



In her dystopian society, Amala's skills put her at risk!

TheThing.WithFeathers

by Jennifer Fowler

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The Thing. With Feathers

PREQUEL TO
SEEDS OF THE HEART



JENNIFER FOWLER

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*The thing about the truth is this:
it doesn't need you to believe it. It just is, with or
without your approval.*

~ One ~

My name is Amala. I was born with a math brain. My mother discovered this when I was about two years old and she found me counting things, then grouping them into twos, fives, and tens and counting by groups. As small as I was, I will never forget the look of horror on my mother's face, like I had sprouted horns or grown a third eye in the middle of my forehead.

"Where did you learn that?" she asked, looking over her shoulder like someone had snuck into our home and was watching her.

"Nowhere," I shrugged.

"Well, stop it!" she said, and she turned abruptly and walked away. I couldn't help counting things, but I stopped counting out loud.

It was just a few months later that I was old enough to go to school. Before the transport came, my mother brushed my hair until it gleamed gold. On the last stroke she paused, still holding my hair in one hand and the brush in the other.

"Amala," she said in a voice so low I could barely hear her.

"Yes, mother?" I replied in hushed tones, uncertain what reason we had to be quiet.

"You do your numbers the way your teacher tells you. You hear?"

"Yes, mother."

"Never any other way."

I nodded, and she let my hair fall.

The transport was a gray, driverless bus guided from house to house by some electronic system. The old, worn-looking seats were filled with children my age. They all had names that sounded similar to mine. Sometime during my childhood my mother let it slip that Amala was an Arabic name. I deduced that all my classmates had Arabic names as well. But over the years I would notice that the children younger than me had very different names, with guttural

sounds. When I realized this, I decided it meant something. But I wasn't sure what.

It didn't take me long at school to figure out what my mother had been talking about. We all learned to count together, in unison. I waited for the day we would count by twos or tens, but it never happened. Then we learned to add. One child was asked to count two groups of blocks and type the numeral for each group on his classroom keyboard, which projected to a large screen at the front of the room. He counted the first group correctly and pushed the 5 key, and the digit appeared on one side of a plus sign. Then he counted the second group in a way I had seen many of my little classmates do it, too quickly to be certain they were counting each block. I expected the teacher to make him start over and count more precisely, but she nodded appreciatively. Then he pushed the 7, while I knew there were only six blocks. Again the teacher nodded. She shoved the two groups of blocks together and asked him to count them all. Again he made a quick, haphazard job of it. He pushed a 1, then pondered the keys for a while and pushed a 5. The number 15 appeared on the screen after the equal sign.

"Very good, Jalil," the teacher approved.

Without thinking I stood up. "It's not correct," I blurted out.

The teacher gave me an intense look. "He took the correct steps," she said, her eyes boring into mine in a challenge.

I stood my ground. "But it is the wrong result." Her eyebrows lowered.

"Are you questioning how I am teaching this?" she asked in a voice like steel.

I looked back at her, my little mouth set firmly. Then my mother's words came back to me, *the way your teacher tells you, never any other way*. But what if it is the wrong way? My mother would not want me to learn the wrong way. And then I understood. That is why she had said the words. She knew they would teach me the wrong way. She knew I would figure that out.

I let my face relax.

"I am sorry, Ma'am. It must be correct."

The teacher's eyes studied me for a moment and then softened. "This is why we must start school at this tender age, before your minds are hardened into unhealthy ways of thinking." She said it kindly, as if she felt the need to explain to an insect why it must be squished.

Because my mother would not allow me to display my math skills at home, I became very adept at doing them in my head. While my classmates were learning the correct steps for subtraction, I was mentally squaring two-digit numbers.

But while my mother could not hide the fact that she feared my logical mind, she loved words too much to follow all the restrictions that applied to language learning.

"You are so *tenacious*," she would say, her mouth tasting the word. "Those clouds are *exquisite*." And sometimes when we were away from the living quarters, tending our tiny patch of garlic and onion in the bare dirt between apartment buildings, she would very quietly repeat pleasing groups of words she called poetry, or tell me tales she had learned as a child. Then she would catch herself, glance at the walls towering around us, and tell me sternly in a low voice to never repeat the things she had just said. But they stored up in my mind.

Everyone in school knew better than to go down the forbidden hall. We knew there were classrooms down that hall, but we did not know why it was against the rules to go there. It bothered me when I was missing information. I liked to understand the details of everything, the way things fit together. I wanted to find out what was down there.

I tried to ask one of my classmates. "Do you know what is down the forbidden hall?"

She shook her head, tossing her blond curls. "No, and I don't care to know. They would tell us if it was important."

We had to walk past the hall to get to the Central Office. There was no need to go there very often because all of our learning could be done in our classroom, and our morning exercises were right

outside the classroom door on a symmetrical square of vivid green grass. Even our midday meal was served inside the classroom.

But one day, in my third year of school, my teacher stood up and called me to her desk. “Amala, since you’ve finished your assignment and have nothing better to do than stare off into space, you can take these to the Central Office.” She handed me a stack of folders.

