

MINDSCAPE

a novel by

Andrea Hairston



Seattle

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*Dedicated to my mother,
Ruth T. Hairston (1923-2005),
who believed in me before I began.*

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BOOK 1

When it comes time to die, be not like those whose hearts are filled with the fear of death, so when their time comes they weep and pray for a little more time to live their lives over again in a different way. Sing your death song, and die like a hero going home.

Tecumseh

The Barrier Age

New Years Day, Barrier Year 50

We set our calendars by the Barrier, counting the hours, days, and years from the moment it engulfed our planet in its mystery. On this day of days half a century ago, astronauts returning from beyond the Asteroid Belt and the wonders of Mars reported a blood red cloud of unknown material overwhelming Earth. As the captain and crew encountered instrument malfunction, disappearing probes, and a chunk of spacetime wiped from the sky, the signal died. These last astronauts and their marvelous ships vanished from the radar screen. On the surface eyewitnesses all across the planet said the Barrier erupted out of nothing, out of nowhere. Some said it boiled up from the bowels of the Earth. Fire rainbows, tentacles of diamond dust...spreading faster than thoughts or radio signals, breaking apart land and sea, night and day, yesterday and every other tomorrow.

Younger generations take the Barrier invasion, the Earth sliced into isolated, warring Zones, for granted. A mundane, boring "given," yet the Barrier irrevocably altered our histories and identities. Who remembers the taste of wheat, the view from the moon, jetting to Nairobi, Los Angeles, Beijing, or anywhere? The twenty-first century is a distant dream, an object of nostalgic worship. Paradise Lost. Many people insist the Barrier humbled humanity, made us detainees where once we were masters. The inhabited Zones—New Ouagadougou, Los Santos, Paradigma—are mere refugee camps, the Barrier a prison wall. Others believe that the gods of our ancestors sent the Barrier as a blessing to the chosen and a curse for the damned. All agree that it cleaved reality with an impenetrable spume of lethal substance—as yet uncategorized. Those who venture too close to the Barrier wall are swallowed up, never to be heard of again, like the last astronauts. Travel between Zones is limited to a handful of corridors spontaneously gen-

erated at seasonal intervals. The Barrier offers no corridors to the stars or to the uninhabited Wilderness lands.

Every attempt to probe, codify, or measure the Barrier yields contradictory data. It resists our senses and instruments. The outcome of an experiment depends most on who the experimenters are and what they desire. Although we perceive the Barrier, it doesn't always seem to be there. Continually coming and going—from our dimension to another? No one has isolated a sample of this epi-dimensional, phaseshifting singularity for controlled study. Yet.

The Barrier has proven to be more than physics and chemistry. It does not act like a field of forces, a well-behaved crystal, or even a cagey virus infecting us with its packet of instructions. The Barrier is a self-generating network of enormous complexity and unprecedented creativity. It regenerates and evolves, sustaining itself, yet changing. A life form? Life is by nature creative, drawn to novelty, driven by challenge, grounded in history. Learning as it evolves, life calls to life. Is Earth to be consumed, rearranged, and forgotten in the pattern of some other being? Incorporated in a new web of life? Has the Barrier come to us as parasite or partner? Perhaps these are the wrong questions, grounded in Earth's natural history. Perhaps this phenomenon will defy humanity to create a new language, a new syntax of life. What consciousness might emerge from an epi-dimensional body? And who will be the *Vermittler*, the go-betweens, shepherding us into the future?

If I have risked the world but lost, as Femi Xa Olunde argues, and these are indeed the *Final Lessons*, forgive me. Remember, however, *Ijala'gun Molu*... If we risk nothing, we gain nothing.

—Vera Xa Lalafia, *Healer Cosmology, The Final Lessons*

1: Tombouctou Observatory and Galactic Library
Outskirts of Sagan City, Paradigma
(March 20, New Years Day, Barrier Year 111)

Old age ain't for sissies.

