

He isn't much to look at, as far as witchdoctors go. She can readily admit that. Unless ceremony calls for it, you won't find him in skins or thatched garb, body striped with mud and radiating terrible power. Benefit Mwambo has seen such men before. Back in her youth, witchdoctors could be found wandering the grasslands of the herdsman tribes, their arrival drawing throngs of people to attend them, trading what little they had for a cure, a boon, a blessing.

Neither does anyone call him a "witchdoctor" within his hearing—he scoffs at such language—only the *medicine man* or *doctor* is permitted. People seek him out for healing matters of the spirit. Be it a ceaseless heartache, a curse from a jealous neighbor, or a ghost of a lost child still lingering at the skirts of its mother, the unassuming man in the white lab coat can cure most any ill. Where he hails from, where he learned his craft, no one knows.

The man never howls at spirits or leads hunting parties to locate and kill shapeshifting tricksters responsible for the tragedies in their lives. (Such creatures are easily mistaken for common crocodiles to anyone without the keen eye of witchdoctors, whose cunning sight can pierce through bone and sinew, straight to the very nature of living things.) He never calls in the rains, or prepares sacrifices or chants at the ceremonial fires to end a blight.

The medicine man's power is simple: he wields sharp blades, and he can cut the sickness right out of you. This everyone agrees on. Which is why the most feared and respected man in the village is also the most unknown man. For who desires to sit and drink and tell stories by the fire at the feet of a man with dozens of blades lined up within arm's reach, chips of steel flashing like owl eyes caught in a torchlight, ready to slice through tender flesh? No one with sense.

Cutting out sickness is, sadly, the business that brings Benefit to his door. She steels herself and approaches the medicine man's hut, a clutch of still-warm chicken eggs bound in kitenge cloth tucked under her arm: ready payment for services.