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# NALO HOPKINSON

## BROWN GIRL IN THE RING



"Excellent...  
a bright, original  
mix of future urban  
decay and West  
Indian magic...  
strongly rooted in  
character and place."  
—*Sunday Denver Post*

# BROWN GIRL IN THE RING

**NALO  
HOPKINSON**



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*Dedicated to my father, Slade Hopkinson.  
Daddy, thanks for passing on the tools of the  
trade to me.*

## PROLOGUE

*Give the Devil a child for dinner,  
One, two, three little children!*

—Derek Walcott, *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*

As soon as he entered the room, Baines blurted out, “We want you to find us a viable human heart, fast.”

“Bloodfire!” Rudy cursed, surprised. “Is what you a-say?” He stared at the scared-looking man from the Angel of Mercy transplant hospital up by the Burn. Douglas Baines had obviously never ventured into Rudy’s neighbourhood before. The pudgy man had shown up in a cheap, off-the-rack bulletproof that dragged along the floor, his barrel chest straining at its buttons. He looked foolish, and he looked like he knew it.

Rudy watched Baines give Melba the bulletproof. Underneath it he was wearing a poorly made jacket and a cheap white shirt. Rudy picked at a nonexistent bit of fluff on the sleeve of his own tailor-fitted wool suit. His ostentatious lack of protection against attack carried its own message. He was guarded in other ways. “Sit down, man.” With his chin, Rudy indicated the hard plastic chair on the other side of his desk. His own chair was a plush upholstered leather, the colour of mahogany.

Baines sat, fiddling nervously with the case of his palm-book. “We need a heart,” he repeated. “For, ah, an experiment. We’re hoping that your people can help us locate one.”

Something didn’t sound quite right to Rudy. “And how come oonuh nah use a swine heart? Ain’t is that you have all them pig farms for?”

“Yes, well, of course the Porcine Organ Harvest Program has revolutionized human transplant technology....”

*Eh-heh. He talking all official. The way he using all them ten-dollar words, this one go be big.* Rudy leaned his elbows on his desk and steepled his fingers, making the gold ring on his thumb flash. “I hearing you.”

“Well, ah, I’m afraid that porcine material just won’t do in this case. Ethics, you know?”

As he heard that spluttered word “ethics,” Rudy was suddenly sure that he knew what this was all about. The man was spouting someone else’s party line. Rudy smiled triumphantly at Baines. “Is Uttley, ain’t? Oonuh need a heart transplant for she, and she nah let you put no trenton in she body?”

“Trenton?”

“Pig.”

Baines looked troubled, then gave a resigned shrug and said, “Fuck, I hate this. I just want to do my job, you know?”

Rudy gazed calmly at the man. As he expected, his silence seemed to fluster Baines even more. Baines babbled, “This is all on the q.t., you understand?”

“Mmm.”

“Well, yeah, it’s Premier Uttley all right. She’s demanded a human donor. Says the porcine organ farms are immoral. You know the line: human organ transplant should be about people helping people, not about preying on helpless creatures, yadda, yadda, yadda. Says she’s confident that if she’s meant to have a new heart, it’ll come from the human population. Fat chance, when almost no one in the world runs human volunteer donor programs any more. But her position is pulling in the voter support. Polls are tipping in her favour since she started up this ‘God’s creatures’ thing. She might actually get voted back in next year.” Baines pursed his lips, shook his head. “And it looks like she’s not leaving a lot to chance, either.” More softly he said, “Somebody’s quietly going to a lot of trouble to have the hospitals procure a human heart for her. It might bring Angel of Mercy good business if we’re the ones to pull it off. It could put us back on the map.”

Rudy put on his bored face. “And what that have to do with we? Posse ain’t business with politics. Is we a-rule things here now.” It was true. Government had abandoned the city core of Metropolitan Toronto, and that was fine with Rudy.



Imagine a cartwheel half-mired in muddy water, its hub just clearing the surface. The spokes are the satellite cities that form Metropolitan Toronto: Etobicoke and York to the west; North York in the north; Scarborough and East York to the east. The Toronto city core is the hub. The mud itself is vast Lake Ontario, which cuts Toronto off at its southern border. In fact, when water-rich Toronto was founded, it was nicknamed Muddy York, evoking the condition of its unpaved streets in springtime. Now imagine the hub of that wheel as being rusted through and through. When Toronto's economic base collapsed, investors, commerce, and government withdrew into the suburb cities, leaving the rotten core to decay. Those who stayed were the ones who couldn't or wouldn't leave. The street people. The poor people. The ones who didn't see the writing on the wall, or who were too stubborn to give up their homes. Or who saw the decline of authority as an opportunity. As the police force left, it sparked large-scale chaos in the city core: the Riots. The satellite cities quickly raised roadblocks at their borders to keep Toronto out. The only unguarded exit from the city core was now over water, by boat or prop plane from the Toronto Island mini-airport to the American side of Niagara Falls. In the twelve years since the Riots, repeated efforts to reclaim and rebuild the core were failing: fear of vandalism and violence was keeping 'burb people out. Rudy ruled with his posse now, and he couldn't have cared less about Premier Uttley's reelection platform.



"We'll pay for the assistance." Baines named a figure.

Rudy was immediately interested, but he didn't reply for a moment. He pretended to be considering. Let the hospital's procurement officer sweat it out a little more.