Celestina couldn't remember who used to say that, all the time.
I'm telling you, it's stand-up tragedy, so don't laugh. You'll see.

Was it Vera Xa Lalafia, her first teacher? Why couldn't she remember? Didn't she remember several lifetimes? A very old woman, Celestina remembered before the Barrier even, before the world had been chopped into petty little Zones. When humanity covered the planet, lush and vibrant, coming and going as they pleased, wrecking havoc in global style, racing out to the stars...

How could she remember before the Barrier, she was just a baby, not even born. It was Vera who'd lived in the other time. And Vera had gone on to dance with the ancestors, leaving Celestina to sort out this Interzonal Treaty fiasco with no clear vision. If it were Vera's Treaty about to be ratified, she wouldn't hide from the festivities in an empty planetarium watching ancient Entertainment all night. She wouldn't cringe at random adulation, run from power trips, or miss a second of pomp and ceremony. And Vera would never have said *old age ain't for sissies*. Yes, Robin said it to Thandiwe.

Stand-up tragedy. A gaggle of voices in Celestina's head screamed at her like achy joints every time she tried to make a move. She stuffed popcorn in her mouth and focused on the planetarium's giant Electrosoft screen. Nothing like old-time movies to distract you from personal crises or global insanity. Even orthodox shamen would concede that. Celestina refused to fight herself over *Do The Right Thing*, *Shawshank Redemption*, *Mississippi Masala*, *A Beautiful Mind*, or Chaplin's *Great Dictator*... But sooner or later the credits rolled, they called your name, bellowed praisesongs, and reality smacked you in the face.

“We apologize for the delay, ladies and gentlemen.” A priority broadcast ghosted across the planetarium screen, interrupting *The Fugitive* upload.

“*Schade.*” Celestina cursed in old German. She scanned the vast auditorium for invaders. Not much longer to hide; they’d be coming for her soon.

A blurry image came into focus: Ray Valero, freedom fighter, Entertainment superstar, tall, dark, and handsome devil, beloved by all. “The architect of the Interzonal Peace Accord, Celestina Xa Irawo, will be the final delegate today to sign the Treaty into law. Rumor buster: the great Lady ditched the party scene last night to conjure a few spirits and check in with eternity. In deep trance, shamen get fuzzy on time.”

“Time’s not my problem.” Celestina stumbled out of her back row seat, feet in one body, pounding heart in another, and fell against darkened fiberplastic windows.

“Humanity’s staging a comeback!” Ray continued in close-up. Perfect teeth flashed. Celestina could see a direct line from Cary Grant and Denzel Washington to Ray Valero. *And* he had the voice of James Earl Jones! “We’re a reunited world, about to inaugurate peace. Can’t rush this gig. History in the making.” Applause and cheers, the crowd was in his hip pocket. “Before signing, Madame Xa Irawo will follow New Ouagadougou custom and pour libation to the brave souls who died to make today a reality. Give us reformed thugs a little style.”

Celestina laughed out of both sides of her mouth.

The Barrier flared outside the window, amplifying the voices in her head. Celestina swallowed her laughter and squinted. The Barrier looked as it did when she was a child—a storm of diamond dust stretching across the horizon, blotting out half the sky. Barrier wisps caught fading sunlight and turned it silver, occasionally twisting out a rainbow sign. The Barrier hadn’t put on this particular show in eighty, ninety years. Was it in honor of the Treaty?

“Do you think the Barrier cares what we do?” She covered her mouth.

How had she come to this? In none of her incarnations had Celestina ever wanted an ordinary life: meet a hunk, drop some babies, fight over pennies, struggle to raise the kids up right, weep when they dashed off into *their* future, rock on the porch in sunset smog, tell big fat lies, serve sausage and *Kuchen* to the grandkids, and flirt with the young things who happened by. Truth be told, she had contempt for normal life. She'd always wanted to do something grand and glorious!