The school building was shaped like a capital E, the entire building reaching seven stories in height. There were classrooms down each of the arms on every level, with stairwells at the end of each arm, on the east side, leading down to an exterior door on the main floor. The backbone was the main hall, and at the south end of this on each level there was an elevator which descended to the lowest level where it opened onto the lobby area of the Central Office, which occupied the entire backbone of that level. Our classes were in the north hall, and our age group was on the second level, two years to each level. The southernmost arm of the letter E was what we called the forbidden hall.

Out in the main hall of our level I ran my hand over the top of the pile the teacher had given me, letting the smooth texture caress my palm. I had seldom touched paper, since almost everything was computerized. We were told that at one time every person on Earth used piles of paper every day, threatening the existence of Earth’s forest habitats. The trees were safe now. Stately trees lined each city street. We had heard that beyond the living cluster there was an ocean of trees, but we had never seen these forests.

I walked slowly, savoring my small release from the classroom. I pulled the top folder open, scanning the symbols written there. We had just started learning to read, and I recognized many of the letters, but my teacher knew I would not be able to read any of the long words. What she didn’t know was that once I scanned the page, it would be an image in my mind for good. I tucked the picture away so that someday in the future I would be able to fill out the facts, understand what kind of information was important enough to put on paper.

As I passed the forbidden hall my steps dragged even more, and I peered through the dim light. My breath caught as I saw a dark shadow leaning against the wall near one door.

I could not help myself. I turned and headed hesitantly toward the figure. About two meters away I stopped dead, staring at the boy in front of me. He was about my age, close to my height, but his skin was so dark, and I could not see the pupils in the blackness of his eyes. He gawked at me with the same astonishment.

Even in my state of bewilderment, I did not forget my determination to fill in the facts concerning the forbidden hall.

“What is behind that door?” I asked, pointing to the gray door next to us.

“My classroom,” the boy replied.

“What do you learn?”

“Reading, numbers, science,” he answered.

Ordinary classrooms teaching everyday subjects. Why would they be forbidden?

“Are all the children like you?” I pursued.

“You mean, not pale like you?”

I nodded.

“Yes, in my classroom.” He pointed across the hall to another closed gray door. “In that one they are lighter than me, but not nearly as pale as you, with straight dark hair. I haven’t seen in the other rooms.”

“Why are you out here?”

“I spit-balled the teacher,” he laughed.

I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I concluded it was not acceptable. “So this is a punishment?”

He nodded. “S’posed to be.”

Just then I heard the clicking of shoes coming quickly down the hall. I could tell it was an angry stride. I turned to see my teacher sweeping down on me.

“WHAT are you doing here!” she demanded. “You disobeyed me.” She snatched the folders from my hands and grabbed my hand in hers, squeezing tighter than necessary.

As she dragged me away I turned back to the boy. "What is your name?" The teacher jerked me harder.

"Latif," he answered.

As I stretched my small legs to keep pace with the teacher my mind seized on another thing that I must resolve. I calculated the time I had taken to detour to the boy and ask five simple questions. It was not enough time for me to have reached the office, delivered the folders, and returned to my classroom. How had the teacher known that I was off track so quickly?

At home I broached the subject of the forbidden hall with my mother over our evening meal.

"I met a new boy today," I began, dipping my thick hunk of bread in the thin soup.

My mother raised her eyebrows in surprise. We didn't see many new people. The same children went to my classes, the same women went to my mother's work place, the same people lived beside us, year after year.

"He had dark skin," I added nonchalantly.

Her eyebrows shot higher, and her pale blue eyes sidled to a corner of the room. I followed her gaze and realized that when I looked close, I could see a small black dot where the two walls met each other and the ceiling.

"Where were you?" my mother was asking in a low voice.

"The forbidden hall. Why are those children hidden away down there?"

My mother ignored my question and asked her own. "Did anyone see you?"

I nodded. "My teacher found me. It was a little strange."

My mother groaned and put her head in her hands.

"Why are those children hidden away down there?" I repeated.

My mother sighed deeply and lifted her head to look at me. "A long time ago," she started, just the way she liked to begin many of the stories she told me out in the vegetable plot, but this time her voice shook a little and she spoke in a monotone, "before you were born, there were difficult times. There were many problems, and one

of these was that the white people and black people could not be in the same places without becoming violent.” I wrinkled my forehead, absorbing the words black and white in a new way. “So for our own safety, The Stewards separated us. It protects both groups of people.” Her eyes darted to the black dot in the corner again.

That evening I walked slowly through our apartment and saw black dots in a corner of every room. Leaving for school the next morning, I noticed one outside our apartment above the door. I saw some on every level as I followed the small group of children moving down the stairs, and then as we all congregated outside in front of the building, each of us scheduled for the same transport, I detected another above the main entrance.

When our transport reached the school, I strained in my seat to get a good look at the layout of the building. What I wanted to see was where the children from the forbidden hall disembarked from their buses, since I had never seen them at our bus loading station.

Our transport and others like it collected children from the neighborhoods of fifteen-story apartments surrounding the northern side of the school and dropped us off on the northeast corner. As I looked toward the south of the building, all I could see was a line of tall trees blocking the view of anything beyond. I concluded that the homes and the loading station for the students in the southern hall, the forbidden hall, must be out there past those trees.

I had a sudden very strong need to see what was hidden there.



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