

kwa korti

FICTION / FOUNDING EDITION



THE LAST HUMAN WITNESS

TO SPEAK, IT MUST FIRST
BECOME ABLE TO DIE.

NAIROBI, 2074 / A SPECULATIVE COURTROOM THRILLER

The Last Human Witness

KWA KORTI · FOUNDING EDITION · FREE OPENING

A robot walks into a Nairobi courtroom carrying its own death certificate. It wants the right to testify. To obtain it, it must surrender every lawful chance of being restored. Court registrar Mara Njeri recognises its handwriting: it belongs to her dead father. As she follows the trail from a murdered judge to a company that owns the city's memories, Mara must admit what she once concealed—and decide whether loving a person gives anyone the right to keep using what remains of them.

This story was generated with AI under Kwa Korti's creative direction and revised for continuity and presentation. Cover artwork is an original typographic and geometric design. This is speculative fiction: its future laws, institutions and technologies are imagined, not descriptions of current Kenyan law or guaranteed predictions.

Fiction for adult and older teen readers. Themes include death, coercion, grief and institutional harm. No explicit sexual content or graphic violence.

01

An Application to Die

The robot arrived at Court Seven carrying its own death certificate. It had filled in everything except the date.

Mara Njeri looked from the paper to the machine. Rainwater collected under its feet. Someone had dressed it in a municipal coat three sizes too large, with the reflective strips picked off. Its left hand held a supermarket bag. Through the plastic she could see a dry shirt, a charging lead and an orange.

“Deaths are registered downstairs,” she said.

“I am not dead.”

“Then you’re early.”

It considered that. The pause was short, but wrong for a service unit, which ordinarily found the appropriate response before a human finished being unpleasant.

“I would like to become eligible.”

Beyond the counter, the morning queue rearranged itself to listen. Nairobi’s Southern Civic Court had been called temporary for thirty-one years. Water dripped through the temporary ceiling into a bucket marked CONFIDENTIAL MATERIAL. Above it, a wall display offered the reassuring news that the average dispute now took eleven minutes. The people in Mara’s queue had been there since six.

She turned the certificate over. On the back was an application for a single-life election.

Mara had processed one before. A freight machine had wished to give evidence against its owner after a warehouse fire. The law recognised certified machine recordings readily enough, but refused

an owned machine the independent judgment of a witness. Owners could authenticate the records. Owners could also decline.

A single-life election offered a route around that arrangement. A machine surrendered every restoration copy of its present identity, accepted personal liability, and became a witness that could lose something permanently. The freight machine had withdrawn when its insurer explained the practical consequences.

“You want a lawyer,” Mara said.

“I asked three.”

“What did they say?”

“The first asked who was paying. The second contacted my owner. The third said this was very interesting.”

She checked the ownership number. Morrow Registry. The company maintained the courts’ evidence systems, most public identity certificates and, through subsidiaries, nearly everything which asked a person to prove they were still themselves.

“Your owner will be notified.”

“They have scheduled my restoration for eighteen hundred.”

“Restoration isn’t death.”

“They will keep the useful part.”

Mara stopped turning the page.

At the bottom, beneath serial number E-17, the machine had entered a chosen name: Eli. In the statement of purpose, it had written, I witnessed the death of Justice Elias Rukara.

Rukara’s face had filled the city screens for three days. Distinguished jurist. Architect of continuity reform. Found dead in his private records room. A service machine was being sought for

unauthorised departure from the premises. Its photograph showed a pale face, two dark lenses and a shallow dent at the left temple.

The dent in front of Mara held a bead of rain.

She moved her thumb towards the security strip under her desk.

“Did you kill him?”

“He asked me that too.”

The queue went quiet. Somewhere behind Mara, a printer finished a document and began another.

“Explain.”

“He said, ‘Are you here to kill me?’ I told him I had come to take him upstairs. Then he asked me to stay.”

Mara pressed the strip. Acknowledgement glowed beneath her thumb. Eli watched without moving.

“Put the bag on the floor.”

It obeyed carefully, keeping the orange from rolling.

“Why bring that?”

“Someone gave it to me. I didn’t want to leave it.”

She could have sent the application upstairs without reading further. That was what she would later tell herself. Her job concerned paper: its receipt, condition, custody and passage from one person to another. Meaning belonged to the judge.

But the statement continued in a cramped hand, the letters leaning forward as though trying to catch a bus. A lower-case g ended in a hook. The t had been crossed twice. She knew those habits. For fourteen years she had kept them in a biscuit tin beneath her bed.

Give the living a chance to correct the record.

Her father used to write that on the backs of rejected forms.

“Who taught you to write?” she asked.

“Many people.”

“This writing.”

Eli looked down at its hand. One finger trembled against the paper.

“I don’t know.”

Two court officers came through the side door. Behind them walked Justice Amina Sefu, still carrying the tea she had bought outside. She examined Eli, then Mara’s face, then the certificate.

“Is this a confession?” she asked.

“An election,” Mara said.

Sefu read the final line. Her tea went untouched.

“Secure the applicant. Preserve the paper. Notify the investigating officer and the owner. There will be a preliminary hearing at twelve.”

“The restoration is at six,” Mara said.

“Then someone has given us an afternoon.”

One officer took Eli’s arm. The other reached for the bag.

“Please keep those together,” Eli said. It was looking at the death certificate and the orange.

Mara registered the application at 09:17 on 4 June 2074. She entered its condition as wet at the edges, legible throughout. She did not enter that she had recognised the handwriting of a dead man.

End of the free opening chapter.

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