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# *A maji maji chronicle*

Eugen Bacon

*Maji! Maji!* Myth or legend  
Or a scheme of fads, ideas embedded  
One battle, one struggle.  
Freedom! Freedom!  
Painted features, glistened spears.  
*Maji! Maji!* Myth or legend?  
Sanctified water skims no bullet.  
Grave, the lone stream bleeds scarlet.

## 1905 AD

A COPPER BREASTED SPARROW circumvented the tree line. Flapping, he savoured natural scents of Earth that lingered in the wind: coppice, flora, even rain beneath layers of clay and loam soil. Milk of woodland saplings blended with compound complexities of bodily secretions from nocturnal creatures marking territory or warding off peril.

The little bird surveyed the silence of twilight within a new smell of burning that explained a curl of black smoke in the horizon. He fluttered lime mottled wings and landed on a branch tremulous from tepid wind. So this was Ngoni Village, the warm heart of German East Africa. He reined himself with the tips of his claws, leaned his body with a subtle shift of weight on the bough. His face twisted skyward, where an eagle soared in a battle dance overhead.

Broad wings slowed. Gleaming eyes angled at the limb of the thorn tree. The eagle swooped with power and a wild cry, talons outstretched with skill and focus.

*Schwash!*

Eagle and tiny sparrow toppled in a downward shred of branch, twigs and leaves, and a curtain of red and lime-mottled fluff entangled in silver eagle feathers. The little bird floated out first. He preened himself and hopped two steps away in good recovery on firm ground.

‘Surely, Papa!’

Papa was Zhorr, the grand magician of Diaspora. ‘I did not mean to loosen your feathers, younglin.’ He looked around, cleared his throat and said, ‘Well!’ A gust of something burning swept up his nostrils. It grew stronger, wilder in the air, wild enough to push rain clouds away.

‘This bird thing won’t do,’ Pickle, his son, said. ‘Now what? Mmhh? What?’

‘We go to the village.’

‘Like this? As birds?’

‘And that troubles you, I see. Pretty much everything displeases you, ingrate lad.’

‘Having travelled back in time to build a picture of history, we’ll be dinner in a human’s pot before we catch up with that past. Imagine the possibilities: skinned or feathered, how will they eat us? Apprentice, guinea pig or bird, Papa, I do not goad fate.’

‘Relax. We won’t be birds long. But we need to observe before we can morph and fit in.’

‘Fit? We could have fitted in better had we done the vortex. Churn, swirl, a blast of colour and *schwash!* Right into this world in our normal forms. Why come as birds?’

‘No mess, no structural changes,’ said Zhorr. ‘The black hole causes atomic fusions and chemical transfigurations. Flying in was safe. Safer! I understand your frustration. You must appreciate 3059 to 1905 AD is a hell lot of years.’

'No kidding. So why birds again?'

'You make an awful sparrow.' Zhorr regarded him for a moment. He swirled. Monster wings flapped and a swell of rapid air slapped Pickle to the ground. 'That better?'

Pickle lifted on two legs. He sniffed around, scratched his ear and landed back on fours; a reddish brown mouse. He scurried into clumps of grass, dragging his tail.

'No point sulking,' the magician said, now a grey squirrel himself. He gnawed his forefeet and shaped his nails. He rubbed his whiskers and sat on a bushy tail.

Above them, the dazzling eyes of a shadowy owl picked bustle in the shrubbery.

'Either way, Papa,' came Pickle's voice inside the brushwood. 'In all these shenanigans, you leave me silly and game. If humans do not gobble me, that darn owl up there will.'

'I will do something. Maybe. At dawn.'

They veered north, eating miles away in bristle undergrowth on a forest walk. Shadows peeped in and out between leaves and soft moon glow. Zhorr and Pickle steered by thick smoke curling in the horizon. They found an open field dazzled by white stars. The meadow closed to unfenced farmland bulging with blonde ears of corn. Yellowing grass trembled, snapped at their chins. Pickle legged it out but, digging, scratching and sniffing at whim, simply could not hold pace with Zhorr, who looked fine and strong.

