs in the air like dirty laundry on a clothesline for all to see and smell. The police officer repeats the question a third time as if to try David's pint-size patience but more to hear himself speak than for any other impact. His body plants firmly in the same space.

"The people who are looking at the man who is floating on the river. Come quickly, please, sir. The man is dead, sir, dead!"

With the last word resounding as the final nail struck into the dead man's coffin, the boy puts his dry hand into the bigger hand of the police officer as if his little strength is mighty enough to pull and drag the taller man to the crime scene. Even the original David was not that small in stature when he faced Goliath.