Baines stammered, "I, um, I mean, it's not like it's illegal or anything. No laws about human organ donation on the books any more, right? No need, when you can just phone up the farm and order a liver, size three, tailored to fit."

"Mmm."

“This is a tough city, right? You people see a lot of terminal injuries?”  
*Seen*, Rudy agreed wordlessly. *Half the time, is we cause them.* That amused him. Baines was just coming directly to the source.

“We’re only asking that you call us when that happens,” Baines continued. “We’ll do the rest. Head wounds are the best. Don’t want too much trauma to the chest cavity. If any one of them has a heart that’s compatible for the Premier, we’ll pay you a bonus.”

*No. That nah go work, just having them come and pick it up easy so. Nah go push the price high enough.* Rudy took his time thinking it through, figuring out all the angles.

Baines tensely tapped ash from his cigarette into the ashtray on Rudy’s desk.

“Melba,” Rudy said softly to the haggard, blank-eyed woman who had been dusting around the office, “wipe out the ashtray.”

Moving slowly, eyes irising in and out of focus, Melba took the ashtray from under Baines’s hands, wiped it clean with her dustcloth, and stood holding it, staring into its empty bowl.

“Thank you,” Baines said, smiling nervously at her. She didn’t respond.

“Put it back on the table now,” Rudy instructed her. She obeyed. She was getting too thin. He’d have to tell the boys to remind her to eat more often.

“Keep on dusting, Melba.”

Melba walked woodenly over to a marble coffee table she’d already cleaned three times and resumed meticulously wiping her dustcloth over and over its surface in slow circles. Baines gulped. Rudy smiled at that. The man couldn’t even begin to suspect what he was dealing with. All right. He knew how this was going to go. He said to Baines, “Once my boys find the body, oonuh have to reach fast, right? Before the person heart stop beating?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“And what if is in one of them streets that full up of garbage, or oonuh get swarmed by a kid gang? Any delay and you go lose your donor.”

“Oh. You might be right.” Baines frowned at him worriedly. “This is too important to take a chance.”

“Well, Mister B., I think today is oonuh lucky day. We have just the fella to set the donor up right for you, keep the heart beating till you reach.”

“You do? Who? It needs someone with the right training to put the body on ice.”

“Let me just say, an ex-medical professional. A nurse.” Rudy was pleased that he’d thought of this. Tony was going to be useful to him after all. “The man know his business,” he said unctuously. “Him was a good worker. Just his misfortune that he couldn’t resist the temptation of buff, you know? His employers do right to let him go. He does do one little job for us now, helping out, you know? While he tries to kick the habit.”

“Well, maybe... yeah, I guess he could do it. We could supply him with a call button that would bring an ambulance on the double. Yeah, that’d work. He could certainly test the blood type.” Baines continued to mutter to himself, ticking items off on his fingers. “And we could give him the fortified Ringer’s Lactate, laser pen to seal off any bleeders, portable CP bypass machine...”

“Good. I’m glad you agree. For me think say we could help Oonuh.”

“Excellent. Let me—”

“But all like how we’re taking such a risk, we want you to increase that bonus figure, *seen*? Say, another ten percent?”

Baines sighed. “Done.”

So easy! Briefly Rudy wondered if he should have held out for more. Well, that’s how dealing went. Some days you wouldn’t win as much as others.

“Okay,” Baines said, looking as though he had a bad taste in his mouth, “don’t forget, we only want the flatliners that are in pretty good condition. Healthy, well, before they died, that is; not too much deep tissue trauma. And tell your man we’re particularly interested in anyone who’s very small framed and has blood type AB positive.”

“Somebody small? Oonuh could use a child? Like a youth, say?”

“Teen or preteen? Well, yes, we could, come to that. None of the street kids, though. Most of them have had buff-addicted mothers.”

Pity. No one would have noticed a few more of the rats going missing.

Baines opened up his palmbook and tapped at the keys. “I’m requisitioning the equipment you people will need.” He scribbled on a business card, swiped the card through the slot in his palmbook, then gave it to Rudy. “Tell your man to bring this when he comes over to the hospital to

pick up the equipment. Today, mind. Before four.” Then he stood, shook Rudy’s hand as though he were palping rotting carrion. “We’ll be in touch.”

He picked up his bulletproof from the chair where Melba had draped it. The view off the observation deck caught his eye, and he went over to the window. “God, we’re a long way up, aren’t we?”

“Hmm.”

“You know, I never visited this place back before the Riots. Funny how you can live all your life in a city and never visit its main attractions, eh?”

Rudy didn’t answer. Man needed to leave his office now, let him get on with his business.

Baines blushed, pulled up the hood of the bulletproof, adjusted its clear Shattertite beak so that it jutted out to protect his face. It was the trademark uniform of the Angel of Mercy Hospital. On the street, they were called the Vultures. The price for established medical care was so high that only the desperately ill would call for help. If you saw a Vulture making a house call, it meant that someone was near death.

Rudy escorted Baines to the door, watched Jay go with him to the elevator. He nodded in satisfaction. He wasn’t going to pussyfoot around until they found a compatible donor. He would make sure that Tony got the heart they needed as fast as possible. He turned to the thin, wiry man standing guard outside his office door. “Crack, where Tony? Go and find he. I have a job for he to do for me.”