Pickle struggled, out of breath, way out of legs and famished. 'Some adventure this.' Sudden nostalgia for Diaspora, its gold and rainbows and snow-capped crags, almost overwhelmed him. In this godforsaken past, wind whined with speed and ferocity. It looped. Trees murmured. They loomed tall like mountains to his modest size. Now a whisper ran across grass, and nearly scared him out of his fur. A dried leaf raced near his

cheek with good rustle. A gasp behind it, a roused cricket, an irate one at that, *zzinged!* his legs past Pickle's muzzle.

They travelled over a dust road stippled with clumps of dung in various stages of drying. Hungry, they paused. Nibbled sprouting maize shoots by the roadside. Further north, a golden carpet of millet and sorghum fields spread. Fallen stems by the roadside crumbled at their feet.

'I'm still hungry,' said Pickle.

So Zhorr shook ears of grain into his paws and they had another feed.

Finally, sporadic huts. Zhorr and Pickle moved along cattle fencing, through a forest of mango trees laden with fruit. A narrow footpath led to a mud hut with thatched roofing. Beside it, they nibbled drowsily into a food shed. They huddled in sound sleep on a golden bed of drying grain, malleable as a waterbed.

Zhorr awoke to the crow of a cockerel. Drums echoed in the distance. The staccato beats left Pickle's sleep of light snores unruffled. The grand magician appreciated his son's exhaustion from a flight across years. The great land of Diaspora stood eons away from a small African village invisible on the global map and only visible in a magic bowl with special effects.

He pondered washing his face. He perused the compound, and took note of a godforsaken well that had seen better days and possibly rain. He prayed it held a trickle or three, else he'd have to cast a spell. A tin pail beside... all seemed hopeful. But before he could stir or rise, within minutes of the cock's crow, hinges of the hut's wooden door groaned. A boy with tight hair and bark loin came out. Lazy hands rubbed sleep from his

eyes. He lifted the empty bucket beside the well and took to his heels, swinging the handle. Presumably on the way to the river for a day's ration of bath, drink and cooking water. That trampled the well's possibilities.

Zhorr waited until there was no more sight of the boy. He clapped his squirrel paws. Pickle woke up – a human boy. He was chocolate skinned and naked. He gazed in wonderment at his father's new form. The grand magician looked comfortable in his skin, a salt and pepper wise-man with ancient eyes.

'No need to look so pleased, younglin,' he said. 'I never thought you would this eagerly embrace childhood. Being human, of course, afflicts you with all their scourges'

'Such as?'

'Disease and incontinence.' Zhorr pointed to a rickety shack gated with maize stalks. 'Pit latrine right over there.'

A sprinkle of sorcery garbed them: Pickle in bark loin; Zhorr in dried cattle skin, a single-shoulder robe. Another clap from the magician, and they soared to a new home, their very own. Wetness clung to its fresh walls still.

Pickle eyed two beds of elephant weed and covered his face.

'Breakfast. If you will excuse me –' Zhorr vanished, appeared seconds later with new-found knowledge and ingredients, having completed an observation tour of Ngoni Village.

'Twigs. Fetch me twigs, younglin.'

Twigs, three stones, a conjured pot and a wooden spoon later, the magician stirred sweet potato powder into lukewarm water in the pot. He mixed it well, removed lumps.

The concoction came to a boil. He pulled out twigs and lowered the heat, stirred the porridge all the while.

‘Ah, bowls.’ He scratched his head.

Clap.

He served the porridge in half-moon gourds. Pickle made a face but wound up licking the inside belly of the gourd with relish.

Replete, his question was one: ‘The villagers do not know us. How will we fit in?’

Clap.

‘They know us now,’ Zhorr said sagely.