"Madame Xa Irawo will sign away a hundred years of war," Ray said. "No more Extras dying in snuff takes. No more corridor coups or organ markets. This is the glorious day we fought and died for."

What did Ray know about it?

Today was the worst day of Celestina's hundred-plus adventure years. Worse than Femi slashing her skull, driving her to insanity; worse than betraying and poisoning herself; worse than holy war, hunting down innocence to save the race. Celestina had driven away all the daughters of her spirit. She had no one to sing her song, carry her story into forever.

Could she trust Ray or any of them with the future?

A stampede of footsteps echoed in the hallways around the planetarium. They'd found her hiding place. She sank down in the comfort chair. Twenty doors into the planetarium rattled and shook but did not open.

The week of celebration leading up to the Treaty signing had been a horror show. She couldn't stand the naïve, trusting looks, feigned or sincere, from politicians and Zone glitterati who had committed almost as many crimes against humanity as she had. Last night, in desperation, Celestina had begged a cameraman for sanctuary—Aaron Dunkelbrot, a former Extra, now a bio-corder expert, what the Treaty was all about.

"Don't sweat this bullshit." He stashed her in the planetarium with his ancient Entertainment stockpile. "A million and half hours of escape," he bragged, honored to accommodate her. "I feel you."

How could this Aaron “feel” her, know what she’d done, know who she really was? Aaron, Ray, and everybody gathered at Tombouctou for history-in-the-making expected her to glide like an angel through thunderous applause, to pass through hypocrisy like a *Vermittler*, sculpting a corridor through the Barrier unscathed. She was their hero, personal savior, God’s next of kin. Her smile was a benediction; her words sacred texts; Saint Celestina, she’d put an end to war.

Not one of them suspected her of betrayal or genocide.

Lights flooded the planetarium and Aaron Dunkelbrot stuck his dimpled cheeks, chiseled chin, and blue-green-algae eyes through the emergency exit. He had the same shadow of beard as yesterday on baby-faced, flawless skin. Gene art, high-end—a renegade scientist had played around with genetic code to give him killer looks.

How can you make a treaty with these people?

“You ready?” Aaron shook her shoulder. “Gotta move.” His flat, tense English marked him as a Los Santos native.

“Of course I’m not ready.” Celestina grabbed her medicine bag, heavy with several lifetimes of wisdom.

“Shall I carry that for you?” Aaron asked with old-movie charm.

“No!” She clutched it to her chest.

Aaron slipped an arm around her waist and guided her out the emergency exit, through the backstage labyrinth to the Great Hall of Images, where humanity had once communed with the stars. She froze in the entranceway.

“Breathe,” he commanded.

“I have a story for you.” She took a breath. “When you become a director.”

Aaron laughed. “In your dreams.”

“Nobody’s been able to tell my story yet.”

“Outlaw Entertainment? Maybe after tonight, after the Treaty, they won’t be banning stories, and I’ll be able to shoot whatever Entertainment I...”

“Don’t count on it.” She gripped his arm to the bone. “I can’t go out there.”

“Bringing all the Zones together, that was the hard part. The grandstanding and signing is a piece of cake. ”

“Promise me to tell the whole story.”

Aaron opened his mouth but did not speak.

“I don’t want to be a spirit without a future.” Celestina pressed her fingers into Aaron’s skull and brought his face close to hers. “You must promise.”

Aaron struggled a moment then rasped, “It’s a deal.”

He thrust Celestina into the Hall. She forced a smile for the ring of bio-corders that transmitted her quicksilver eyes and craggy brown cheekbones to viewers in every Zone of the inhabited world. The synth-marble floor sent shivers from her bare toes to teeth. Ants in her pockets stung her thighs, spreading itchy heat.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Ray shouted. “The First Lady of Peace!” He dropped to one knee and kissed her hand.