Sure enough, they were warming chilled hands over a twig fire, burning morning breeze from stiff knuckles, when a rap came across the wooden door. Chief Ngosi – whose wives, huts and extended family Zhorr had perused earlier that morning in his three-second flight – stepped into the hut. He led a dozen reed-thin elders, their walk too slow, too careful for the limited amounts of greys on their heads.



Image by [MeRyan](#)

'Greetings Zhorr,' Chief Ngosi said in a dialect that Zhorr and Pickle seemed to fully understand.

'Greetings, good Chief.'

'I trust you and the boy are well?' Chief Ngosi asked.

'As well as can be.'

Zhorr nodded at Pickle, who rose and left his coveted spot beside the fire. He leaned by the mud wall and watched elders huddle around the merry flames. They were wiry-haired men with blank faces that carried eyes still as a swamp. Only one elder bore wrinkles as numerous as the tales of the dead. There was no doubt that behind their retinas, those elders carried wealth of culture that seasoned them with much knowledge. However, theirs was a wisdom merged with gloom.

Chief Ngosi drummed his lips. He glanced at the elders, then at Zhorr, completely ignoring Pickle, and delved into the focus of their visit.

'Zhorr,' he began. 'We all know that you and medicine man Shona are the most powerful sorcerers of our land.' He sat on the ground knees up. 'You know what happened to the village of Tumbi.'

'Toom-bee,' Zhorr repeated, rolling the consonants. Elders watched him closely. He cleared his throat and nodded, having no inkling of Tompei or what had happened to it, although Ngosi's tone indicated something awful. He hoped someone would tell him the headlines or the whole village thing would become pig's ass for Pickle and him.

The chief pulled a small twig from the embers. 'When Whiteman came from the sea, we welcomed him with a feast. We gave him our wives and daughters to warm his loins. What



did he do? He brought more white men. Soon, we did not have enough wives or daughters to go around. To add insult to injury, Whiteman spoke of a thing called cotton and how much better it would be in our farms. Cotton. Better than millet, corn or cassava, Whiteman said.'

The chief poked the twig on the ground, made small holes. 'Now this cotton does not feed the stomach. When we refused Whiteman's request, his soldiers came with magic sticks that threw fire. So we grew cotton, only a little at a time, in small portions at the corners of our farms, to make peace. Our children need grain. Instead of being satisfied, Whiteman wanted half our farms to grow sisal. Then he introduced coffee on The Mount where the gods live. Before we could cough, he called himself Imperial Commissioner and demanded land tax.'

'Yes,' nodded Zhorr, not much enlightened. 'Yes, indeed.' So what happened to Tongsey again?

'Whiteman took our young men,' said Chief Ngosi. 'He forced them to work in his plantations. We gritted our teeth and bore it, for the gods were unhappy with us and there was nothing we could do. Finally, unable to take it any more, the people of Tumbi asked Shona, the medicine man, for help. They wanted something stronger than spears to fight Whiteman's stick that vomited fire.'

'And Shun. . .' the grand magician cleared his throat. 'Shona helped them?'

'Why do you test my knowledge, Zhorr? Of course Shona helped them. He told them to mix millet seeds, water and castor oil, and blessed it. He said this magic potion would turn the hot pellet in Whiteman's stick into water.'

'If you ever heard a load of boloney –' began Pickle, leaning forward, arms folded, from the mud wall.

Zhorr silenced him with a look.

'Village warriors drank the potion,' said Chief Ngosi. 'They wore headbands and waved spears. *Maji! Maji!* they cried and burst into Whiteman's compound.'

Zhorr nodded. 'Whiteman's bullets did not turn into water.'

Chief Ngosi spat. 'They did not. The wails of the women,' he spoke slowly, 'the children's crying. ... My ears are still ringing.'

Zhorr touched his arms. 'What do you want me to do for you?'

'Trouble is brewing. White soldiers are moving through the country. They are burning millet and corn. Tumbi is no longer a village. It has been reduced to an orange blaze. The soldiers are moving inwards. In the village of Tana, they raped girls and mutilated men. Soon they will invade Ngoni. If we do not die of the Whiteman's stick that spits fire, we will surely die of famine.'

Desperation scorched his eyes. 'I am a leader and a warrior. The bones and blood inside my body cannot stay silent. If I sat like a stone and did nothing for my people, I would be alive but dead. No one would sing of my creation, my story, my journey. There would be no fire, wind or kingfish song. Not even a frog song. No one would tell stories to my children and children's children.'

'And you think I can help you – how?'

'If Whiteman's medicine was more powerful than that of medicine man Shona, then only you can defeat him. This morning, we beat drums to summon young men. They have

formed gangs to rip cotton off Whiteman's plantations, burn his cattle and capture his women. In order to fully succeed, we need your magic.'

'But Papa, you cannot interfere!' said Pickle.

'Silence, boy.'

Zhorr pondered. Finally he spoke.

'If you promise not to harm the children or kill the women – they know nothing of your war – maybe I will help you.'

'We will shed no child's blood or lay a finger on any woman. We will banish them to the gaze of the sea where they came from.'

'And if they cannot swim?'

'We will give them dhows and then banish them.'

'Return to your huts and wait there until dusk. When the moon casts its light, summon your warriors. You will meet me at the door of my hut and I will speak.'

'Speak? Is that all you will give us? Words?'

'I will give you more than words, more than immunity to bullets with plain water. I will give you,' he paused. 'Magic.'

After the last of the elders had shuffled out, Pickle rushed to his father. 'You have not well thought through this. Surely you can't!'

'Primarily because?'

'You will change history!'

'So it would seem.' He scratched his head. 'We shall see.'

'But—'

'You will know the outcome in due course.' His mind slipped to a hidden place. Nothing Pickle said could reach him.

\* \* \*

'The first stir of twilight brings with it scores to our door,' said Pickle.

Zhorr raised his brows.

'The entire village of Ngoni,' said Pickle. 'And gate crashers.'

The chief's wives wore cowry shell bracelets and heavy gold anklets that clink-clanked with every stride. The rest of the women balanced without finger support fat clay pots on their heads. Men built a fire.

Everyone danced.

Ngoni Village had brought feast and dance to Zhorr's door.

Faces shone with body paint: ochre red streaked with white clay. Bellies distended with banana brew, roast goat, cassava and millet broth.

Seed rattles and bead-filled shakers tied to dancer's arms and legs chimed in tempo to the drum's *poom! palah! poom!* Necks swayed. A sky dance, a river dance, a new rites dance, a war dance. Expression, transition, choreography. Someone double looped through a ring of fire. Triple flip. Loop. Loop. It was more religious than anything else.

Pickle moved away from prancing feet in a ceaseless sequence of pace and loop, and walked towards Zhorr, who was seated in close vicinity to a banana leaf carpet piled high with food. In one hand, he clutched a gourd of mulled fruit.

Pickle touched his father's shoulder, knelt on the ground beside him. 'I don't see how this will help my learning, Papa.'

Zhorr took a swig of brew. 'They rot fruit to pulp, crush it with feet, and ferment it to make this.' He swirled it. 'Clear water that boggles the mind.'

'But Papa—'

'Look,' Zhorr pointed.

Chief Ngosi stood fine-looking in ceremonial robe. Tails of peacock headdress fell to his shoulders. He stood tall in paraphernalia, leopard skin and gold. A strong white moon in the shape of a plump woman's bosom caught the shine of dark skin rubbed with fresh sheep fat.

The chief raised an arm and waved his people silent. All eyes turned towards the grand magician.

Zhorr unfolded from the ground and climbed to full height.

People observed him with curiosity.

'Today is a day of reckoning,' said Zhorr. 'I will give you—' Animation danced in charcoal eyes. The crowd shuffled. 'I will give you ghosts!'

Children heckled. Men and women looked at each other and howled. Elders shook their heads, scratched their cheeks, muttered under their breaths.

Even Pickle's jaw dropped.

One wave of the chief's arm, though he did not look reassured, silenced the jostling crowd. Elders still hummed.