Celestina had no time to chastise Ray’s silliness. VIPs from Los Santos, Paradigma, and New Ouagadougou cried, laughed, and sung her name. They crushed the guards against the stage, stretching out hands stained with blood and tears. Celestina pulled a flask from her medicine bag and poured libation. The wine stained her robes and feet and pooled like blood on the non-porous surface.

“To all who died for this peace,” she said. “Bless them, bless us.”

“Bless you!” someone shouted from the back.

Ten feet in front of Celestina on a transparent fiberplastic table, a paper document generated especially for the ceremony curled in the moist air. Delegates from every Zone had signed in ink as well as electrons. An aide thrust a fountain pen and a glass stylus into Celestina’s twitching fingers. Her feet cramped; her hands knotted up. She couldn’t move. The glass stylus slipped from her fingers and rolled across the stage.

Elleni Xa Celest, her *Geistestochter*, snatched the device before it crashed into the monitors. Her braids and skin glistened in the shadows. “Almost home,” she murmured and pressed the stylus into Celestina’s gnarled hands. They had not spoken to each other in six years.

“You came,” Celestina whispered, tears blurring her vision.

“Last night,” Elleni said.

She clutched her spirit daughter. “You came.” One of Elleni’s braids snaked around Celestina’s wrist, spitting yellow discharge. Celestina buried her face in her daughter’s hissing hair.

Sidi Xa Aiyé stood beside them, pressing palms together in a gesture of respect.

“You too?” Celestina kissed Sidi’s feathery fingers.

“How could we miss your day of days?” Sidi said, a delicious smile on her full lips.

Of her daughters only Mahalia Selasie was absent.

“Will you hold this?” Celestina offered them her medicine bag.

Elleni and Sidi exchanged electric glances. Celestina felt her soul wilt.

“While you sign?” Elleni spoke first. “I’d be honored.” She clasped the bag to her heart.

Perhaps Celestina wasn’t a spirit without a future after all.

“Are we ready yet?” Aaron beckoned to them from behind a bio-corder.

Celestina allowed Elleni and Sidi to walk her out of the shadows and up to the Treaty table. She glanced at the paper beneath her hands. In a few thousand words, they had written down their best selves. Her story was coming to an end. The hard work of the Treaty would be done by Elleni, Sidi, Aaron, Ray, and people in every Zone.

“*Aboru, Aboye, Aboṣiṣe.* May what we offer carry, be accepted, may what we offer bring about change.” The old Yoruba words relaxed her knotted hands. Celestina leaned forward and with sweeping gestures, signed the Treaty. “Our time is no worse or no better than other times. We are not inevitable. We didn’t have to happen this way. There are many threads, many Earths.” She waved the Treaty up to the stars then down to the ground. “We live just one of the stories, one fine line in a universe of possibilities. It is up to us to make our story beautiful.”

The live audience exploded with applause, which Celestina tasted more than heard, spicy, ginger-beer applause, spraying her sinuses clear and sweet, bubbling down her throat, boiling in her belly, hot and potent. “Thank you, I am nothing...” The blight on her soul faded in her daughters’ burning eyes and the crowd’s stomping feet. She felt like another self—the one they imagined her to be. “You are the future. I see tomorrow in your faces.”

“Bless you!” Someone yelled from the front now.

She recognized his torn face and battered hands: Piotr Osama, an Extra she’d brought back from the edge of death. His skin was silver, and he wore the white robes and moss headdress of the Ghost Dancer cult. These born-again Sioux were treaty-shy. They refused to sign away their sovereignty and were boycotting the convention. Piotr aimed a sham bio-corder at Entertainment royalty or perhaps at Paradigma’s Prime Minister. Or maybe at the gestapo security.

Celestina closed her eyes, wishing to see no more, eager to die herself—*Ebo Eje*, a blood sacrifice for peace and redemption. She was, however, not eager for more killing. Still clutching the Treaty, she walked into the line of fire.

“*Aje...*” So be it...

Piotr’s spray of bullets ripped through the paper and slammed into Celestina’s chest. Her blood gushed onto the Treaty.