'Seriously,' said Zhorr. 'Before you throw bananas at me, swallow the import of my words.'

Pickle folded his arms.

'We are listening,' said Chief Ngosi.

'As well you should.' Zhorr scanned the chief's entourage. 'To defeat the enemy, I will make you,' he paused, 'vanish at will.'

\* \* \*

The first attack on white homesteads at the sleeve of The Mount came just before dawn.

A servant later narrated in wonderment what happened:

A burst of war cries trampled army fencing. Startled, white soldiers jumped from their beds in pyjama striped bloomers and snatched guns from their holsters on the walls. They sought with their eyes for the enemy and saw flying spears every this way and that, spears catapulting from invisible energy fields. Four or five volleys of shots, and random bullets caught a few unseen targets who cried out. But blind to their enemies, white soldiers lost their fight to stay upright. Ghosts splashed white throats open, knocked guns from white man hands and fired.

Zhorr and Pickle saw all this from the surface of still water inside a clay pot. At the end of the attack, women and children huddled in dreadful stillness inside cotton plantations.

'Is this the initiation ritual you promised?' cried Pickle. 'The one that would turn me into a 'made' magician? If this is it, I don't want it! I don't want to be part of this anymore.'

'It is a lesson that supersedes spell recitals from *The Book of Magic* in the comfort of a floating castle in Diaspora. Now stop talking.'

Pickle turned towards the grand magician.

'You brought me half-way around the galaxies to witness men die? Your magic has created phantoms.'

'Mouth all, youngling, I am not conflicted by it. If the Ngoni have become smitten phantoms, they are phantoms of choice.'

\* \* \*

A wall of soldiers stood on guard outside the courtyard. One appeared, from his headdress, to be in command. Zhorr approached.

'I must see Chief Ngosi,' he said.

'Who are you?' the guard said.

'May your gods take pity on you for I shall grant you none when I am through answering that question.'

The warrior stepped aside. 'Chief Ngosi is with his first wife.' He pointed towards a distant hut with brand new clay.

After a wait, Chief Ngosi emerged.

They sat under the shade of a banana tree whose leaves spread like an awning. Zhorr declined a gourd of millet wine. Chief Ngosi indulged. He wiped his lips with a back hand and suppressed a burp.

'What can I do for you my friend?'

'I am concerned,' said the grand magician.

Chief Ngosi regarded him.

'Since what has come to be known as the Massacre of the Mount, your warriors powered with invisibility potion, an ability to appear and disappear with the wind at will, continue to plunder Whiteman farms and kill indiscriminately. They have forgotten anything about amnesty to women and children.'

Chief Ngosi nodded.

'I will ask them to show restraint. Is that all?'

'At this point, yes.'

'Good. Perhaps you will join me for lunch. Fresh caterpillars from Yassa land.'

\* \* \*

A week later, Pickle pointed at the water gourd. 'Look, Papa.'

Zhorr observed Ngoni warriors on rampage outside tribal frontiers.

'Kill! Kill! Kill! White is white!' they chanted. 'Kill! Kill! Kill!'

They marched past the Great Lakes to the coastline, and left in their wake vultures looping the air in hordes.

\* \* \*

'Greetings, Chief Ngosi. I wonder –' Zhorr began in the next visit to the chief's palace.

Ngosi's face tightened.

'*Emperor Ngosi,*' he corrected. 'I am a very busy man.'

'So I see.'

Emperor Ngosi would speak nothing of his warriors' actions. In a stab of whatever modest hospitality he had left, he showed Zhorr his newfound treasures. Inside one hut, metal boxes each carrying 500 rounds or more of ammunition stacked high. Another shed was a museum of gadgets from an Arab Sheikh: pistols, shot guns, machine guns, live ammunition and rifle silencers.

The Emperor cradled a laser sight rifle in his hands. 'Not fully acquired in the western worlds, I hear. Isn't she a beauty?'



'Better than invisibility magic,' Zhorr said with tight lips.

'This,' the Emperor lifted another item, 'is a bazooka.'

\* \* \*

In a third and desperate visit to the palace, Zhorr discovered Emperor Ngosi was not so friendly any more. He appeared out of mist, waved the magician silent. His court was now full of sorcerers whose powers he appeared to trust.

Emperor Ngosi locked his hands. His eyes dulled. 'We are a master race,' he said. He thinned into black fog where no one could see him. Invisible Ngoni soldiers lifted and tossed the grand magician and his son out of the palace.

\* \* \*

Lust predated greed that predated power that predated altruism. The Emperor gathered a harem of one thousand wives whose shelter commanded three entire villages. Their feed took resources from twelve more villages now forced to pay 'protection' tax to the palace.

'You *do* understand the long term outcome of this?' Pickle said to his father.

'Yes.' Zhorr smiled a wistful smile. 'What you witness is not genetic betrayal. It is not a modern phenomenon. It is simple quintessential greed. Recognisable as it is age old. Emperor Ngosi knows he can climb higher up the money cum power tree; that itch is powerful. He is obsessed in a rather clear way in a quest for continental supremacy that will only be a speck. In dramatic nuance, history will repeat itself, only with a new face.'

'Yes,' said Pickle. 'A face called tragedy.'

They regarded each other.

'The Emperor has grown more powerful,' said Zhorr. 'Guns are no longer to him magic sticks that spit fire. He understands the mechanics, complexities and gains of advanced weaponry. Soon, his troops will invade Europe, Asia, Australia and the rest of the world. He will destroy opponents with weapons of famine, disease and bombs. The release of weapons-grade material will change the Earth's ozone layer. A tidal wave will unleash a tsunami that will kill millions. Changes to the earth's epicenter will give rise to tectonic forces that will bend the earth's crust. Earthquakes and lava bombs will kill millions more. Survivors and generations after them will become crippled with incurable illnesses far worse than mutable forms of bird flu, HIV or Ebola.'

'And my lesson?'

'Clearly it works,' Zhorr said in uncompromising attitude. 'My method works very well. Too well, in fact, for the scoop of emotions it uncovers in you. Did you want me to teach you about galaxies and how a sprinkle of magic could keep them efficient? Did you want me to clap my hands and say: *Look at this world. Isn't it beautiful?*' Zhorr pressed his hands together. 'This, my son, concludes our history session.'

One clap! and he regained his true form. Silver ringlets of hair fell to his waist. Jewelled apparel full of shadows, melancholy and river song wrapped him. Onyx eyes glittered and lit the hut. The grand magician of Diaspora towered two heads taller above his apprentice son.

'Tell me,' he laid a gentle hand on Pickle's shoulder, crisp with starched livery in lace, lavender and cream. 'What have you learnt then? Really learnt?'

Pickle's face shone with clarity. 'No matter how strong the urge or goodwill,' he said, 'never use magic to flirt with history.'

'Unless –' with utmost professionalism, 'you have a rule to cover it.' He ruffled Pickle's copper head. 'Well done, my boy. With that knowledge, you have earned a diploma. Now we must depart fast track and travel between worlds to where we belong.'

'Fast track?'

'Straight to the year 3059 and I will die in peace.'

'What about the *no mess, no structural changes* that favoured us flying as birds to the vortex? Atomic fusion, chemical transfiguration and what else, that's what you said.'

'Pure gumbo.' Zhorr toyed with tresses falling down his shoulder. He combed off tangle with a finger. 'I always wanted to fly.'

Pickle's brow creased. 'But Papa –'

'Mmhh?'

'I am desperate to leave this world, and my faith in you is restored. Partially restored.'

He glared.

'Did you 'But Papa' me to fault my motive?'

'Can't we, must we not...'

'Must we not what?'

'Undo it?'

'Undo the flying bit or my dying in peace?'

'The damage. The course of history that you have altered.'

'Ah, that. Course we can. Undo it. It is our obligation to do so. Yes, you must.' Strong fingers poked Pickle in the chest. 'You,' almost absent mindedly. 'Yes, you. Put your wizard hat on. Quick! Time leaks perilously.'

Before Pickle could lift a finger, the door burst open.

Zhorr and Pickle barely transformed to prior form – just barely! – before Emperor Ngosi ran in.

'I don't want it any more,' he cried. 'I don't want it!'

Zhorr scratched his salt and pepper wise-man hair and regarded the Emperor with ancient eyes. He took a step forward, laid a hand on Ngosi's shoulder, an action that appeared to carry calming effect.

'What is it you do not want, Emperor Ngosi?'

'The power. Take it. Take it!' He tossed down his staff. 'It has made a monster of me. Oh what have I done? My own people! Zhorr, I am a sick man. My forefathers groan in their graves. I see reason now. I do not want greater power.'

'Do you speak from your heart?'

'All men are equal. There is no master race. Please, remove your magic now.'

'I am delighted you have found sense. I could not have enforced it without infringing your free will. Go home.' An indulgent pat on Ngosi's back. 'We shall work some arrangement.'

After Emperor Ngosi had left, shuffling his steps and carrying much weight, Zhorr and son glanced at each other. Pickle spoke first.

'Your magic eyes did not see that coming.'

'N-no.' He was back in his jewelled robe. 'Time travel brings paradoxes and anomalies. That was an anomaly.'

'Knowledge for the future. What happens now?'

'Ngosi has no need of us, really. Having seen light, his world will embrace him once more. The blood of a speckless rooster or three will appease the spirits of his forefathers. As for the powers of invisibility, he will no more use them for harm.'

'Yet you hesitate, Papa.'

'A small predicament really. Ngosi has no desire for greater power and he has already won the Maji Maji war. But, for the implications of changing history, although he is a reformed man, we must reverse the effects of my magic.'

'Heaven forbid. Reversal will –'

'Different historical outcomes are not necessarily better than the ones that eventuated. We cannot tamper with this world. Take us back to exactly one minute before Ngosi and the elders first entered this hut and sat around the fire.' Fog touched his voice. It became hoarse, old as a museum. He glanced at his son with unwavering eyes. 'You know what that means?'

Pickle nodded. 'The calculation is simple.' He turned away from his father. 'A simple calamity, really.' He stood still for a moment. 'Ngoni warriors will use millet seeds and water to lose the war.'

'I cannot stop it.' Zhorr's museum voice trembled. 'And neither can you.'

'Yes.' Pickle swerved. 'No one can.'

In a flash, Pickle swished his gown. A glow of light on his forehead swelled in changing shape and size. It filled him with magical powers that lifted the grand magician's philter of invisibility on the Ngoni.

The cloak whirred again.

Zhorr and Pickle soared with outstretched hands into naked space.

Soft tips of Diaspora mist lifted and touched a cobalt line of hillocks. Crystal water gushed between pieces of boulder and cascaded downwards in a waterfall. A snow-crested mountain ridge climbed towards a floating fortress with an iron gateway. An array of white lights in every arched window blinked. The flying castle sighed in welcome exactly three nanoseconds before a timid rap on the wooden door of a mud hut somewhere in Ngoni country.

The author speaks about *A maji maji chronicle*:

*Historical myths or events are perfect for alternate history in science fiction, especially where paradoxes and anomalies can indicate variant historical outcomes. Early in the 20th century, the Ngoni were a fierce ethnic group, distant cousins to King Shaka of the Zulu kingdom. Way before the scramble and partition of Africa, ethnic groups had dispersed across the continent, and this particular Ngoni group set habitat in what later became known as German East Africa. In defiance to harsh methods of forced labour imposed upon them by colonialists, the Ngoni took up arms in what is historically documented as The Maji Maji Rising. Maji is a Swahili word for water. Belief holds that a witchdoctor gave warriors a magic potion that would turn German bullets to water. This rebellion sets the premise of my story, A Maji Maji Chronicle.*